



HUMAN ERROR

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HUMAN ERROR

By ERIC PFEFFINGER

Produced at the Public Theatre

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AN AUDIENCE GUIDE

By Martin Andrucki

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THE AUTHOR. Eric Pfeffinger says this about himself on his personal website:

Eric's work has been produced by Actors Theater of Louisville, the Geva Theater Center, the Phoenix Theatre, and the Bloomington Playwrights Project. His plays include *Accidental Rapture*, *Hunting High*, *Some Other Kind of Person*, *Barrenness*, *Assholes and Aureoles*, *Malignance*, and the plays for young audiences *Lost and Foundling* and *The Day John Henry Came to School*.

In an online interview published by The Lark, a group dedicated to developing new plays, Pfeffinger has the following to say about *Human Error*:

The play hasn't changed much in response to current events; humanity has been considerate enough to continue regarding people of different mindsets with suspicion and vitriol, so that's very convenient for me. . . .

I . . . grew up in the Midwest, and that sense of place usually informs my plays. . . So, the culture and texture of *Human Error* is in my backyard; the references all came naturally. . . When you've got that geographic and cultural specificity as an anchor, I think that's what permits a play to reach for universality – not everyone has been to an OSU-Michigan game, maybe, but nearly everyone has had some experience with zealous tribalism, with or without face-painting. . .

Early on as I was drafting the play, some of the characters emerged as white and one emerged as African-American, and even if race isn't an overt preoccupation of the play, the characters' experiences and interactions came to develop around those dynamics; it's yet one more axis of difference across which the characters find themselves alienated from one another. . . .

Then the play came to be about – among other things – how people choose to isolate themselves in homogeneous and demographically comfortable echo chambers (just in time for election season!) – and the mode of comedy itself became a theatricalized representation of all the kinds of psychological filters we use to make our world more comforting. So yeah, it eventually becomes clear that neither the characters nor the audience is necessarily seeing things happen the way they're actually happening. Through the magic of theater!

[Interviewer]: To put it simply, the play forces a liberal, 'blue state' couple into a very close situation with a conservative, 'red state' couple. Do you think these characters learn from one another? Do you think whatever gulf exists between these kinds of couples can be bridged?

[Pfeffinger] : That's a really good question. The first draft of the play ended, I think, on a fundamentally pessimistic note: we can try to bridge the chasm between our tribe and other people, but we're bad at it; we're gonna fail. But as I've worked on it, the play has led me to a more nuanced, more humane place: a suggestion that people on opposite sides of an ideological or cultural divide can come to understand one another – probably only through suffering, but it's possible. The notion is more complicated than that – which is why I wrote a play and not a maxim – but that's roughly where it's starting to land.

I actually didn't think I believed that until the play led me there. I still haven't decided if I believe it, frankly. It's possible my play has a more capacious view of humanity than I do. This is one reason why writing plays is good for you: the characters drag you out of your comfort zone, confront you with perspectives you didn't realize you could accommodate.

THE SETTING. The play moves frequently from location to location: a fertility clinic, Jim and Heather's suburban home, their lake house, a sporting goods store, the home of Keenan and Madelyn, the emergency room of a hospital. These places are all in or near, Sylvania, Ohio, a town about the size of Auburn, Maine.

Each of these locations is a spot on the map of every-day America— places about which there is absolutely nothing special. No metropolitan wealth or glamor; no natural wonders; no parade of human eccentricity. In fact, they seem to capture a quality often associated with Ohio itself: a state of complete normalcy. Put another way, from the dramatic point of view, they don't seem . . . dramatic. They're not picturesque, or scary, or mysterious.

And yet these cachet-free places, sparingly evoked on stage by a bit of furniture, a small array of props, and a few simple costumes, do in fact provide the environment for continually engaging dramatic action, including some noisy fireworks during the climactic scenes. Why do such ordinary locations become the setting for the extraordinary relationship between two couples that is the essence of the play?

There is, of course, the bizarre situation that launches the action: a bumbling gynecologist has placed a fertilized embryo in the womb of the wrong mother. As a result, thanks to human error, Heather will bear Madelyn's baby. But outlandish as that is, the consequences wouldn't provide enough fuel to keep a play humming along on stage for two hours if it weren't for the most disturbing feature of this error—the fact that Heather, Madelyn, and their husbands live on opposite sides of the political frontier that currently divides the United States.

