

## When everything falls into place- Tabloid-ready tragedy propels a great play

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DURHAM -- What does it take to make a perfect theater piece? Merely an imaginative playwright, a talented cast, an astute director and a creative technical team. Of course, such a winning combination is relatively rare, but when it happens, as with Fist in the Pocket Theater's "Washing Machine," it demonstrates the unique qualities of the theatrical medium.

This production, being hosted at Manbites Dog Theater Company on its "Other Voices" series, was recognized with rave reviews and award nominations in its 2007 and 2008 New York runs. It's easy to see why in this singularly engaging, vividly gripping presentation.

It starts with Jason Stuart's inventive script, inspired by a newspaper report about a little girl who got trapped in a laundromat washing machine that killed her before anyone could stop its water-filled wash cycle. Stuart takes these few facts and spins them into an investigation of the incident, not so much to find out how it happened (although he comes up with a plausible scenario), but to look into the psyches of all involved. The script's characters include the little girl and seven others, each revealing facets of the story in short, disconnected fragments that the audience must collect and analyze like mystery clues. Stuart gives each role tantalizing bits of back-story that present wonderful acting opportunities to the single performer it's designed for.

Actor Dana Berger, a Duke University graduate, has been with the production since its inception, and it shows. She defines each character with detailed body language and appropriate accents, switching among them in a split second.

It's astounding to see her transform so completely into the little girl's exuberantly pubescent brother, the weary Russian laundromat owner and the coolly analytical insurance investigator. Her tour-de-force display goes on to limn the neglectful mother, a slick company executive, a wizened former factory worker and the little girl's playmate. Her slow-motion depiction of the little girl's last moments is hauntingly moving.

Director Michael Chamberlin keeps the pace thrillingly taut, the nightmare-like state relieved occasionally by welcome but believable humor. Sound designer Elizabeth Rhodes' ominous clunks of wash cycle gears and lighting designer Ben Kato's startling shifts into shadows and eerie colors enhance the concept. The production is beautifully unified by set designer Akiko Kosaka's giant, clear plastic construction resembling a front-loading washing machine tub, cleverly doubling for a number of other locations.

In just under an hour, these first-rate stage artists create an absolute must-see for anyone who values theater's extraordinary power.