

Theater

'The Crackwalker': Love on the Rock

Project Y Cruises the Mean Streets

By DOLORES WHISKEYMAN
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The Crackwalker" at Project Y Theatre Company offers the story of a promiscuous mentally retarded girl and her emotionally disturbed boyfriend. But love does not conquer all in this romance; love does not even come close. From the first kiss to the final blow, their fate is assured; only disaster lies ahead for a boy who idealizes a \$5 whore as an "angel" to be held and loved.

But self-delusion seems to be the key to survival for everyone in this dark comedy by Judith Thompson, a Canadian playwright who made her reputation with work that turns a harsh light on social problems. Here, the problems are multiple: alcoholism, wife-beating, drug addiction, prostitution, bigotry, pathological lying and a grinding ignorance.

In "The Crackwalker," Thompson contrasts two couples—the slow-witted Theresa (Suzanne Richard) and her boyfriend, Alan (Tyson Lien), with Alan's buddy Joe (Andrew Smith) and his wife, Sandy (Krista Welter). The men trade in the currency of cars, motorcycles, booze, rock music and women. The women

are obsessed with the men; Theresa, in fact, makes a living from them.

Thompson structures her play as a series of glimpses through a dirty keyhole—tight, short scenes and monologues in which the world outside is referenced often but never seen. Instead of showing the force of poverty at work, Thompson gives us only the results.

Credit director Michole Biancosino and her fine cast for finding the humor—and humanity—amid so much grit. Biancosino and her actors strike the balance effectively between moments of comedy and poignancy, maintaining Thompson's empathy for the characters without tipping into sentimentality.

These characters are not especially easy to like. Joe is a mean-spirited brute who throws Sandy across the room, walks out for months at a time, and returns expecting—and getting—her favors. Sandy has stomach pains and trouble sleeping; no wonder. But she makes no connections between those problems and Joe. Loneliness compels her to him as much as it leads Alan to Theresa.

Alan and Theresa seem at first an improbable match by appearances, but actress Richard is a striking choice. The diminutive Richard deliv-



BY LOWELL BROWN

Suzanne Richard and Tyson Lien play unlikely lovers in "The Crackwalker."

ers a fascinating performance as an emotionally manipulative, physically vulnerable girl who matches Alan's desperate need for tenderness. Their scenes together provide the most touching moments of the play.

Lien's Alan is a shuffling, stoop-shouldered loser in dirty clothes; Richard plays Theresa as a childlike liar who cannot think past the next moment.

She provides a comforting immediacy for a boy tormented by bad memories of his dying father and taunted by a back-alley figure (Gbenga Akinagbe) who may or may not be a booze-induced hallucination. Theresa's sweet voice purring, "Go to sleep, think of nice things," is exactly what Alan needs to hold reality at bay.

Reality doesn't stay at bay, of course. Alan dreams of marriage and children despite a social worker's warnings that sterilization is the best choice for Theresa.

It's no surprise, then, that the pressures of adult life close in. But if we can anticipate Alan's undoing well in advance, it says much of Lien's performance and Biancosino's direction that the most awful moment of the play comes as a shock.

The Crackwalker, by Judith Thompson. Directed by Michole Biancosino; lighting, Gary Fry; sound, Amit Prakash; set, Drew Harmon; costumes, Rebecca Clay Howson; makeup, Carol Bonds. Through Dec. 15 at the District of Columbia Arts Center, 2438 18th St. NW. Call 202-462-7833.