

theater PATRICK FOLLIARD



Tsunami Theatre Company's stellar production of 'Porcelain' depicts a gay Chinese man looking for love in the U.K.

Cruising for love

TALK ABOUT LOOKING FOR LOVE in all the wrong places. In Tsunami Theatre Co.'s stellar production of gay playwright Chay Yew's "Porcelain," the main character meets his heart's desire and his personal demise in a public toilet in London.

As an audience of mostly gay men filed into the Warehouse Theater on press night, "Porcelain" had already started.

John Lee (Kasima Tharnpipitchai), a clearly traumatized young Chinese man sits in the center of a nest of marble trapezoids. He's determinedly making origami cranes from a small role of crimson paper hanging from the ceiling.

As it turns out, the small Zen space is a cell, Lee is a prisoner, and the red paper birds, which are made in a gesture of redemption, will later double as a pool of blood.

Without warning, the ensemble, otherwise known as the four "Voices" (James L. Beller Jr., Bob Lavoie, Alexander George, and David Charles Goyette), bound onto stage. Breaking the silence, they make traffic sounds and like newsboys shout out the day's sexy headline: Nineteen-year-old Lee has been arrested for killing a man in a public restroom.

It's a case of "cottaging" (the English term for anonymous gay sex in public restrooms) gone wrong.

Yew unfurls Lee's sad story via frequent meetings between John and his chain-smoking, court-appointed psychiatrist, Dr. Worthing (Beller). Slowly, John opens up to Worthing, recounting the events that lead to the crime.

In flashbacks, John hooks up with Will (Goyette) in the loo. John and Will tryst at Will's place. In a disturbing scene, Will basically rapes John, but John, who is so eager to be loved, misinterprets brutality as affection.

Finally, in a prolonged bit of high drama, the deadly shooting is reenacted.

INTERCUT WITH THE DOCTOR VISITS and flashbacks, are sequences featuring Alan White (George), a television news reporter making a documentary on "cottaging" and all that goes with it. He interviews myriad men of different



David Charles Goyette (top) and Kasima Tharnpipitchai play a damaged pair of lovers in 'Porcelain.' (Photo by J.R. Taylor)

backgrounds and sexual orientations.

The extraordinarily talented ensemble has a field day portraying the multiple roles. Giorgos Tsappas's inspired set allows the characters to move in and out of alcoves lit only by hanging bare bulbs, reminiscent of toilet stalls. Lavoie plays John's shamed immigrant father, as well as an hilarious assortment of dim-witted East-enders.

Under Mike Chamberlin's skilled direction, Tharnpipitchai's performance is a revelation. A gifted and graceful actor, he nakedly exposes John's longings and vulnerabilities.

As an Asian immigrant in the U.K., John feels like an outsider. He longs to possess the porcelain skin of the happy, handsome gay men who look right through him at the clubs and bars. Despite a keen mind and a promising future at Cambridge, John can't deal with being jilted by a man he met while cruising the toilets.

Yew is a playwright with a lot to say. He touches upon universal themes: loneliness, homophobia, racism, violence, the media, popular culture and more. In "Porcelain," his words are sometimes heartbreaking, especially the scenes in which John demonstrates his abject crusade for love at any cost.

He's funny, too. Doctor Worthing is cleverly drawn as a humorously hypocritical, beat-down civil servant. And the allegedly straight guys who partake in bathroom sex are a real hoot.

"It's like a supermarket," one of the interviewees comments. "You get what you want and go home."

It's a powerful play, and Tsunami's production, a beautifully rendered effort.

MORE INFO

'Porcelain'
Tsunami Theatre Company
Warehouse Theater
1021 7th St., NW
202-299-0320
to May 16