Madelyn and her husband, Keenan, are campus intellectuals, denizens of the University of Michigan, one of the most left-wing schools in the country. Keenan, in fact, calls himself a “socialist” (p36). Heather, by contrast, is a conservative, church-going suburban mom, while her husband, Jim, is a pickup-truck-driving, gun-toting, football fan whose favorite colors are red, white, and blue.

So it’s not the *where* of the action that provides the dramatic electricity, it’s the *when*—the historical rather than the physical setting. And that “when” is now.

As we all know, having been told it unendingly in the media, we live in a period of intense political polarization. (Ironic side-note about this cliché: in the world of magnets, opposite poles actually *attract* each other.) Anyhow, we’re “polarized.” There is the president, and there is “the resistance,” and there are the multitudes who form up on one side or another of this divide. The mutual repulsion of these antagonists, we are told, is absolute, the finding of commonalities between the sides seemingly impossible. The play explores how a resist-type mother handles the appalling fact that a Trumpy-type woman will actually be bearing her child? And what do the husbands think?

So the physical setting and the historical setting stand in sharp contrast with one another. The former promises smooth-sailing through calm Ohio waters; the latter provides the ideological tempest that makes theatrical waves.

THE PLOT. The play begins with a complication, the plot immediately thickening as the action begins. Dr. Hoskins, who operates a fertility clinic, informs Madelyn and Keenan that their fertilized embryo has been mistakenly implanted in another woman, so Madelyn’s baby now resides in the womb of a complete stranger. The play then goes on to explore the many ramifications of this human error.

Complication number two arises when Keenan and Madelyn discover that the wrong surrogates, Heather and Jim, are in fact even wrong-er than expected. Not only are they not Madelyn and Keenan, but they are their total opposites culturally and politically. Everything they practice and believe, it seems, is the obverse of Madelyn and Keenan’s values. Put simply, the wrong couple are conservatives, while Madelyn and Keenan are down-the-line leftists. And so, traditional Christian Heather will be carrying the baby of Madelyn, a “godless” liberal.

Each scene of the play explores the various conflicts that arise from this fundamental difference. Despite various comic misadventures, however, the couples gradually come to accept, and even like one another. Until a casual remark by Heather sets off an emotional conflagration that looks as if it will end their relationship in anger and resentment. Before that happens, however, Heather goes into labor, the crisis of birth interrupting the crisis of their tenuous friendship.

The complications, though, are not exhausted. Dr. Hoskins's clinic, it turns out, is capable of multifaceted incompetence. The baby that Heather delivers is not Madelyn's child after all, but the offspring of yet another family—the Changs. The unborn child that has drawn Heather and Madelyn together despite their often bitter differences will now disappear into the arms of a woman totally unknown to either of them. The bond that might have held these two women together into the future no longer exists, and their relationship, created in defiance of formidable obstacles, will also almost certainly vanish.

THE CHARACTERS. Playwrights have long understood the dramatic power of putting contrasting characters together on stage. Othello and Iago come to mind, as do Professor Higgins and Eliza Doolittle, not to mention Laurel and Hardy, Kramden and Norton, and Felix and Oscar. In other words, the “odd couple” has been a staple of dramatic structure for centuries. *Human Error* creates an ingenious variation on this tradition: a couple of couples, oddly matched.

We can call them the “NPR Couple”—Keenan and Madelyn—and the “NASCAR Couple”—Heather and Jim. (“NPR” refers to National Public Radio, widely perceived as a fountain of left-leaning journalism. Heather at one point defines Madelyn as a typical audience member of this organization. “NASCAR” is short for the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing, a group thought to attract fans who lean politically to the right. Jim declares his fondness for this institution when describing the most important things in his life.) The comic premise of the play, as we have seen, is that NASCAR is going to have NPR's baby.

Media stereotypes (think Archie Bunker) tell us that conservatives are blinkered and unadventurous, while liberals (any role played by Robin Williams) are open-minded and eager to embrace new experiences and people unlike themselves. Paradoxically, *Human Error* reverses this formula, showing the NPR couple as immediately and viscerally hostile to NASCAR, while the NASCAR folks are welcoming toward their political opposites.

For example, when Madelyn and Keenan decide to scout out Heather and Jim's home and neighborhood, they are appalled by what they find. The house, says Madelyn, is “too big. . . I hate McMansions, I hate anybody who would live in a f***ing McMansion” (p11). So the voice of NPR immediately broadcasts its contempt for the NASCAR Couple—without ever having met them. NPR goes on to announce its disapproval of the uniform mailboxes up and down the street and the pickup truck in the driveway, which, Madelyn speculates, is “Probably . . . washed every weekend. ‘Sorry, environment’” (p13). Distaste for the aesthetics of house and neighborhood morphs into moral condemnation of the NASCAR people, who selfishly use up water and send soap into the rivers and streams by washing their evil truck. “They're not like us,” announces Madelyn. “This isn't Ann Arbor. This isn't Brooklyn. This isn't Berkeley. These aren't our people” (p13). It's revealing to note how

limited are the places that do contain “their people”: university towns and hipster enclaves. No mention of Toledo, Ohio, just up the road.

