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Intimate theater has a play to match



By Howard Shapiro
Inquirer Theater Critic

Martin Sherman's endearing two-character play, *Passing By*, is billed as a romantic comedy, which undersells it. It's a bit fierrier than that, at least in the likable, bare-bones version by Quince Productions at Shubin Theatre on Bainbridge Street.

It's also not really funny. But *Passing By* is romantic - or at least it hangs around the periphery of romance, as two gay guys who meet by chance at a classic French movie try to determine what constitutes a relationship and whether it can work against the odds.

In this case, their uphill battle is not because the two men played with a nice sense of self and everyday chatter by Matt Taylor and John Jarboe - are gay. It's because they're both embarking on new paths, and the age-old question recurs: Whose path will detour if the relationship continues?

That question can overlay any sort of relationship, so at root, *Passing By* is not essentially a gay play. But Sherman, a London playwright born in Philadelphia and the author of *Bent* and the book for the musical *The Boy From Oz*, gives *Passing By* a particularly gay context - early-'70s Manhattan, pre-AIDS and before a wider acceptance.

Tension about acceptance runs through the two-act exploration of this friendship's course; the men - an artist, 30, and a champion diver in his mid-20s - are constantly aware that whatever the outcome, their situation must be private.

Rich Rubin directs the play with a keen eye for its intimacy - he keeps the facile conversations simple and without irony. Taylor, as the artist with a wine store-clerk day job, and Jarboe, as the younger man looking for a new New York career, become their characters with ease. In the little Shubin - fewer than 50 seats - they seem almost as if they've just popped from the audience for conversations we happen to overhear.



On Friday and Saturday nights, Quince Productions is presenting an additional show at the Shubin - actually, two one-acts - in a 10:15 late slot. Rubin also directs them, on sets bare except for a cot, chairs, and a cross that hangs from the rear-stage curtain in the first act.

Together, the two acts are called *Show/Tell*, both by Victor Bumbalo. The show part of *Show*, set in the '90s, is about a priest whose body reveals a purple spot, an early sign he may be HIV-positive. The tell part of *Tell* is about a gay man who tells another, confined to a hospital bed, a story about his recent sexual encounter, so that his buddy can experience it vicariously.

The expressive actor Michael Tomasetti makes you believe in the premise of *Show*, about a priest in a Catholic rest home - "a crazy house for priests" - who finds God in little sexual favors a young aide in the institution (Peter Roccaforte) grants for the priest's spare change. The play's best aspect is the sense of being trapped that it evokes.

Tell is raw in its narrative, in which a visitor (an impressive low-key characterization by Matthew J. McDonough) tells his ill friend - as a favor - about a poetically lurid sexual encounter. Peter Danzig is the patient, and Nicole Mesiano, as the nurse who keeps interrupting, throws away many lines that should neatly telegraph the ending.

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John Jarboe (left) and Matt Taylor portray gay men, but "Passing By," at the Shubin Theatre, is not essentially a gay play.

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