



The Agitation of *Washing Machine* at Durham's Manbites Dog Theater

By Jeffrey Rossman

June 20, 2009, Durham, NC: One tries to imagine what it must have been like pitching the idea to a producer: "So this five year old girl gets caught in a washing machine and dies. It's a one woman show – the kids will love it." Stranger ideas have hit the stage, but this certainly ranks as one of the more unorthodox and macabre. Luckily we have theater companies like Manbites Dog Theater in Durham to give public voice to adventurous productions like *Washing Machine*. Actually, Manbites Dog is only hosting the New York based **Fist in the Pocket Theater Company's production of playwright Jason Stuart's absorbing and disturbing creation.** While that pitch idea above may sound somewhat preposterous – that synopsis really is the play in a nutshell – **it takes simple but effective lighting, sound, and stage design but mostly the virtuoso solo performance of Dana Berger to make this a theatrical event you will never forget.**

After walking through the charming lobby of Manbites Dog's downtown Durham location, you enter a small black box theater. The central prop on the "stage" is a large, cylindrical Plexiglas and metal object that is meant to represent the basket of a large commercial laundromat washing machine. The only other items are four plastic bags filled with water hanging from the ceiling spaced around the stage. The walls give the very authentic impression of being in a very dank and depressing basement/laundry room. At precisely the designated start time of 8:15 p.m., the lights turn a subdued blue, you hear the first of many clicks that symbolize the start of a new wash cycle, and Dana Berger bolts out from the seats onto the stage to begin this multi-character study and examination of "what really happened?"

A young, financially bleek mother steps outside to make some calls regarding several bounced checks. She leaves behind in the laundromat her five year old daughter and her testosterone laden early teenage son from a previous marriage. He comes out screaming that the girl has climbed into the washing machine and despite alleged attempts to break open the window with a rock, the girl dies. The play revolves around eight characters – all miraculously portrayed by Dana Berger – each somehow connected with this tragedy and adding their two cents of perception of events. There are no names given to any of these characters.

Berger changes identities on a dime, accompanied by the familiar click of a wash cycle change and a lighting variation. She is the seven year old friend of the dead girl followed by an old hunched-over man who was present during the incident and who then just as quickly metamorphoses into an insurance adjuster investigating the scene. **Berger doesn't merely imitate – she actually becomes these people in manner, physicality and aura.** But you can tell that her favorite is the young teenage brother. She is nearly jumping out of her skin as Berger, a mid-twenties Duke graduate in bearing and bravado, *is* a 14 year-old confused and angry boy. While this was a lot of fun to watch and served as somewhat of a comic relief, it took up too much of the 55-minute play and didn't add all that much to the *Rashomon*-like conundrum of different versions of the same event.

The mother claims she ran in, couldn't open the machine, and smashed the glass with a rock. The surveillance video shows the mother standing motionless for 21 seconds staring at the machine. There is speculation the slightly built brother coaxed her into the machine. The old man may have witnessed everything but vacillates between mindless mumbling and brief glimpses of coherence. A monologue by the mother alludes to regret over the girl's birth and invasion into her life. There are no answers, but no outright accusations either. **Michael Chamberlin's crisp direction and Berger's stunning performance supply you with the greatest gift that any effective work of art aspires to – more questions and rumination about what transpired in the production.**

The final scene is a remarkable climax and depiction of the horrible event – the drowning and death of the girl. With whirling lights and real washing machine sounds plus the blaring of The Who's "Baba O'Riley," Berger writhed and was thrown around within the staged agitator. All the hanging bags of water were released and doused all over her. Most disturbing was the very end. Instead of a motionless corpse, we were left with the serene and smiling visage of the girl staring, almost contemptuously, directly at the audience – as content and happy as one could wish for a child. What does that mean? That's for you to ponder as you walk out into the heavy, water-filled air of downtown Durham