Having been initially alarmed by the NASCARs’ possessions, Madelyn suggests that she and Keenan directly confront the differences between the couples: “I wonder if what we should do is we should just march right in there and sit down and just clarify for each other like exactly where we stand. . . . On everything. Just go right down the list of everything that’s important. . . feminism. Evolution. Poverty. Just right down the list” (p14). What these various ideological positions have to do with a woman’s fitness to bear a child remains unclear. It’s not as if Heather will be preaching about Darwin or Gloria Steinem to the growing fetus in her womb. But for Madelyn, what’s important is the social acceptability of this particular surrogate mother, a concern that seems not unlike the revulsion an upper class woman of an earlier century might have felt about having a member of the lower orders give birth to her baby. As she prepares to meet these deplorables, Madelyn decides to pursue a “hardcore strategy. We need to be tough. Bad cop, worse cop. We are their worst nightmare” (p15).

Moments later, Jim of the NASCAR Couple knocks on the window of NPR Couple’s car, and welcomes them: “I just wanted to . . . see if I could get you anything, something to drink. . . . Well, you guys just come on up to the house whenever you feel like it. . . . Got some food. . . . No hurry. It’s all good” (p16). The conservative truck-washer turns out to be pretty nice, especially compared to the paranoid liberals. Of course, the neighbors have called the police to report a strange car on the street, so Keenan and Madelyn have not entered a fully trusting world, but we see no inclination on Jim’s part to grill his new acquaintances on their political views, despite his description of himself as someone who experiences discomfort when he encounters “unconventional” things. “I got my wife, my kids, my truck, my TV. I watch football and I enjoy the NASCAR” (p21). Tellingly, this man who dislikes the unconventional, and who in the eyes of the NPR left could well be a racist, says nothing about the fact that Keenan and Madelyn are an interracial couple. How could Archie Bunker remain silent in the face of that provocation?

Over the next several scenes, the play explores the transformation in the relationship between the couples from suspicion and discomfort to a growing friendliness. The NASCARs invite the NPRs to their lake house, where they all swim and enjoy summer fun. Jim convinces Keenan to go shopping with him at Cabela’s, a store that specializes in hunting gear, and even talks Keenan into taking the next step: actually carrying a gun into the woods and stalking animals. Madelyn teaches Heather yoga. Heather in turn embraces Madelyn’s idea of tanglen, the possibility of shared identities.

Of course there are bumps along the road of this developing friendship—it wouldn’t be a drama if there weren’t. Jim berates Keenan for supporting the University of Michigan football team instead of Ohio State, even though Keenan denies being a football fan at all. This leads to a moderately violent

confrontation, with Jim dragging Keenan offstage in a headlock. Heather confesses that she is befuddled by getting close, for the first time in her life, to person who isn't a Christian. The only word she can think of for Madelyn is "godless" (p32), a term which the latter rejects because it "seems like heathen, and heathen seems so hedonistic. And I almost never do anything, y'know. Fun" (p32).

Which brings us to another of the play's ironies. Not only are the NASCAR people initially more friendly and open-minded than the NPR Couple, but they also seem to enjoy life more. The stereotypical conservative is supposed to be dour and grouchy, like Scrooge, while his liberal opposite is supposed to be jolly and life-affirming, like Mr. Fezziwig. But in this play the roles are reversed, especially in the case of Madelyn, who never has "fun."

Throughout the play we are reminded of her rather pinched relationship with life. In discussing Dr. Hoskins's blunder in implanting the embryo in the wrong womb, Heather says, "I'm a pretty forgiving person. I try not to dwell" (p31). To which Madelyn's reply is, "Yeah, well, dwelling is my specialty" (p31). The presumptively "uptight" NASCAR lady comes across like Mother Theresa, while Ms NPR sounds like Dirty Harry. At the lake house, while others relax, Madelyn doesn't, instead remaining "so not relaxed" (p43) as the stage-directions tell us. At the end of the first act, when Heather invites Madelyn to "fill my screen" (p46)—that is, to increase the closeness and intensity of their relationship as co-mothers of the developing child—Madelyn declines. "It's just not really the kind of thing I do" (p47), she says, putting an end to the impending "mind-meld" (p47). Later, as the two women are doing yoga together, Heather advises Madelyn to "embrace" her situation, "without thinking too much about it." Heather's reply is what we might expect from a no-fun person: "Yeah, that's not really my forte" (p58).

