

REVIEW

Politics and pottery: It's all about pleasure

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The neuroscience of pleasure, politics and pottery may not appear, at first or even third glance, to cry out for a place at center stage.

For most of a rich and delightful 80 minutes, however, a lanky economics professor named Steven Tomlinson mingles that and more in an open-hearted, quick-witted little solo called "American Fiesta."

Ultimately, the piece is stretched too thin to contain all the disparate subjects in a single bowl - even a vintage bowl as desirable as the Depression-era Fiestaware that drives the author's search for meaning in the clash of red-and-blue states.

How fascinating that the play, which opened last night at the Vineyard Theatre, is being co-produced by Bill Bradley - yes, the former star of basketball courts, U.S. Senate chambers and the occasional presidential race. It seems Bradley saw the play during its acclaimed run in Tomlinson's hometown of Austin, Texas, and, through a series of events as unlikely as the piece itself, this Off-Broadway transfer emerged.

"American Fiesta," which the American Theater Critics Association awarded with a prize given to up-and-coming playwrights, is ostensibly about the obsession of the collector. Tomlinson, born in rural Oklahoma, discovers his first piece of the shiny dishware on the trip home in which he prepared his parents for his pending marriage, in Vancouver, to a man named Leon.

Tomlinson is not merely a business professor. He is also a lay preacher and, if the play is to be taken literally, an employee of a "neurometrics" company that traces the effects of stimuli on the brain. As he looks at a vintage No. 7 Red Fiestaware mixing bowl, he says, with all the grace and absurdity of acquisitory need: "You see it. You want it. You've got to have it.... How does an object get such power?"

The back wall, which previously had shelves waiting to be filled, turns suddenly into the scholarly images of two brains, each cortex reacting with adorable serotonin excitement

to the sight of a simple curve or a color as safe and warm as "your grandmother's table." Family beliefs and attitudes toward the 2004 elections are similarly imagined.

Tomlinson has the rangy charm of John Lithgow and a head that looks a bit like a bright-idea lightbulb. Expertly directed by Mark Brokaw, the actor, professor, lover and rebellious adult child manages to match unlikely questions with what suddenly seem like inevitable answers. Do we want a flawless set of yesterday's dishes or do the chips have value? Are people as different as they appear from their voting record, or can something as neutral as a beautiful object find primal similarities?

Neil Patel's dark warm set has layers of cupboards filled with pieces of brightly colored old glass. Even when the play gets preachy - which, alas, it ultimately does - Tomlinson makes sure we remember that the shiny pieces from grandma's table were innocently made from lead and radioactive uranium. They'll still set off a Geiger counter, but not on eBay.

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