Going Pro at the Market Theater

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There are many reasons to go to the theater; Reason is one of them. As I sat in the audience at the premiere performance of Reason, Ping Chong and Michael Rohd's new production, my fascination with the plush red seats and quaint elegance of the Market Theater faded as soon as the lights dimmed. The ferocity with which the audio and visual onslaught began radiating from the stage was surprising and satisfying.

By presenting several vignettes of different people's lives, the play tackles complex themes that are at times funny, at times harrowing. A professor lecturing on consciousness ironically loses touch with reality; a young woman is determined to leave the world she knows to become a nun; an old man faces his own mortality as a therapist tries to breathe life back into him; a broken man struggles with the death of his mother; a couple of world travelers miss their opportunity for love.

Reason is the product of a collaboration between the Office for the Arts at Harvard and the Market Theater. The purpose of the production is to give Harvard students exposure to professional theater. Four of the nine actors in Reason are Harvard Undergraduates. The lucky four, Olga V. Fedorishcheva '03, Angela Mi Young Hur '02, Johanna S. Karlin '05, and Susan S. Thompson '05, concur that working with professionals has been an enlightening experience, and one that is difficult to find as a student actor at Harvard.

The writer/directors Ping Chong and Michael Rohd, visiting artists at the Office for the Arts, are both highly acclaimed. Chong, known for his work in experimental theater, has won multiple awards including two Obies and six National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships. Rohd, Chong's frequent collaborator, is the founding artistic director of Sojourn Theatre in Portland, Ore.

The Harvard actors expressed great excitement at working with such respected artists. For Karlin, the professional atmosphere was intimidating at first: "I was afraid it would be scary, but they were the most down-to-earth, nice, friendly people." Karlin feels that the connection she now has with the artists will be helpful to her after college: "They are great people to know. I feel like I can go to them with future endeavors."

The directors are enthusiastic about the value of a collaboration between professional and student actors. Chong claims that he approaches working with the Harvard actors just as he does working with professionals: "I don't treat them differently than any other actors." Chong comments that the production has been a "learning experience" for all those involved: "The actors are interesting to work with."

Rohd emphasizes his belief in the importance of professional guidance and experience for young actors: "Ping and I are strong believers in the importance of mentorship for young artists."

Reason is deemed part of the genre of "experimental" theater, Chong's specialty. The nature of the set and the way that the play is constructed definitely live up to this classification. The characters in the play are largely the result of improvisation by the actors. Chong and Rohd had previously outlined some characters, but the details of the storylines and dialogue in the play were derived from the individual personalities of the actors and from skills that they created during rehearsals.

In this way, the actors were completely immersed in the creative process. "This is a unique experience for the actors," says Rohd. "Their background and experience have informed the actual production."

The construction of the set adds to the intimate feel of the performance. The stage is blocked by a grid-like wall, which has three windows that open and close to reveal torso views of actors. As a result, the audience feels that they are being allowed to spy on the interactions of the characters.

One of the advantages of this setup is that it enables the play to move seamlessly between plotlines. An office worker sitting at a desk replaces a pair of would-be lovers on a train almost instantaneously with the closing of one window and the opening of another.
The production also plays with the effects of light and sound. Recorded voices have conversations with live actors; the ding of a train bell imitates the weak strivings of an old man’s heart; flashing lights symbolize the movement of a train.

The experience of the characters resonate for the undergraduate actors. The central theme of the play is movement. Two world travelers, Elsa (Angela Mi Young) and Richard (Ryan Keilty) meet on a train and feel a strong connection to one another. However, they are incapable of keeping still long enough to communicate and connect properly. Elsa says, “Being in motion is like breathing.” Elsa may be moving physically, but she refuses to travel emotionally. She does not grow in experience.

For Reason’s undergraduate actors, the production has been a unique opportunity to grow as the characters they play could not. Olga Fedorishcheva says, “It’s unbelievable. There is no doubt that this kind of professional acting experience is valuable to students.” However, the actors point out the scarcity of such opportunities at Harvard. Susan Thompson, for example, feels that the college provides great experiences for student directors but does a weaker job making professional-level acting experience available to students. The collaboration between the Market Theater and the Office for the Arts at Harvard happens only once a year.

The reasons that Chong and Rohd’s production gives us for experiencing Reason as an audience member are many and masterfully delivered. For the Harvard actors, there is an even more compelling reason for the production: the rare chance to be part of professional theater.

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