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THEATER REVIEW | 'CHIMERA'

Having the Stuff of More Than One Self

By ERIC GRODE

A more sensationalist entity than the proud-to-be-prickly Under the Radar festival might have given “Chimera” a sexier title, like, say, “I Am My Own Sister” or “Invasion of the Body Cohabitant.” Not to worry: This play, Suli Holum and Deborah Stein’s cerebral freakout, is plenty compelling on its own.

A trim actress with an asymmetrical pixie hairdo and a somewhat predatory grin, [Ms. Holum — the show’s creator, along with Ms. Stein](#), who is credited with the text — ultimately gives voice to three characters. There’s Jennifer Samuels, an esteemed microbiologist; Brian, her wonky son; and a chipper narrator with a Midwestern accent, who may be the twin sister Jennifer never had. Or, rather, did have, but only prenatally.

When Brian receives a diagnosis of a genetic condition that neither parent has, a series of tests yields a medical and existential bombshell. Jennifer has a second set of chromosomes within her, it turns out, and this vestigial human — this “other woman who never really happened” — is actually Brian’s mother. Essentially a carrier for whoever or whatever created her son, Jennifer reacts to the news in ways that are both logical and inexplicable.

If we are not entirely ourselves, then how accountable are we for what “we” do? How much psychic space do or should we share? The potential for dime-store philosophizing hovers at the perimeter of “Chimera” (the title refers both to the rare but real biological phenomenon of offspring with two sets of chromosomes and to the mythological creature made from various animal parts), but only rarely do Ms. Holum and Ms. Stein succumb to the more navel-gazing aspects of this quandary.

The rest of the time, their inventive characterizations and a beguiling physical production deliver on its ambitious promise. (Much of the creative team hails from the Philadelphia-based [Pig Iron Theater Company](#), and that group’s wizardly sound designer, [James Sugg](#), is among several welcome carryovers.) “Chimera” has many different stories nestled in its austere, deceptively chilly-seeming frame. And they’re all good.

