What is Ally McBeal's occupation?

- Veterinarian
- Lawyer
- Interior Designer
- Psychic

AISLE SAY Boston

REASON

Created and Directed by Ping Chong & Michael Rohd
The Market Theatre/Office for the Arts at Harvard
Winthrop Park, Harvard Sq. Cambridge / (617) 576-0808

Reviewed by Will Stackman

What distinguishes performance art from drama? Ping Chong's work, even after an Obie for Sustained Achievement and various awards and honors, continues to raise this question. His latest academic outing, under the august offices of Harvard, employs nine actors and a simple setting which can be mechanically adjusted to show up to three waist-high picture-window views or down to one smaller square frame. Over the course of 90 minutes, his actors in "Reason" appear in vignettes -- literally and figuratively -- from six unrelated stories concerning alienation from society in some way.

It's fortunate that the cast is capable and the writing captures identifiable moments in modern life, because the structure of the evening is indecipherable. It's as if an evening of short one-acts had been fragmented and then interwoven in no particular order, retaining only their time sequence. While the randomness of "what's coming next?" suggests an essential fact of life, the lack of a common thread beyond philosophical musings about consciousness leaves the impression that there's no raison d'être for what just been seen. In one sense, not necessarily related.

The cast is worth seeing, however. Drawn from Harvard students local talent, and theater professionals, they range in age from Ray Jenness, a retired speech and drama teacher, to a local sixth-grader, Eliza Rose Fichter, who just finished a run at the Lyric Stage as Helen Keller in "The Miracle Worker." Ray McDavid has worked for numerous professional theatres in the area, including appearing last fall in "The Square Root of Minus One" at
the Market. **Ryan Keilty** is a founding member of the Sojourn Theatre in Portland OR, where playwright **Michael Rohd** is the founding artistic director. **Beth Phillips** has considerable experience in New York in classic drama. Each of these professionals creates striking characterizations in their own way.

The Harvard students have their own strengths. **JoJo Karlin**, in her first year, exudes undergraduate confidence and believability. **Susan Thompson**, also in her first year, brings the centering of a trained dancer to her role as a postulant. Both the frosh are business assistants at **Hasty Pudding Theatricals**. Senior, **Angela Mi Young Hur**, originally from L.A., plays a more developed character, a young world-traveler. **Olga V. Fedorishcheva**, a junior originally from the Ukraine, creates an engaging emigre go-getter, ready to do anything in this land of opportunity, from house-cleaning to home-care physical therapy to ballroom dance competition. Interactions between her Katia and Jeness's retired railroadman recovering from a operation are among the most human of the evening. Much of the show, in fact, was developed by actors working directly on the material, bringing life experiences to the show.

The sequence that comes closest to becoming a playlet involves Young Hur and Keilty meeting at various points around the world, communicating as much by cell phone as face to face, she too busy for a relationship, he wealthy and rootless. More compelling is Phillips' divorced philosophy professor lecturing on consciousness, a possible theme for the show which the fragmented action does not support, when her life closes in, leaving Fichter as her thirteen year old daughter trying to continue as if things were normal. The child's enigmatic final speech imitating her mother is not enough to make any real point, however. McDavitt's middle-aged loser in a deadend office job, lonely and inept, who winds up finally speaking up to his dead mother's ashes, is fully dimensional; he just needs a play to be in.

Modern art practice values process to a degree that often simply baffles its audience. Skill and decoration can only do so much. The technical proficiency of the Market Theatre in realizing **Randy Ward**'s abstracted changeable setting backed by gridlike projections wears thin very quickly. Similarly, **Benjamin Emerson** layered sound design has a similar gallery feeling; it's a wonderful collection, but doesn't amount to much. The result is a pleasant enough evening, but the end result feels a little like channel-surfing through a series of contemporary stories. This was probably not what Ping Chong and Michael Rohd intended when they decided to explore how technology interferes with human connections.

A collage of ideas may be simple metaphor at a university, but drama is about ideas in collision, about their interaction. Just putting them side by side onstage is not enough -- particularly when no conclusion is intended. Such use of the theatre may be an engaging experiment, but two millennia of experience suggest that some experiments need not be repeated. -- at least not at this level of production. The job of the playwright and the director is to find a reason for what's on stage, not ask the audience to do that part of
their job -- unlike the current definition of a studio artist. Maybe it's time for modern art to become outward-looking and the theatre more concerned with its dwindling audience.

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