



The Mothers Grim

Mobile Poem: Either the Interstate or the End of the World

By Alexis Soloski

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In an alternate America, more menacing and tender than our own, mother Irene and daughter Annabella inhabit a trailer home in a nameless city. Irene has lived there so long, she's begun to muddle the past and present with the stuff of her dreams. Seated behind a TV tray cluttered with noisemakers and artifacts, she drowsily requests, "Please do not ask me to come clear on such points as 'happened,' 'did not happen,' 'is happening,' 'will happen.'" Considering that Irene's days include not only canned ravioli and a stamp-licking job, but also visits from Dracula and Frankenstein, this confusion is reasonable. Indeed, when Annabella enters with Anna Bella Eema, a homuncula she's conjured from backyard mud, Irene only remarks, "Take her in the washroom and clean her." But Anna Bella Eema doesn't come clean.

The mud girl may remain grubby, but Lisa D'Amour's fantastical script for and Katie Pearl's keen direction of *Anna Bella Eema* prove far more sparkling. Together they craft a play ineluctably feminine, but not in any way coquettish or retiring. Rather, they engage the mother-daughter bond and the body's betrayals with a fierce, coarse lyricism. They create a landscape sharp enough to provoke interest, but hazy enough to invite allegory—as when Annabella hears the hum of nearby construction and muses, "It's either the interstate or the end of the world."

Essentially, D'Amour and Pearl offer an unexpurgated fairy tale of maternal distress. As the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim wrote in *The Uses of Enchantment*, "Myths and fairy stories both answer the eternal questions: What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself?" Uncomfortable questions all—small wonder, then, that D'Amour represents them in the form of monsters. Here, the vampires and new Prometheans stand in for Irene and Annabella's desires (love, solace) and dreads (isolation, exile). Yet, these metaphors are not exact—trust D'Amour and her director to work less linear spells.

Trust the actors as well. Though Gretchen Lee Krich's frame defies the "thick woman" Irene describes herself as, she conveys the ferocity lurking just beneath Irene's placidity. As the girl Annabella and girl's girl Anna Bella Eema, adult actors Monica Appleby and April Matthis make sinister twins in their outsize baby-doll dresses. Appleby, eye-rolling

and teeth-baring, offers a portrait of a strong, impish girl-child. Matthis registers less as the mute mud girl and more as Frankenstein, disguised as a police officer—"a small and inarticulate monster"—who arrives to suggest Irene relocate.

Occasionally the acting falters as do the direction (needlessly busy at the beginning) and the script (slack in the middle), but the lilt of the language and the accretion of imagery are unaffected. Awestruck as her mother attacks a policeman, Annabella murmurs, "My mother is a wild mother." Anna Bella Eema is a wild play.

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