

# The perils of surrogacy, gently considered

By Steve Barnes

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Susan Slotoroff and Morgan Hooper in "How to Pray" at Bridge Street Theatre. (BST publicity photo.)

## *Catskill*

Faith, the 30something central character of Michelle Carter's dramedy "How to Pray," running at Bridge Street Theatre in only the second production in the play's history, has a dilemma: She agreed to carry a baby for her unable-to-conceive brother and sister-in-law, but the couple breaks up soon into the pregnancy, and neither wants the forthcoming child.

"What," her brother unhelpfully asks, "are you going to do?"

What indeed?

She considers her options over almost 30 scenes, each involving just two characters. Though the story feels fractured at first, the play's details and emotions build, under the direction of Bridge Street co-founder John Sowle, into a completely realized world. Faith, played in an open, sympathetic manner by Susan Slotoroff, becomes a woman at once easily recognizable yet utterly distinctive. Earnest, honest and well-intentioned, she's also a little lost, and while she doesn't necessarily need a partner to complete her, it would be nice to have someone to talk to now and again.

She finds partners, conversational and otherwise, in characters including her temperamental cat, a newly adopted dog, a nonagenarian dying in a hospital and an impoverished transgender chanteuse, all played by Bridge Street co-founder Steven Patterson, as well as a new lover, his elementary-school-age son, a minister

and a perky website for expectant moms, each played by Morgan Hooper. The two are nuanced and varied in their multiple portrayals, particularly Hooper's little boy and Patterson's singer. (Patterson is returning the roles, having played them in the world premiere six years ago in New Jersey.)

The set, designed by Sowle with a central, rotating bed and a few pieces of furniture at either side of the stage, is remarkably versatile at accommodating the many scene changes, and Patterson and Hooper swap their costumes (by Michelle Rogers) with such adroitness that the pace never lags. Kudos, too, to Carmen Borgia's expertly evocative sound design.

The play has the quick-cut feel of a smart pay-cable comedy, one that trusts the audience to grow with the characters. The questions asked by "How to Pray" are ultimate and profound, but the play handles them gently, showcasing different points of view rather than forcing confrontation. It's a warm inquiry into human foibles, frailty and fulfillment.

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