

NYTHEATRE.COM REVIEW

Washing Machine

By Michael Criscuolo- June 25, 2007

Fledgling theatre company Fist in the Pocket makes a strong impression with their debut production, *Washing Machine*, Jason Stuart's new play inspired by the true story of a five-year old Virginia girl who drowned inside a Laundromat washing machine. What could easily turn maudlin and unsavory is made mesmerizing by Stuart, director Michael Chamberlin, and actress Dana Berger, who gives a tour-de-force performance in this solo showcase.



The facts of the story are simple: in June 2005, a little girl got trapped inside the play's namesake and was killed. Her mother was outside on the phone. Her teenage step-brother was inside supervising. So, how did this happen? That's what *Washing Machine* sets out to discover.

Well, sort of. The play takes a bit of a journalistic approach getting to the bottom of things, as Stuart introduces us to the dramatis personae. Among them are the girl's mom, a white trash type who favors the Who over Mozart ("Can I tell you how much I hate Mozart? Shit, I was pregnant on the couch listening to 'Baba O'Riley'"); the girl's step-brother, angry about the awkward changes adolescence has wreaked upon his body ("I want to sound like a girl again...I'm not ready to sound like a man"); the Laundromat owner who tried to lower his premiums by installing a second-rate security camera; the insurance adjuster who becomes more haunted by the case the deeper she delves into it; and a mysterious old man who sells day-old flowers by the side of the road. Through their interlocking monologues—in which they convey stories about their lives before and after the accident, as well as on the day of the event itself—*Washing Machine* begins to slowly piece together this tragic puzzle.

Well, kind of. Stuart uses the girl's death as a conduit for exploring the unfulfilled lives of his characters. The mother expresses residual guilt about smoking during her pregnancy. The step-brother tells anguished tales of trying to talk to the girl he has a crush on. The flower salesman recalls over a quarter century spent working in a cable factory. The details add up to create an environment that is ripe for the girl's demise.

But, Stuart remains intentionally vague on the actual details of the event, leaving it up to the audience to draw their own conclusions. Was it negligence? An accident? Murder? By the end of *Washing Machine*, each audience member will likely have their own differing opinions.

Chamberlin creates a surreally atmospheric world where everyone knows their place (literally there is a specific geography defining which part of the stage each character inhabits). Set designer Akiko Kosaka's life-size evocation of the inside of a washing machine throws reality out the window for something far more visceral, claustrophobic, and effective: no matter how much they would like to, the characters cannot escape the effect this event has on them. Ben Kato's light design, filled with abrupt changes and primary colors, adds nuance to this symbolic netherworld. And, Chamberlin's use of "Baba O'Riley" during the show's intense climax is a cunning stroke of musical appropriation that would make Martin Scorsese, a master of such moves, proud.

As for Berger, she is impressive. Playing all of *Washing Machine*'s numerous characters she displays an astonishing range of skill, switching from role to role within the blink of an eye. What's even more striking is how thoroughly she inhabits each personage, and gets right to the heart of what makes them all tick. It's an outstanding performance that announces the arrival of a vital new talent on the indie theater scene.

Washing Machine is a splendid calling card for Fist in the Pocket, and I look forward to seeing more from them in the future.