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Chosen Child

Written by [Monica Bauer](#), Directed by Megan Schy Gleeson; Stage Manager, Greg Nash; Scenic Design, Anthony R. Phelps; Lighting & Sound Design, [David Wilson](#); Costume Design, Rachel Padula Shufelt; Props Artisan, Lisa Guild

CAST: [Lee Mikeska Gardner](#), Margaret Ann Brady, Debra Wise, Lewis D. Wheeler, [Melissa Jesser](#)

Performances through November 22 at Boston Playwrights' Theatre, 949 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA; Box Office 866-811-4111 or www.bostonplaywrights.org

Playwright [Monica Bauer](#) had intended to write a memoir, but "popped out" a play instead. Lucky for us, because her drama *Chosen Child* is among the best plays I've seen at Boston Playwrights' Theatre, the professional and persistently positive incubator for the production of new works by alumni of its M.F.A. Playwriting Program. Under the astute, watchful eye of Artistic Director Kate Snodgrass, and with the directorial expertise of Megan Schy Gleeson, Bauer has reworked and rewritten her very personal story into a compelling memory play which resonates (as she says) with anybody who ever had a mother.

Chosen Child is a one-act set in New York City and Omaha, Nebraska, and takes place in both the present and the past. With Anthony R. Phelps' abstract and ethereal scenic design, the frequent leapfrogging between place and time, and the actors portraying their characters at different stages of life, one could use a schematic diagram to stay on top of the action at times. Eventually, it all gets sorted out clearly, in large part due to the nuanced performances by an accomplished cast. Not only are they actors of the highest order (four of the five are members of Actors' Equity), but most have also worn the mantle of director, and two are artistic directors of companies at Central Square Theater.

Three generations of mothers are represented by Lee (Margaret Ann Brady), stepmother to Claudia ([Lee Mikeska Gardner](#)), who is birth mother to Donna (Debra Wise), who has a young daughter Anne ([Melissa Jesser](#)). To bring the relationships full circle, Lee is also Donna's adoptive mother and Anne's

grandmother, and Donna thinks that Claudia is her adopted sister. It certainly sounds confusing, and Claudia also has a son, a young man named David (Lewis D. Wheeler), who happens to be schizophrenic. As children, he and Donna are led to believe they are cousins, until their incredible chemistry with each other makes them suspicious. When they figure out the truth, it more or less explodes in their faces, changing the course of all of their lives.

During their formative years, David lives with his mother in New York and Donna lives in Omaha with her father and Lee. It is through their correspondence to each other that the audience learns about their separate childhoods and their common fascination with the space program. They only meet once, but each makes an indelible impact on the other and is not forgotten. When he is on his own as an adult, David determines that he must make the journey to find Donna. However, he only has a slip of paper with a New York phone number on it and a manila envelope stuffed with old letters as clues to her whereabouts. Through the good graces of a long-suffering agent (Jesser) at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, and a long-overdue confession from Claudia, he is put on the right track.

Bauer takes the audience on a circuitous route, stingily meting out pieces of the back story to build tension and stoke our curiosity. She makes it feel like it is David's story as he doggedly pursues the connection that had been taken away from him, but there can be no doubt that the playwright's focus is on figuring out how she feels about the mothers and their actions. Bauer examines every aspect of their character to find a way to forgive whatever they did because they thought it was for the best, or because they knew no other way. Does being in a family mean you have to forgive, no matter what the offense? She does a great job of contrasting the flaws and the strengths to give us fully-realized characters and, frankly, none of them are very nice. However, they are complex and compelling, and this stellar cast nails them with intensity and commitment. Wise and Wheeler are deserving of special mention for their ability to make us suspend disbelief and accept them as children in the scenes from the past.

[David Wilson](#) (Lighting & Sound Design) and Rachel Padula Shufelt (Costume Design) provide elements that enable the play to travel between times and places, and the clothes definitely make statements about the kind of woman each of the three main characters is or aspires to be. Gleeson blocks the scenes effectively, using different parts of the stage for different locations, and sets a pace that allows the action to flow seamlessly, even as the actors move abstract pieces into place or change parts of their costumes. Most importantly, the playwright, director, and actors are able to surprise us with the twists and turns of the story while keeping it accessible. The ending is unexpected, but we might have seen it coming all along.

Photo credit: Kalman Zabarsky (Debra Wise, Lewis D. Wheeler)

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