

# Pittsburgh's Quantum Theatre Explores Children's Health Issues through *The Electric Baby*



**By Christopher Cussat**

This past April, the Quantum Theatre (QT) opened its world premiere of *The Electric Baby* by Stefanie Zdravec. Known for staging its shows in unique places that are not necessarily theatres, QT premiered *The Electric Baby* at The Waldorf School of Pittsburgh (The Waldorf School) between

March 29 and April 22. The run of *The Electric Baby* was a collaboration of QT, Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC (Children's Hospital), and The Waldorf School.

Directed by QT's Daniella Topol, the play was nominated for a 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize after having been nurtured at PlayPenn in Philadelphia and in The Playwrights Realm's INK'D series. Zdravec's previous play, *Honey Brown Eyes*, was published in *American Theatre* magazine and won the 2009 Helen Hayes Award for Best New Play or Musical. It was also a National New Play Network Smith Prize finalist.

The setting for *The Electric Baby* is Pittsburgh and its mysterious, titular character is a fragile, yet powerful man who exerts an influence on the Pittsburghers around him—he also glows like the moon! Natalia, his Romanian-born mother, and Ambimbola, his Nigerian-born father, are working fast to pour their strengths and stories into him, even as fateful events have separated the family. The play suggests that perhaps a triangulation with the moon at its apex can unite them—and maybe they can also heal the Pittsburghers who end up in their story.

According to Karla Boos, QT's Artistic Director, she generally chooses plays to produce that move her. "I hope to offer productions where whatever moved me and the artists will move our audience." She explains that *The Electric Baby* is a play about healing, and about characters who come together from very different circumstances—but they are all in need of healing, and they ultimately affect each other. "It's both happy and sad—like life," she adds.

Although QT tends to mix quite a bit of the "real" in with the theatrical, *The Electric Baby* is quite an unusual story, because a real child cast his shadow on this world premiere! Zdravec's son, Colin, led the family to Pittsburgh when a pulmonary illness landed him on oxygen. After he remained undiagnosed by their local, New York hospitals, the family was eventually sent to Children's Hospital, where specialist, Dr. Geoffrey Kurland, was able to finally diagnose Colin's rare, interstitial lung disease as Neuroendocrine Hyperplasia of Infancy (NEHI). Colin is one of only about 250 known cases of this disease. Happily, his prognosis is good and he will likely outgrow his need for supplemental oxygen in the coming years.

Boos says that the ability of the play to affect her was magnified many times over by Zdravec's personal story—and there was an inciting incident before she even met Zdravec, learned about her connection to Children's Hospital, or read the play! "I'd been on a tour of the hospital with International Women's Forum members and I was so proud that this wonderful place exists here in our city. I feel that all Pittsburghers should take this tour and get this inside look at the amazing work being done there." She adds that the play and the project seemed like the perfect oppor-

tunity for QT to help tell that story too.

Colin's family also speaks warmly about Pittsburgh, and more warmly still about the stellar facility of Children's Hospital and its philosophy of patient and family care—as well as their doctor, Geoffrey Kurland. In addition, QT, with its love of iconic places and belief that physical environments contribute to the meaning made of activity inside, already loved Children's Hospital, and saw that its design plays an active role in its mission to heal.

Zdravec's writing benefited from a fruitful collaboration with Topol, who is considered one of the country's foremost directors of new plays. Her recent engagements have been at South Coast Rep, the Women's Project in New York, and Magic Theatre in San Francisco. Topol is also connected to Pittsburgh as a Carnegie Mellon University graduate and through her early work at City Theatre.

A cast with deep ties to Pittsburgh and a history with QT included Robin Abramson, John Shepard, Ruth Gamble, Monteze Freeland, Laurie Klatscher, and her son, Nick Lehane. Production Designers were Stephanie Mayer-Staley (scenic), C. Todd Brown (lighting), Ryan McMaster (music and sound), and Richard Parsakian (costume).

The team found an amazing environment at The Waldorf School's Victorian home in Bloomfield/Friendship. It was also located in the shadow of Children's Hospital, where some play events occurred—allowing the collaborators to shine a spotlight on the work being done there. Boos believes that this location nicely illustrated QT's unique work. "In choosing our non-traditional environments, we put the audience right inside the work, along with the artists. The Waldorf School down the road from Children's Hospital was a wonderful place to bring *The Electric Baby* alive." She explains that it felt like a magic, protective place, where this vulnerable baby exerted an influence for good. "I think that was also a great representation of my feelings while at Children's Hospital."

Boos concludes with her thoughts about the important relationship between the arts and healthcare, and how this interconnection can accomplish awareness about health issues. "I always feel that art and science share a lot because there are always people out on an edge, exploring the unknown, and trying to capture human potential. I know we felt a kinship with all the hospital personnel we met, especially Stefanie Zdravec's doctor, Geoffrey Kurland, and Ellen Mazo



Robin Ambramson and Nick Lehane

at the Children's Hospital Foundation, who was so wonderful in bringing Quantum Theatre to her colleagues and exploring the ways we could come together."

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