

## Brattleboro Reformer (VT)

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### ***To here from maternity***

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Thursday, August 31 BRATTLEBORO -- It's a story that's equal parts labor of love ... and love of labor.

On Friday and Saturday, Brattleboro will join 20 other communities worldwide in presenting the play "Birth" as part of the "Birth on Labor Day" movement which aims to make maternity care more mother-friendly.

The play presents the stories of seven women whose experiences giving birth are told with warmth, hilarity, poignancy and unbridled honesty. The Brattleboro production features seven local women, many whose careers are directly related to maternity, performed at the New England Youth Theatre on Main Street at 7:30 p.m., both nights.

Brattleboro joins communities from Bozeman, Mont., to Bermuda, Maui to Malta, and New York to New Delhi in the growing Birth on Labor Day movement. These communities are all presenting the play sometime on the Labor Day weekend. Proceeds from the play here benefit The Volunteer Doula Network and perinatal education programs at the Brattleboro Memorial Hospital.

"There are so many women who are not satisfied with their birth experiences, and the offenses run the gamut," said playwright and mother Karen Brody, who had little idea she would find herself at the head of a global movement when she set out several years ago to interview mothers for a book about birth.

"Nobody really felt it was a story," said Brody.

Nobody, except many of the 118 mothers she interviewed, whose experiences she couldn't forget.

"Several stories just stuck with me. The voices, they followed me, they haunted me," said Brody, who decided to transform her book idea into a play. "I heard dialogue. ... It was really all about the voices."

Completed in 2004, "Birth" quickly found people willing to bring it to the stage. It caught the eye of a volunteer doula working with the Birthing Center at BMH, who brought it to the attention of Dawn Kersula, a registered nurse at the Birthing Center. She quickly saw the beauty of the play and agreed to produce it in Brattleboro.

"It's very hard to share with women the power of birth itself," said Kersula, whose stage experience includes the annual Gilbert & Sullivan productions at Main Street Arts and other community theater work. "It's so overwhelming, you can't even really talk about. ... It's a defining moment in the role of women."

Yet for many women, the birth experience can be unfulfilling, incomplete or worse. And that evokes powerful responses.

"There's always something that niggles at you. ... Should I be angry about what happened or should I be happy about what happened?" Kersula said. "I know some people that have another child because they didn't get it right the last time."

"Birth," the play, tells stories of a range of birth experiences and a range of choices women made about their birth. The message is not judgmental; just empowering.

"This play just really shows the way decisions you make about your birth affect your experience," she said. "It really presents you with a range of choices, it honors that women can make a choice."

To bring "Birth" to life in Brattleboro, Kersula tapped Amy Majer, a Birth Center RN, who happens to have a bachelor's degree in theater, to be the director.

Brody's play moved Majer in a very compelling way.

"There's nothing in my experience and studies that's anything like it at all. ... It's strikingly objective," Majer said. "I think that the effort the playwright is making is to bring those stories to the public eye. ... It's important for birth to be talked about. It needs to be reintroduced as a topic."

In the cast are seven women, including two with significant acting experience. The rest are "in one way or another, birth enthusiasts," Majer said.

The cast represents the birthing spectrum from liberal, "My body rocks!" Amanda (Cathy Tretler) to strong-willed, no-nonsense Vanessa (Elizabeth Nieuwsma-Dell) to career-driven Beth (Aimee Creelman) and angry Lisa (Beth Lloyd). But at the cornerstone of each story lies personal choice. And Janet's (Renee Wolver) epidural, Jillian's (Kathy Urffer) home birth and Sandy's (Laura Ridgeway) cesarean section are all on display without judgment.

The challenge for Majer and the cast has been to bring those stories alive -- and for some, to reconcile their characters' stories with their own strong feelings about birth.

"Watching that actresses develop empathy for that character is really interesting," Majer said. "That's the message of the play ... that everybody's choice counts."

In that regard, the actors' experiences might somehow reflect those of audience members.

Brody said she gets countless e-mails from people who have seen "Birth."

"It's so touching to hear from women who trully feel healed," she said, adding that she hears often about men whose viewpoints have changed, whose connection to their partners' birth experiences has been deepened.

"Birth" also has an activist side. Discussions, rallies and education campaigns often accompany productions, and the Birth on Labor Day (BOLD) movement has the potential to do for birth what "The Vagina Monologues" has done to raise awareness about violence against women and girls.

"I think we have a real opportunity here to start a global conversation about birth," Brody said. "Are we listening to mothers? I think BOLD is listening to mothers."

BOLD events this year coincide only with Labor Day Weekend, but in 2007, the whole month of September has been set aside for stagings of "Birth" and other events. There is also a birth-related reading list related to BOLD and other ways the play is having a ripple effect. For more information, visit [www.birthonlaborday.com](http://www.birthonlaborday.com).

Here in Brattleboro, tickets to Friday's and Saturday's performances are \$12 for adults, \$8 for students and seniors, benefiting the volunteer Doula Network and other Birthing Center programs.

The Doula Network provides volunteer doulas -- women who provide one-on-one support during labor -- for area women and their partners. Since 2003, these women have come to The Birthing Center at any time of the day or night to rub backs, hold hands, give partners a chance to take a nap, and help moms make the transition to motherhood.

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