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Philly Fringe 2018: Lisa Grunberger's 'Almost Pregnant'

The art and science of baby-making

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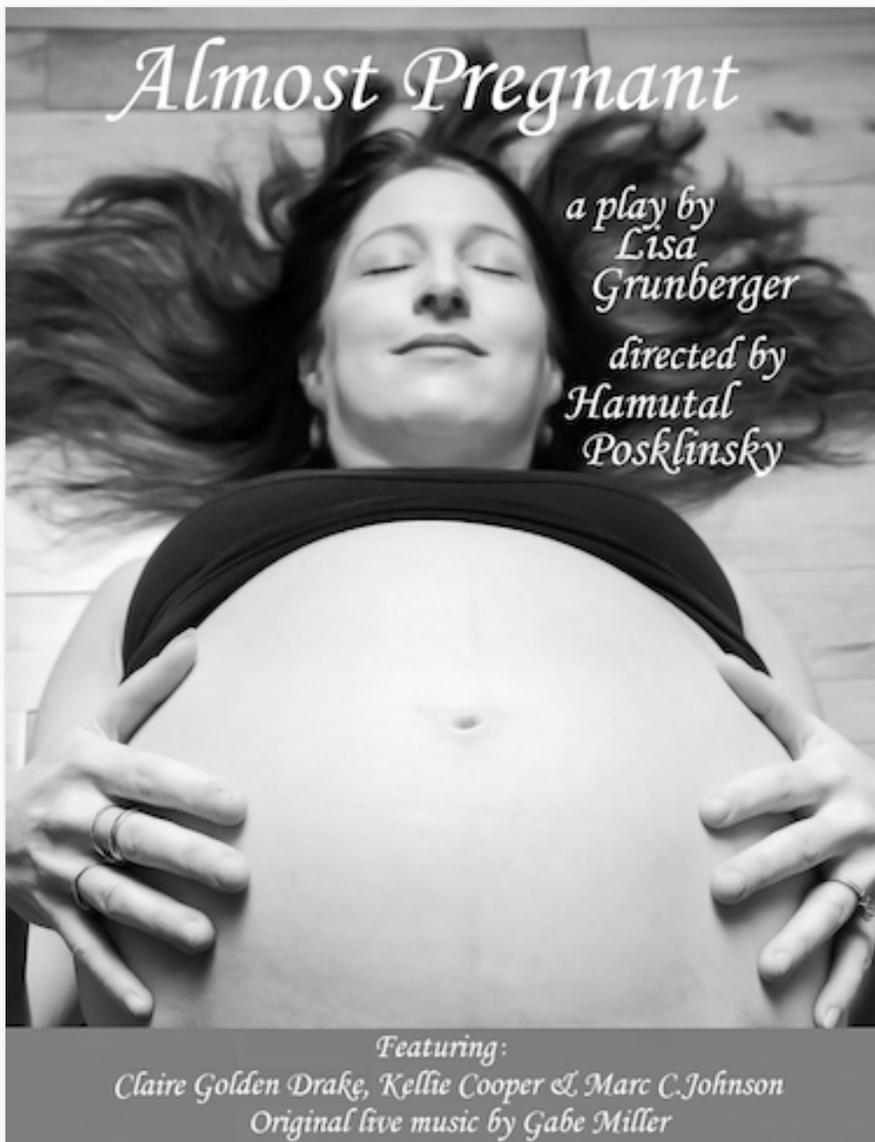
September 12, 2018 in *Theater*

Temple University English professor Lisa Grunberger's *Almost Pregnant* explores the emotional torment of trying to become pregnant when one's own body refuses to cooperate. Hamutal Posklinsky directs the premiere with empathy, insight, and humor.

Claire Golden Drake gives a commanding, utterly genuine performance as Becca, a Jewish woman who, after a normal routine in her 20s of avoiding pregnancy, decides at age 36 to conceive. Seven years of hell ensue as she pursues fertility treatments, in vitro fertilization, and egg and sperm donations. She lives each month in suspense, checking cervical fluid and vaginal mucus, hoping her efforts won't end in yet another miscarriage.

Waiting for baby

This doesn't sound like a fun scenario for an 80-minute play, but Grunberger's script provides many laughs and much inspiration, even for a childless (and inevitably clueless) man like me. With Becca are two puppetlike characters representing the frightened and confused parts of



Grunberger's premiere finds clever ways to depict the process of pregnancy. (Image courtesy of the artist.)

her mind. Kellie Cooper as Estrogen and Marc C. Johnson as Lucky -- yes, there's a *Waiting for Godot* echo -- wear matching baggy pants, puffy shirts, and clownish makeup.

The play's fourth performer, Gabe Miller, is a barefoot violinist who moves through the action. Providing nearly-constant accompaniment, often with snippets of familiar melodies, like his rendition of "Money (That's What I Want)," his music gives wry commentary. Meanwhile, Estrogen and Lucky toss the fistfuls of cash that Becca and her husband spend on unsuccessful treatments.

As Becca shares her story, Estrogen and Lucky cavort like children, yet they also assume serious roles. Cooper particularly excels as two serious characters, a shy young egg donor and an infertile Catholic woman whose church opposes in vitro fertilization but brands childless couples selfish.

The land of "almost"

Posklinsky's dynamic staging suits Becca's bursts of frustration and despair, framing Drake's powerful performance. Seeing pregnant women sends Becca's emotions spiraling.

As Estrogen says, Becca lives in "a secret society of sub-fertiles," expending all her time, money, and sanity while everyone offers useless advice. She develops an "empty horror of waiting rooms," and gives into wacky schemes and "magical thinking," trusting superstition to compensate for science's failures.

The play's perfectly crafted ending features Becca marking the days of the "two-week wait," the time it takes to know if an embryo has implanted in the uterus. Her desperate, albeit often humorous, journey in *Almost Pregnant* is a heart-shattering experience.



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