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Theater

Pieces of A Broken Heart

Unrequited Passion Fires 'Porcelain'

By TRICIA OLSZEWSKI
Special to The Washington Post

Beautiful moments don't often take place in public men's rooms. But in Tsunami Theatre's "Porcelain," a restroom known for gay sex is exactly where a bit of magic occurs for a young Chinese man named John, whose story then turns even more desperate and tragic than the circumstances that led him to search for love among the lurid.

"Porcelain" has begun even as the audience is entering the Warehouse Theater, with 19-year-old John Lee (Kasima Tharnpipitchai) sitting in a sunken part of the open stage, dressed in white and alternating between staring blankly and making origami cranes from a roll of red paper that hangs nearby. The scene seems to take place in a mental hospital; we soon find out that it's actually a prison, but it doesn't mean that John isn't disturbed.

Four men dressed in black then accost the stage and approximate the dizzying hyperstimulation of the outside world, at first mimicking rush-hour traffic and then simultaneously relaying different news reports that feature the same sensational story: a man found dead after being shot six times in a U.K. bath-

room popular for "cottaging," or anonymous encounters. John, who had been discovered cradling the man's bloodied body, was arrested for the murder.

Playwright Chay Yew unfolds John's predicament with an intricacy that's deftly handled by director Mike Chamberlin and his excellent cast. The four "voices" (James L. Beller Jr., Bob Lavoie, Alexander George and David Charles Goyette) who serve as John's tortured subconscious here do double duty as characters involved in the case. The action often jumps back in time as criminal psychologist Dr. Worthing (Beller) questions John to gauge his sanity, and the unrequited love story that's revealed is fortified by a subplot of a television reporter, Alan White (George), who's using the murder as a frame to investigate the underworld of cottaging.

"Porcelain," which debuted in London in 1992, covers a lot of ground in its short running time, including bigotry, homophobia and the dark side of all-consuming passion. Tsunami's production drags you all over the emotional map with moments that often quicken or break your heart, including a recreation of John's anxious but exciting first meeting with Will (Goyette), the eventual victim, who crushes John when he decides he's not gay; a devastating monologue delivered by Lavoie as John's immigrant father, who's disowned his son and expresses regret over leaving his native Singapore; and a gut-wrenching portrayal of Will's final hour.

"Porcelain" does offer moments of levity, mostly courtesy of Beller's turn as the neurotic, foulmouthed but slightly fey Worthing, and Lavoie's transformation into a handful of sharp characters, including a clueless cop who talks about his questionable arrest of someone on an indecent-exposure charge, plus a number of Alan's other colorful interview subjects.

Tharnpipitchai, though, is "Porcelain's" quiet force as John, who confesses to Worthing the aching loneliness and discrimination he felt as an Asian in Britain that led to his hunger for Will's affection. Tharnpipitchai's slight stature, gen-

tle voice and polite posture even when John is being defensive with Worthing make his character's anguished unraveling toward the play's end all the more powerful.

Chamberlin does allow a few moments of melodrama to creep in—a violin score, for instance, turns John's confession that he "just wants to be held by these men" into treacle. But the missteps of Tsunami's production are rare, and its delicate handling of a subject at once sensitive, explosive and tawdry is simply stunning.

Porcelain, by Chay Yew. Directed by Mike Chamberlin. Set, Giorgos Tsappas; lighting, Colin K. Bills; costumes, Franklin Labovitz; sound, Ron Oshima. Approximately 1 hour 40 minutes. Through May 16 at Warehouse Theatre, 1021 Seventh St. NW. Call 202-299-0320.



BY G. TSAPPAS—TSUNAMI THEATRE

Kasima Tharnpipitchai (left, with James L. Beller Jr.) stars as a young gay man accused of murder in Tsunami Theatre's production of "Porcelain."