We learn that Keenan, who works for a research institute studying comedy, has developed a theory on the subject. He sees comedy as "primarily a divisive force. It splits people into factions. It's Balkanizing." Jim objects: "People get together, it's fun, they laugh together" (p62). Keenan and his wife, it seems, are temperamentally well-matched: she rarely if ever has fun, and he objects to comedy. Thus, while NASCAR-Jim enjoys watching sitcom characters exhibit their "foibles," the NPR household provides a hostile environment for laughter.

But despite these sharp differences, the characters do approach the state of "mind-meld" as the play develops. At the midpoint, Heather tells Dr. Hoskins that she and Madelyn "could be sisters almost. I love her so much" (p48).

Later, Madelyn rhapsodizes to Keenan about the closeness that has developed between her and Heather: "Look at us, we're sort of friends now. And once we have the baby . . . they'll stay in touch . . . And our families will get to know their families and our friends will get to know their friends and everyone will get just too close to one another to caricature anymore and this baby of ours is basically going to be the key that ushers in a new golden age of tolerance and understanding and our fractured

nation will finally begin to heal” (p64)! Madelyn immediately realizes that what she has said is ridiculous, but it does reveal something essential about her character. Politically obsessed, she can’t imagine just letting the baby be a baby. She has to turn it into an instrument of social reform—a daunting and fun-less prospect for the kid in the crib.

But this state of rapturous sisterhood is suddenly disrupted by an argument between the women about abortion. “You must have been so relieved to find out we were pro-life” (p67), says Heather, meaning that if she were pro-abortion she might have decided to avoid the pain and inconvenience of having Madelyn’s baby by getting rid of it. Madelyn sees this as a way of insinuating that, if their situation were reversed, she, not being pro-life, would have aborted Heather’s baby. This provokes a bitter argument, in the course of which she reverts to her earlier self. She declares that becoming close to Heather was a “mistake. . . . I’m opening up—I don’t open up to people! I don’t **connect**! But here I am, I’m connecting with you” (p69)? “There’s a chasm Heather. There’s a moat. We can’t cross that moat! We can’t cross the moat” (p70)! So no more visions of world peace through tolerance between people whom we will no longer caricature. Instead: moats—which imply castles and walls and warfare.

She also spreads some kill-joy on her husband, who has just returned with Jim from their day in the woods, armed to the teeth and wrapped in blaze orange. This looks too much like fun to Madelyn, and she mocks Keenan, telling him he looks like “Black Elmer Fudd” and a “traffic cone” (p70).

However, as tempers are spinning out of control and rash words are being spoken, nature intervenes in the form of labor pains, and the scene shifts to a hospital emergency room. Once the baby arrives, the relationship between the couple changes. They go their separate ways, the NPRs to take another shot at in vitro fertilization, the NASCARs to adopt a fourth child. Recent unpleasantness seemingly forgotten, Madelyn declares that she can’t wait for “our new kid to meet your new kid.” But for that to happen, they would have to keep in touch—and they won’t. In the end, they realize they’re too different from one another to cultivate a successful friendship.

THEMES. “Human error” is a phrase we use at moments of catastrophe to exempt our technology from blame. If the rocket blows up on the launch pad, human error, rather than the shortcomings of the machine, will very often be cited as the cause, ... Someone must have forgotten to throw a switch or tighten a screw. This is reassuring regarding the dependability of the mechanical world, but otherwise deeply disturbing. Machines we can trust. But people? Not so much. “To err is human,” says Alexander Pope. Which is to say messing things up is in our nature.

One of the premises underlying the various brands of leftist thought descending from Marxism is that humanity’s problems and woes are all the products of social disfunction. If we could re-engineer society, turn it into a machine for producing a new kind of human being, then utopian happiness would arrive. In other words, everything wrong with the world—war, poverty, racism, etc., etc.—is the product

of human error. So, let's change—mechanize? — humanity! That was the vision of the makers of the Russian Revolution: they would create the New Soviet Man, who would no longer be prone to pride, covetousness, envy, and the rest of the seven dead lies. All would be well. But human error kept popping up, and things didn't turn out as planned.

