In one of the many scenes in the fragmented, riveting ‘Reason,’ first-year Jojo Karlin (left) shares the stage with professional actor Ray McDavitt. Actor Ray Jenness (inset) performs in another scene.
Angela Mi Young Hur '02 is one of the student actors in The Market Theater production of ‘Reason,’ a piece written and directed by Peter Ivers Visiting Artists Ping Chong and Michael Rohd. The stories onstage have been culled from extensive interviews and improvisation exercises with five professional actors and four Harvard undergraduates.
A haunting fragility pervades “Reason,” the current production at the Market Theater. Throughout the evening, which is as whimsical as it is cerebral, a series of interwoven stories unfold and layers of understanding are stripped away to reveal others beneath. One perception encases the next like the peels of an onion. This effect is largely a result of the communal process by which the piece was developed. The stories onstage have been culled from extensive interviews and improvisation exercises with five professional actors and four Harvard undergraduates. These stories were then streamlined by Harvard University’s Peter Ivers Visiting Artists, Ping Chong and Michael Rohd, who have been working with the actors since early January.

“Reason” reunites Chong, a world-renowned experimental theater artist, and Rohd, a writer, actor, and the artistic director of Portland, Oregon’s Sojourn Theatre, who had teamed up on various projects around the country. “Truth and Beauty,” which they developed at Virginia Tech School of the Arts and Theater Arts, garnered vast attention when it was highlighted in American Theatre magazine last year.

Whereas a good deal of Chong’s theatrical work, which he has been turning out since 1972, has focused on racial relations and East-West cultural collisions, “Reason” takes a different tack. “In this past decade most of my work has been sociopolitical, and I certainly wouldn’t describe [“Reason”] as that. There are spiritual and metaphysical dimensions to this show,” said Chong.

Those dimensions are visually realized thanks to the inventive set. The action of the play is viewed through windows set in a large, stark wall. The result, an elegance enhanced by multimedia effects, is a hallmark of Chong’s. His productions are informed by his training and work as a filmmaker and visual artist.

“There are so many elements in [“Reason”] and every element affects the rhythm of the show. The windows allow multiple realities to happen at the same time, and allow me to change the scale of what you see. It gives you a variety of kinds of images you can see,” Chong explained.

The windows are controlled by moving panels that open and shut at various paces. But there are other technical demands. The show is scored from beginning to end, and there are slide projections that require painstakingly specific coordination — down to actors’ specific sentences. The lighting is especially complex because of the small performance space.

These elements enhance the emotional impact conveyed by the intertwining stories, which find characters in familiar situations — on trains, in classrooms, at home — as they strain to connect with those around them. At its core, the show explores how technology, created to facilitate communication, tends, paradoxically, to alienate.

“Most images people take [in] these days are mediated through two-dimensional screens. We were interested in the fact that so much of experience is mediated through television, film, and computers. We take the screen idea and transform it through the theater experience, and ask [the audience] to take it in in a different way,” explained Rohd.

Beyond the challenge of technical navigation, the students, who range from those fixed on pursuing theater careers to those whose involvement was spurred by “pure curiosity,” have had to integrate a demanding rehearsal regimen into the already thorny time-management exercise involving course work, part-time jobs, and social lives.

Nevertheless, students assert that the experience has been invaluable. Several note that a unique — and uniquely rewarding — aspect of their involvement is performing a work they have been so personally invested in creating. At the outset, however, when the cast was exhaustively improvising and being interviewed by Rohd and Chong, the intimacy was a tad unnerving.

“From the start we knew it was going to be an
intense experience, just hearing about people’s lives. Right away we were thrown into a room with people we didn’t know at all, then all of a sudden, we knew intimate details of their lives,” said Jojo Karlin, who, with Susan Thompson, is one of the first-year students in the show.

It would seem that the notion of working closely with iconic theater figures and professional actors would intensify the intimidation. Making no attempt to suppress her awe, one student explained how Chong and Rohd easily established an atmosphere that quickly wiped out any stage fright.

“At first it was stressful and scary. But Ping and Michael are such great people that they reduced stress to a minimum. Then there was the questioning of whether I’m doing [improv exercises] right. They created an environment where you feel very free to express yourself. The gnawing anxiety about being judged by professional actors also faded quickly,” said Olga Fedorishcheva ’03, who is also a competitive ballroom dancer.

“Sometimes, working with a director, it can feel like they’re imposing. But Ping and Michael explain each character and how the image fits in the canvas of a whole production in a way that feels very natural. I was never doing anything I didn’t like. It all makes perfect sense when Ping explains it,” said Fedorishcheva. She sees the creative process reflected in the show’s themes. “The whole show is about not having a perfect explanation, but a great explanation that makes sense.”

For Angela Mi Young Hur, a senior, the emotional rigors of rehearsal were a small price to pay for an insider’s view of the playwriting process: “The directors had a general idea of what the general narrative arc would be, but we got to see how they flesh it out, how they shape it, and what they cut out. It’s a dual-purpose project for me as writer and actor. I’m writing a thesis that’s basically a novel, so [the show has] been exciting because I realize I’m more interested in writing than acting. It’s a very organic process. You get attached to the script at the same time you feel more self-conscious about some of the lines that perhaps you helped write. It feels so personal. ... While developing stories, we saw how stories transfer to other characters.”

Chong studied filmmaking and graphic design at the School of Visual Arts and the Pratt Institute, and as he got more acquainted with the stage, he expanded his skills and his range. He studied dance with Meredith Monk, a performance artist with a reputation for being audaciously experimental. In 1975, he founded Ping Chong and Company, also known as the Fiji Theatre Company, in New York. The nonprofit troupe has built its reputation on the exploration of the meaning of theater and art. The group has developed fiercely innovative works, which have been presented on several continents. Chong himself has earned international acclaim, and he has a virtual gallery of fellowships, honorary degrees, and awards (including Obies).