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VIRTUAL Realization

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The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow

by **Rolin Jones**

Directed by **Matthew Wiener**

[Actors Theatre](#)

[The Herberger Theater Center Stage West, Phoenix](#)

(602) 252-8497

October 27th - November 12th, 2006

[\\$24.00 - \\$48.50](#)



Rolin Jones' play *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* is the first script I've seen that embraces 21st century realities, fancies, and trappings to tap into age-old questions about self and interconnection. Not since *Closer* has a script successfully captured technology and its contemporary sensibilities to offer such an

interesting observation into the foibles of humanity. And it's damned funny, too. Jones' hyper-intellectual and precocious leading character, 22-year old cybertechnologist and agoraphobe Jennifer Marcus (**Melody Butiu**), embodies all of the positives and pitfalls of Generation M (Generations X and Y overall

codename - for “me, myself, and my”). With this character driving the plot forward, technology clashes with desire to create understanding.

Jennifer’s lifeline is her computer and her anti-establishment streak is embodied by her willingness to barter sex and weapons technology to get what she wants, whether it’s electronics, information, or other services. Her relationship with her adopted American mother, the A-type Adele Hartwick (**Cathy Dresbach**) is strained and her loving father (**Gerald Burgess**) is affable but ineffectual. Because her birth mother in China is in question, and she sees no sense in leaving the placenta of her room when her umbilical cord allows for Ethernet connections, she embarks on creating an extraordinarily advanced robotic version of herself, Jenny Chow (**Elizabeth Ho**), to go to China in her stead to search for her. She uses her bartering to engage Raytheon underling Preston, Mormon missionary Terrence, and Robotics Engineer Dr. Yakunin (all played by the hilariously amazing **Gene Gannse**) to get what she needs. With the aid of her pizza delivery friend, the endearingly slacking Todd (**Cathan Bordyn**), she goes on a virtual reality tour that brings her to self-discovery.

Matthew Wiener has paced the **Actors Theatre** production with the speed of an anime adventure to keep it cruising along past the improbabilities, but where he really shines is in those moments, such as when Jennifer and her father talk on the roof of their house or during the emotionally powerful climax of the show, when he slows the action to a crawl and trusts in silence to speak for the moment.

Biutu has the energy and the precision needed to make Jennifer loveable and almost believable. She strongly presents Jennifer’s many ticks and her dynamic of daughter, neurotic, friend, mad scientist, and stunted teen inherent in Jenny. Gannse is a comedic genius with perfect timing. His four characters are full, fun,

and he uses the dialogue to weave four very different oddballs while still making us love each one. He, Burgess, and the unparalleled Dresbach are valley institutions from whom Wiener draws wonderful performances. Burgess is cheek-pinchingly sweet and lost as the dad, and he presents the characters quirks with skill. Dresbach is intimidating and completely empathetic as the slowly unraveling Adele. There is one scene involving a drunken brawl that highlights how Dresbach is completely in control and yet can include so much vulnerability in her characters.

Bordyn is very funny and sweet as Jennifer's best friend. His and Wiener's initial choice of prototypical vocalization seems too easy, but as Todd fleshes out, it becomes natural and understandable. Ho's Jenny is an anime character personified, and her transformation from robotic into near-humanity is wonderfully created, from her AI voice through her jerky movements to her heartbreaking innocence.

Jeff Thomson's recreation of the Marcus' home is nicely compartmentalized and creates great traffic patterns and playing spaces. There are some great special effects that enhance the humor. **Connie Furr's** costumes are great little quips of their own. **Paul A. Black's** lighting complements the story and space.

AT is once again playing to its strength after inexplicably becoming a touring house by mounting a thoroughly contemporary script with a superb ensemble and strong direction and design elements. This is the true start to what promises to be their strongest season yet.