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The Appearance of Impropriety

Reviewed by Robert Windeler

Presented by Abingdon Theatre Company at the Judith Anderson Theatre, 5 West 42nd Street, NYC, Feb. 15-March 14.

In the aftermath of recent events in Washington, the public blames the press as much as the politicians. Thus it makes sense dramatically to re-examine the ethical standards of journalists, and to offer the proposition that they may be held as accountable for their work-related and private sins as the public officials they cover. This gritty back-room story, a sort of "The Front Page" for the late 1990s minus much of the humor, is provocative, and the production is well cast. **Kate**



Mark Shanahan (l.) and Reese Madigan in "The Appearance of Impropriety."

Bushmann has directed with crisp assurance, and **Elizabeth Chaney's** press-room set design is a dead-on combination of cozy livability and prison-sentence grim.

By setting his taut two acts in a microcosm he knows well, the press

room of a Northern New Jersey federal district courthouse, playwright **John Petrick**, who also covers the courts for *The Jersey Journal* in Jersey City, has allowed us in the audience both to enter a new milieu and consider some old questions. With only four reporters in residence, the characters are easily knowable, if not likeable. They all run late, cut corners, spy on one another, too often settle for the second-rate rumor, and otherwise appear less than we'd like them to be.

A high level of acting avoids stereotypes in favor of humanity. **Reese Madigan** as the callow cub reporter, **Mark Shanahan**, as the slightly older, ambitious bisexual user, **Pamela Paul** as the unmarried mid-leveled wire-service reporter, and **William Langan** as the union-protected staffer and family man are all terrific. Petrick's narrative is edgy and full of surprises, and his denouement is neither predictable nor conclusive. Just like real life in the press room.

Muna Tseng/Ping Chong: SlutForArt

Reviewed by Phyllis Goldman

Presented by the 92nd Street Y Harkness Dance Project, at Playhouse 91, 316 E. 91st St., NYC, March 2-7.

Muna Tseng in collaboration with writer-director **Ping Chong** (whose voice is eloquently heard reading the text) has mounted a stark, moving, bittersweet homage to her brother **Tseng Kwong Chi**, a noted photographer who died of AIDS in 1990 at the age of 39. Tseng's fine, clean choreography moves against elaborate slide projections of her brother posed in juxtaposition to various

American historical sites. In most of the photographs he is wearing a Mao suit and dark glasses—his uniform, seen almost as if he is ridiculing the culture from which he emerged. Tseng admits her brother did not like being Asian and had difficult times resolving his homosexuality and his relationship with his father. All these sub-textures are interwoven in words and movement as Tseng unfolds the story of her relationship with him.

Tseng portrays herself as the mourning, angry sibling left too soon by a brother wiped away by an angry disease. His death is perceived as an endless punishment for her which is tautly drawn when she dances as the bereaved one. Yet her anguish, carefully realized, is combined with strong reverence for this brother who lived a carefree, as-you-please life. From a charming little boy with protruding ears, to a member of the Andy Warhol '80s "rat pack,"

Tseng Kwong Chi's life was completely "today"—no worry about tomorrow. Tseng seems somewhat resentful of this lifestyle, yet the agony of losing him pervades.

The choreography for "SlutForArt" is quiet and distinguished. Tseng is a performer of gentility. She uses the term "buttery grace" in the accompanying text—and those words describe her fluid technique and her peaceful and exquisitely beautiful movement.

At the end Tseng sits, as if in a cocoon of loneliness, and tells of the Shaker box that held his ashes. She wonders how his larger-than-life being could possibly be contained in a small, simple box. "He was the Number One son," she recalls. "I loved him, he was my brother."

The evening opened with "98.6: a convergence in 15 minutes," which acted as a prologue/explanation of the early years of Tseng's family.

Tokyo Can Can II

Reviewed by Irene Backalenick

Presented by Okada Productions New York Inc., at the American Theatre of Actors, 314 W. 54th St., NYC, March 7-28.

If only earnest endeavor and high energy were enough to compensate for the lack of professional polish! Such is the case with "Tokyo Can Can II," a new Japanese musical, now at the American Theatre of Actors. The show, written and directed by Japanese theatre artist **Yutaka Okada**, depicts Japanese life during the American occupation following World War II.

Certainly the subject matter—Japanese society as seen through its own eyes—is absorbing. And if Okada sees the Americans in that time and place as mostly evil and the Japanese as mostly good, he is probably not far off the mark from his point of view. He is speaking of victor and vanquished.

But this piece comes off as decidedly amateurish, both in content and in execution. Its high melodrama and one-dimensional characters are more suited to a 19th-century opera. Its choreography is unimaginative, and most of its performances vary in quality from adequate to God-awful. While Okada is to be commended for nontraditional casting, acting skills should still have been the determining factor.

Yet there are compensating

moments, as when the young couple (played by **Travis Leung** and **Hiroimi Dames**) sings a love duet. **Saburo Iwakawa** has written some lovely, haunting music for them. Dames, whose voice is pure and whose smile lights up the stage, is a most engaging young actress—and one to watch in the future. On the other hand, theatre drops to a new low when the company sings about lice ("Itch, Itch, Itch!") or the size of their genitalia.

Given Okada's impressive credentials in Japan, one wonders at his success. Can it be that East and West have very different concepts of theatre? Yet good art surmounts cultural barriers. And, indeed, there have been magical Asian productions in New York over the years. This, however, is not one of them.

PHOTOGRAPHY

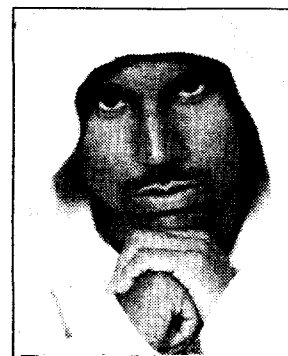
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