

JANUARY 25, 2007

STAGE: WILL THIS FAMILY SURVIVE DISABILITY

# Drama surrounds disabled child

## 'A NERVOUS SMILE'

8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, through Feb. 11; Sunday performances are followed by a talk-back with the cast, director and a representative of United Cerebral Palsy. The Grotto, Gorton Center for the Arts, 400 E. Illinois Rd., Lake Forest. \$25, \$22 students and seniors. (847) 735-8554 or [www.citadeltheatre.org](http://www.citadeltheatre.org).

By MYRNA PETLICKI | Contributor

Having a child with a severe disability can put tremendous pressure on parents — even if they have the financial resources to buy the best care. The late disabled playwright, John Belluso, told the story of the startling decision made by one such family in "A Nervous Smile." Citadel Theatre of Lake Forest is presenting that thought-provoking drama under artistic director Scott Phelps' direction.

Lake Forest resident Phelps was determined to stage the play after seeing it at the 2005 Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville. "These characters make such strong choices," Phelps said. "Mr. Belluso, having been in a wheelchair from an early age, writes from profound knowledge of what it's like to be a person that is handicapped, trying to survive in a society that kind of turns its back on the elderly, the infirm, the disabled."



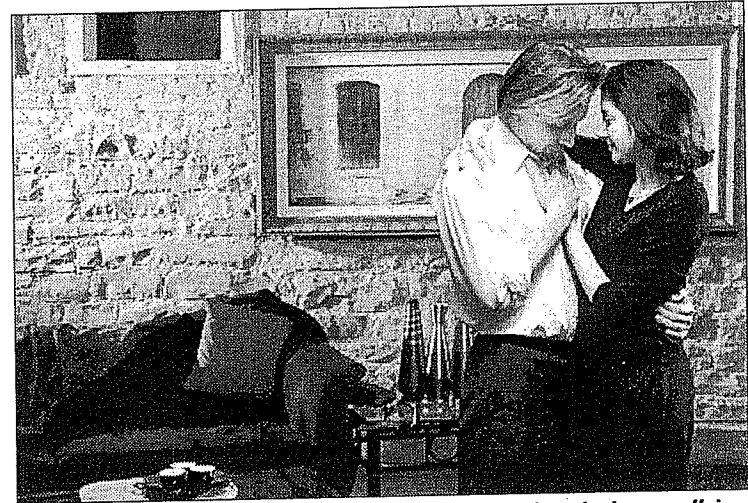
Melina Paez (left) and Franette Liebow in a scene from "A Nervous Smile" staged by Citadel Theatre of Lake Forest. — Photo by Daniel Kullman

## Family interrupted

"A Nervous Smile" tells the story of Brian (John Walski of Edgewater) and Eileen (Ukrainian Village resident Franette Liebow), a wealthy New York couple whose daughter Emily has cerebral palsy. "Brian is focused on living out the rest of his life chasing his desires," Phelps said. That includes having an affair with his wife's best friend. "He is completely burned out with caring for this child. Eileen starts out off as the villain, then we come to find out otherwise." Walski said, "Even people

who are in a situation where you would assume they could buy themselves out of the situation get to the point of desperation." The actor asserted that he wasn't siding with the decision that Brian and Eileen make but "the strength and the honesty to make a decision like that is compelling."

Walski described Brian as someone who had gotten everything he wanted. "At one point he had the perfect marriage. He was truly in love with his wife. They had this daughter. He was starting his career. And then, as easily it came to



John Walski plays the father of a child with cerebral palsy who has an affair with his wife's best friend, played by Melina Paez. — Photo by Daniel Kullman

him, it goes away."

"I was really drawn to the script because I think it is disturbing," Liebow said. "The play is as much about our response as an audience" to the decision the couple makes.

## Big decision

"It is the husband who proposes the idea," Liebow said. "I think my character has pretty complex reasons for agreeing to it. I think they have more to do with her husband Brian, and the fact that he is having an affair, than it does with her child. I think her decision is based on what she still wants and hopes could happen with her husband."

Liebow added that "on the surface, (Eileen) is very easy to dismiss. She likes to shop. She's got money. She's probably a bit of a dilettante. She's on a lot of boards. It's easy to say she doesn't have a heart or a soul. One of the biggest challenges is playing her so that people don't just dismiss her as a cold, unfeeling materialist who couldn't care less about her child. I think she cares passionately about her child."

Phelps described "A Nervous Smile" as "a poetic drama. It's lyrical. It starts with Emily's poetry in a synthesized voice and it ends with her poetry. It opens up a window of understanding."