"What Happened in Boston, Willie"

Reviews of Current Productions

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" REASON "

Written and Directed by Ping Chong and Michael Rohd

Olga V. Fedorishcheva.....Katia (housecleaner, therapist)
Eliza Rose Fichter.....Eliza (daughter)
Angela Mi Young Hur.....Elisa Won Cho (woman on train)
Ray Jenness.....Frank (old man)
Jojo Karlin.....Jojo, Bartly, Allison, Conductor
Ryan Keilty.....Richard Lanier (man on train)
Ray McDavitt.....Edward (businessman)
Beth Phillips.....Beth (professor)
Susan (Scottie) Thompson.....Meredith (nun)

[ "Keep in your soul images of magnificence." -- Robert Edmond Jones. ]

On the night that I attended The Market Theatre's production of REASON there were two married couples who sat in front of me. Afterwards, seeing that I was a member of the "Press", one husband turned to me and said, "What was THAT all about?" I said I would think of something. Here goes.

What I saw was a black steel wall that came down to the very edge of the stage, and one, two, three or four panels slid up to reveal bits and pieces from five plot lines - none of them having any bearing on the others. Since the actors are only seen from the waist up, I felt I was watching a puppet show on multiple screens at the local Cineplex. At first I was irritated - yet another "gimmick" - and then I became more and more fascinated with what was unfolding and by curtain, uh, panel-call, I decided I had seen something quite brilliant and yet hard to describe in words. REASON is not what you would call a Tired Businessman's Show - you need to work at it, folks. You may not "get" it in the conventional sense - that is, seeing it as a "play" with a beginning, middle and end - but you can certainly "feel" it as I did - and that may be the key to understanding REASON - through the heart. (I'm not even going to try
discussing Ping Chong’s theatre aesthetics, or Eastern-Western philosophies. Does REASON work? It did for me – but, then, I’m from another planet, anyway.)

First things, first. Here are the five plot lines:

1. Frank, an old man, is a retired engineer who witnessed a man jumping in front of his moving train. (Frank's growing awareness of his own mortality is symbolized by a brush-fire of a birthday cake.) Olga, a therapist, comes to walk Frank through his rehabilitation and to get him to still go out and enjoy Life.

2. Edward, a quietly defeated businessman, screws up a business assignment and is rewarded by having his desk moved into the company washroom. He dials a sex-chat number and asks a young vixen what aftershave she likes and what does she find attractive in a man. He plays his music way too loud, and an off-stage neighbor knocks to say (in a thick Southern-belle accent) to please turn it down. In his final scene, Edward talks to his mother’s ashes in its urn; she seems not to have been a very nice woman.

3. Beth, a college professor and a single parent, gives lectures on philosophy and suffers a breakdown, foreshadowed by her hearing sounds that no one else can hear. She is last seen wearing a clear plastic mask of her own face; four mysterious figures with glowing candles advance and retreat before her as her own voice is heard delivering a lecture, this time about God. Beth gently, gently vanishes backwards into the darkness.

4. Meredith, a young woman, decides to take the veil. Many years later, she revisits her old room in her parents' house and finds it has been kept exactly the way she had left it.

5. Richard and Elsa meet on a train passing through Russia. Both are eternal wanderers – partly for business, partly from restlessness. They strike up a conversation and have a brief affair. Richard is willing to commit, but Elsa panics and chooses to skip their next rendezvous.

Second things, second. These five plot lines are divided up and revealed a bit at a time behind the sliding screens. A puppet show. The Alienation Effect. What have you. But, paradoxically, if you start to pay attention to these scenes in all their little details, you’ll start to wonder and thrill to the art of Being Human. The Clockwork Orange – symbol of our times (at least in the Western world) – still has juice in it, after all.

Imagine you're shown a segment of a home movie that you've long forgotten. One minute; any scene will do (shades of OUR TOWN here). At first glance, you'll say, okay, that’s [me/you/him/her] doing [whatever], and, so, yeah? But stop, rewind that minute of film and watch it again and study it – my God! You'll become fascinated with things you've forgotten – the way [me/you/him/her] smiled back then, the shades of hair or of objects in the room – oh, yes, that tablecloth! or the placement of a chair now long gone – and suddenly everything in that one minute becomes so precious, even though you took it for granted at the time and it's now gone forever. That is the effect I got when watching REASON – so many little moments that, when isolated, suddenly took on cosmic proportions – as I recently said in KRAPP'S LAST TAPE, here's a world in a drop of water. And I am grateful.

Of course, other people may see REASON as a collection of cold, neurotic people or be bored stiff or turn into one big HUG? from beginning to end (as did my married couples). But I saw, I felt, and I was moved. So many beautiful, haunting images – and in the Richard-Elsa plot, a fable for the global village. The most tired of businessmen can at least follow their love story from cool beginning to cooler end.

REASON can be considered the twin to the Market's production of SWIMMING IN MARCH from last
year – it has been brilliantly designed and lit by Randy Ward; and Benjamin Emerson's sound system is simply incredible – the actors' voices match their voice-overs in the same airless, canned quality; layer upon layer of soft yet crystal-clear sound washes over you. That is not to underestimate the contributions of its quirky, grab-bag ensemble (composed of both professionals and students) who have been pressed into its landscape – in particular, that astonishing child actress Eliza Rose Richter, who takes to her mother's lectern like a young Portia (oh, how I hope her mature voice will have sweet music in it!); Ray McDavitt as the tragicomic Edward; Jojo Karlin, who is really Miss Piggy in disguise (that's a compliment, Jojo); the anonymous actress who supplies the phone voice for Edward's sex-chat companion (perky, yet wary – a college student doing it for kicks); and, especially – especially – Ryan Keilty (Richard) and Angela Mi Young Hur (Elsa), those star-crossed Strangers on the Train.

The catchy song used in the most amusing scene (the ensemble as rows of Weebles on a train heading, no doubt, for Playskool) is "Close Your Eyes" sung by Bebel Gilberto on her TANTO TEMPO. Great CD! I bought it the next day.

Yes, there IS humor in REASON. And love and mortality and much more in this haiku of a play. Go and listen with your heart.

I hope those two couples who sat in front of me will read this and say, "Okay, I'll buy it – I guess." Of course, I could be wrong about REASON, and I know others can give equally convincing interpretations. But that is what I saw.

And, more importantly, FELT.

Beam me up, Scotty.

"Reason" (23 February – 17 March)
THE MARKET THEATRE
One Winthrop Square, Harvard Square, CAMBRIDGE, MA
1 (617) 576-0808