Human Error runs its own little utopian social experiment on stage. Surely, the drama suggests at various points, we can overcome our political prejudices and work together, like the brothers and sisters we truly are under the skin, in order to carry out the virtuous project of bringing new life into the world. Surely we're equal to the task, even if that project is absurdly complicated, involving Woman A.'s genetic child arriving via Woman B.'s womb. And surely these characters will be big enough morally to get the job done by extending tolerance toward one another in spite of their differences. They might even become friends!

And this is the direction the action takes during the play's first two-thirds. In fact, as the first act draws to a close, Madelyn tells Heather about the Buddhist idea of "tanglen," a spiritual process which "involves, like exchanging yourself for others. . . . You share this other person's suffering . . . and it kind of chips away at your own, like, solipsism." Heather, intrigued by this prospect, translates the concept into an image relevant to her own life: a giant, flat-screen tv. "If we're gonna be sharing pain maybe you just really need to . . . just like fill up my whole screen, you think? . . . I'm gonna be having all kinds of pain pushing out this baby of yours . . . I need someone to cross my boundaries and like join up with me and just really get up in my screen" (pp54-46).

Later, Madelyn imagines that the baby Heather will deliver is going to be "a golden key" opening doors between people who are separated by some enormous "canyon" (p67). And as the play approaches its conclusion, both couples are entwined in the shared effort of childbirth. They have all joined hands, forming a "daisy chain" (p82), all of them sharing Heather's pain, all crying out together in "agonized . . . howl[s]" (p83).

So, case closed, it would seem. The political boundaries between people have been crossed, and everyone has entered into the land of shared humanity. The utopian experiment has proven to be a roaring success. The doctor's human error, happy mistake, has created the opportunity for self-transcendence and human reconciliation. Almost.

Unfortunately, we can't ignore the fact that the whole enterprise was in the process of collapsing into a pile of bilious rubble just moments before Heather went into labor. The debacle begins with a remark by Heather about her being pro-life, a third-rail topic under any circumstances. The situation soon descends into an exchange of insults:

MADELYN. You just see me as some kind of a stereotype. . . . And . . . here you are, you're this right-wing Christian, this—you've got your truck and your guns, and all this time you're looking at me, all you see—

HEATHER. What do I see? What? Someone who listens to NPR, who clicks "like" every time she sees a gay marriage announcement online? . . .

MADELYN. No that's not what you see . . . what you see is someone who would abort your baby (pp72-73).

Meanwhile, Jim and Keenan, who have been off in the woods hunting and bonding, instantly take sides with their wives against each other. "Oh my God!" Keenan cries, "Do your neighbors know? That you're not actually an affable small business owner but just a cluster of mindless talking points in an Ohio State sweater?" (p76).

So underneath all the hugs and understanding there still lurks the stubborn troll of humanity, in all its ineradicable surliness. The four of them will go on shortly to form a howling daisy chain as Heather goes through labor, a striking embodiment of human solidarity. But the bond is created by temporary pain. And when the pain disappears with the birth of the child, so does the bond. The play ends with the two couples standing at opposite ends of the stage. They have returned to their separate worlds and have stopped seeing each other. Madelyn and Heather muse about getting together again, and their husbands agree—half-heartedly—that they really should keep in touch. But a moment later Keenan speaks the truth that nobody wants to acknowledge: "no point in working overtime to be friends just because we're different, right" (p91)? That is, let's stop trying to create a friendship based on dutiful effort rather than on mutual attraction.

The wives are less willing to break the connection they have made. The last image of the play is of Heather and Madelyn standing apart from each other but together in time. "Both start doing . . . yoga exercises. . . . More or less in sync. They wind up very close to each other . . . but of course they can't see each other. Unless it almost seems like they can" (p92).

Almost, but not quite—that could serve as a description for the whole action of the play. The characters come close to overcoming that awful flaw in our nature that leads to mutual repulsion and distrust. But human error persists.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. Do you have friends with whom you strongly disagree about important matters? If so, how do you get around your differences?
2. Do you think Madelyn is right to suspect that Heather will decide to keep the child?
3. Do you think Keenan's race affects Jim's feelings about him?
4. If you do, how does he show the effects in his lines or in his behavior on stage?
5. Which couple do you think is more open-minded?
6. Which couple changes more over the course of the play?
7. Would you rather spend time with Heather or Madelyn? Why?
8. Do you know anybody who roots for a sports team with Jim's vehemence? What do you think about that level of enthusiasm?
9. Which couple would you prefer to have as parents or friends?
10. Do you agree with Keenan's theory of comedy? Why? Why not?