

THE AUSTIN

CHRONICLE

Anna Bella Eema: Here's Mud In Your Eye

By Wayne Alan Brenner
May 18, 2001

If, as they say, in the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king, and if that also holds true across the borders of gender, then I have come to believe that, between them, playwright Lisa D'Amour and director Katie Pearl have roughly, oh, five thousand and 12 eyes. I can think of no other way that they'd be able to see so much so clearly. And that they communicate their vision so astonishingly well suggests that maybe half of those many eyes are also used to speak -- the way the commander of the U.S.S. Pueblo once did.

Now the Pueblo incident, in which American soldiers became prisoners of war and smuggled out messages by blinking in Morse code on video, was dramatized years ago, and much of its power was due to the skills of actor Hal Holbrook. D'Amour and Pearl's Anna Bella Eema is similarly strengthened by performances -- at once stellar and earthy -- by Jennifer Haley, Stephanie Stephens, and Paula Rester. The combo of Stephen Pruitt's lighting and Christopher A. Sidorfsky's music also enhances the story, but it, too, could stand on its own as a phenomenon worth experiencing.

That life itself is a phenomenon worth experiencing is continuously attested to, if only mutely, by all those who haven't committed suicide. Lisa D'Amour, who remains among the living (for which fact theatregoers can rejoice), is by no means mute. D'Amour is by all means one of the most articulate explorers of the human (and particularly female) experience of the world this side of the grave (and perhaps a league beyond).

I'm trying to tell you just how wonderful a show Anna Bella Eema is. I'm having a difficult time because: 1) Its beauty and its depth are almost beyond language other than

its own, and 2) I have this suspicion that whatever I want to say, D'Amour would be better able to put it into words herself.

Anna Bella Eema is the story of young Anna Bella, who lives in a mobile home in a trailer park with her mother. Mom's a little over the edge, a recluse, hasn't stepped outside the trailer for years; she's a self-imposed prisoner of some internal war we can only guess at, and she spends most of her time medulla-deep in books or eking wages from her job as a postage stamp lick. Mom has fantasies of werewolves, of vampires; she witnesses a reality slightly skewed from the one we're more familiar with. Anna Bella's left to herself a lot, spends a lot of time outdoors. One day she builds a girl out of mud and this girl comes to life: Anna Bella Eema.

Anna Bella Eema brightens the life of her sister-creator but causes her mother's secret garden of anxieties to grow wild. Anna Bella Eema is opening a door to a new world in which a little girl is no longer the little girl her mother once knew. Also: The trailer park is about to be demolished to make room for a new highway. What will become of them all?

Jennifer Haley imbues Anna Bella with all the verve and curiosity and resourcefulness available to a child; Stephanie Stephens skillfully portrays a mother reinforced with concrete but with a heart more like porcelain, a mind as minutely fractured as the sweetest raku; Anna Bella Eema and Frankenstein (a police officer) and several construction workers are believably, comically realized by the almost doll-faced Paula Rester. These three women spin the whole incredible tale as they sit behind TV trays crowded with objects from the story. Some of the objects are for sight alone, others are amplified for sound as well. There's movement here -- the story is alive with cogent physicality -- but mostly there's sound: The women's voices, singly or together, expertly weaving D'Amour's intricate web of narrative, at times falling into gorgeous, pulse-quickenning song. Hopeful comparatives spring to mind: Meredith Monk, Angela Carter, Laurie Anderson, Margaret Atwood. But this Physical Plant/Refraction Arts presentation is, ultimately, unique. And glorious.