

'Memories' peers into a future of 'we' over 'I'

Author: Steele, Mike; Staff Writer¹ Staff Writer

Publication info: Star Tribune [Minneapolis, Minn] 12 Jan 1991: 01E.

[ProQuest document link](#)

Abstract: Ping Chong's "Elephant Memories" is a dark-hued meditation on a future in which the self-critical "I" is subsumed by an easily regimented, nonthinking "We." It's an Orwellian future where memories, like libraries, have been eradicated, where citizens' wrists are bar-coded, where the ultimate crime is doubt and where fun and games become an arduous duty. Chong's hourlong work is often opaque, elliptical and abstractly stylized, a piece that requires patience and engagement on the part of an audience. Images dropped here pop up there later. Bits of text floating abstractly at the beginning fall subtly into place later as information accumulates. Chong gives you the raw material and lets the picture form in your own mind.

Links: [Linking Service](#)

Full Text: Ping Chong's "Elephant Memories" is a dark-hued meditation on a future in which the self-critical "I" is subsumed by an easily regimented, nonthinking "We." It's an Orwellian future where memories, like libraries, have been eradicated, where citizens' wrists are bar-coded, where the ultimate crime is doubt and where fun and games become an arduous duty. Chong's hourlong work is often opaque, elliptical and abstractly stylized, a piece that requires patience and engagement on the part of an audience. Images dropped here pop up there later. Bits of text floating abstractly at the beginning fall subtly into place later as information accumulates. Chong gives you the raw material and lets the picture form in your own mind. As always, Chong's eye is superb, the stage constantly dynamic. The stage design - something between a circus and bullring, the space defined by vertically hung string around the perimeter and dominated by dual pictures overhead of a sea turtle and a nuclear plant - is always alive. What finally does accumulate is a familiar picture, a George Orwell, Franz Kafka, Fritz Lang vision of nonthought, nonfeeling futures. It becomes a cliché, yet a vision that seems to need constant re-airing in new and imaginative ways. The piece even talks about a pan-oceanic embargo and an overseas war against the "barbarians of darkness" that is justified by the notion that "our way of life is the way of life." This rhetoric works because Chong's population, sort of cyber-robotic humanoid types in costumes that remind one at once of harlequins and prisoners, has been unable to hold on to memories of individualism. In the play's strongest and funniest scene, an emcee (Ric Oquita) with microphone in hand ambles from person to person, congratulating each on his or her conformity, sometimes menacingly questioning their group sincerity, finally humiliating one woman who still remembers her mother, a criminal doubter. Questions fly cryptically through the proceedings, especially, "Is there a difference between choice and the illusion of choice?" The most sophisticated group members realize that real choice has been replaced by "the deal," a cynicism to which everyone, except perhaps the doubter, readily and happily agrees. What's most disturbing about Chong's vision isn't that people have been dominated by some diabolical outside force, but that they've willfully entered into groupthink, happily given up the responsibility for their individual actions, contentedly choosing to live in a world of self-denial leading to self-destruction. Often Chong can't resist the easy liberal sentiment - chants of "It's a man's world," a screed delivered by the doubter that gets preachy and sermonizing. Yet the work's strength lies in the insights that come from delving into the arduous and discovering meaning. In a play that cries out for critical thinking, it all seems appropriate. There's nothing really new here except the form of presentation, but that itself, skillfully wrought, keeps this still all-too-pertinent warning fresh. Illustration PHOTO

People: Chong, Ping

Publication title: Star Tribune

Pages: 01E

Number of pages: 0

Publication year: 1991

Publication date: Jan 12, 1991

Year: 1991

Section: VARIETY

Publisher: The Star Tribune Company

Place of publication: Minneapolis, Minn.

Country of publication: United States

Journal subject: General Interest Periodicals--United States

ISSN: 08952825

Source type: Newspapers

Language of publication: English

Document type: NEWSPAPER

ProQuest document ID: 418271281

Document URL:

<https://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/418271281?accountid=12768>

Copyright: Copyright Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities Jan 12, 1991

Last updated: 2011-09-16

Database: ProQuest Central,National Newspapers Premier

Contact ProQuest

Copyright © 2012 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. - [Terms and Conditions](#)