The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow
Written by Rolin Jones
& Directed by Edgar Landa

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Our Playwright: Rolin Jones

A decade and a half since his days delivering pizzas for Ameci’s in Southern California, Rolin Jones has come quite a distance. The 32-year-old’s writing career was thrust forward in 2001 when he entered the Yale School of Drama. Drawing on his own experiences as the son of an estranged mother, the friend of an obsessive-compulsive girl, a pizza deliverer, and the assistant to a successful business woman, he began to conceptualize The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow in 2002. His professors were glad to see such wit and up-to-date subject matter—global/computer communication, androidal emotions—spewing forth from their student’s pen. Before long his Jenny Chow premiered at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California, to more or less good reviews. Despite one reviewer’s comment that “the playwright has no firm grasp of what he wants to say or do with our attention once he grabs it,“¹ Jenny Chow was the winner of three critical awards in 2004. In 2006 the play won an Obie award for excellence in playwriting and was also a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Drama. Meanwhile, Jones was extended an invitation to join the writing team on the hit television series Weeds, which he accepted. He has written several plays in the mean time, including Souljacker and The Jammer, which are doing well around the country. Rolin Jones makes Southern California his home, where, thanks to the success of Jenny Chow, he enjoys “a piece of the pie” years after having to deliver it in his own Dodge Dart.

Jenny Chow in Perspective

The year was 2004. Some of you may remember it. To recapture the spirit of the times let us take a look again at a few of the highlights of this year, when Jenny Chow first premiered. It was a leap year. Opportunity and Spirit landed on Mars. John Kerry took the Democratic Party’s nomination for the American presidency while the CIA admitted there was no “imminent threat from weapons of mass destruction” prior to the invasion of Iraq. South Korean scientists announced their plans to clone 30 human embryos. The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King swept up statuettes at movie awards ceremonies (it set precedents in film technology). Scientists determined that Mars once had water, for sure. Terrorizing explosions in Madrid killed 190 people. Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage. Throngs of Chinese took to the streets of Hong Kong, commemorating the 15th anniversary of the massacre in Tiananmen Square. A Russian school was terrorized resulting in the deaths of over 300 people. The trial of Saddam Hussein began. The U.S. Assault Weapons Ban expired, and stayed expired. Martha Stewart went to jail. The Red Sox beat the Yankees for a spot in the World Series, which the Red Sox won, ending the “Curse of the Bambino.” NASA flew a jet 10 times the speed of sound. Southeast Asian countries were devastated by a horrendous tsunami. A video of al-Qaida members beheading U.S. civilian Nick Berg was circulated on the World Wide Web. As you can see, 2004 was an active year in news, in political, legal, and religious unrest, and certainly in technological advancement. Jenny Chow, which in a way touches on every major issue of this particular year, made a nice niche for itself in the fabric of a turbulent society.
These Are a Few of My Favorite Themes

*The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow*, for such a short and charming little play, sure does cover a lot of thematic territory. Don’t believe me? Pay close attention to the performance and you will note Rolin Jones’ artistic commentary on the following themes (in my particular order!):

Reality
Intelligence – and the (artificial) design of it
Fear
Family
The Generation Gap
Social Disorders
Social Order
Privacy
Ethics
Communication (*communion*, *community* and *communality*)
Technology
Manipulation
Compromise
Truth
Genealogy
Identity
Adolescence
and…
…and…

*Religion*  (Jenny Chow has the same initials as another famous J.C.)

So what exactly does the play say about all of these themes, which are relevant to today’s world? Well, this is a study guide, not an answer key. I will only suggest that the play might be drawing our attention to a world that is crowded with themes, even *dirty* with themes. We are surrounded by personal, social, political, family, and religious issues which cling to us like mud as we trudge our way toward more mud – and we don’t even know if the mud is real! The play might get us to think about how we find ourselves in a messy reality that we didn’t make and what we might do to give ourselves a little order, a little structure.
The Importance of Jenny Chow

Jenny ultimately learns nothing from her experience and neither do we as the play sputters to an inconclusive and quite downbeat close. —Michael Tuscano, Critic

The above quotation reflects a particular critic’s opinion about the play. But I am not convinced that everyone should feel the way he does. Perhaps the critic is not trying hard enough. You be the judge. Jennifer Marcus is constantly learning throughout the play, especially when she has those heart-to-heart talks with her dad, and when she tries with all her might to go outside, but can’t. When she decides that it is in her best interest to be reconnected with her missing robot, Jenny Chow, she learns that her decision to kick Jenny out of the house was hasty, that throwing her intelligent design–her own little Frankenstein–out into the world to fend for itself was a bad idea.

So what do we learn? Why is Jenny Chow important to us? This is the age of technological communion. It is far easier for Jennifer Marcus to commune with people all over the world than with the two people living in her own house–her parents. Her dad tries again and again to reach out, by cooking for her, by being friendly with her friend Todd, and by trying to involve Jennifer in his ritualistic love affair with California wildfires. Adele, Jennifer’s mother, is also reaching out, in her own way. So what is the problem? Why do we have a family in dysfunction? The generation gap has existed for as long as there have been generations. But the gap gets wider and wider as communication systems situate parents and their children in two totally different worlds. Communion seems possible only through technology (take for example Jennifer’s meeting with her biological mother–which is pretty cool!).

—Michael Tuscano, Critic

2 Again, his critique can be found at http://www.theatermania.com/content/news.cfm/story/6322
Questions to Ponder

Level 1

1. Using three of the themes from the “These Are a Few of My Favorite Themes” section of this study guide (p. 4), explain how the play connects to your life. How is your life similar to (or different from) Jennifer’s? What specific experiences in your life are similar to Jennifer Marcus’ experiences?

2. The complete name of the play is The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow: an Instant Message with Excitable Music. What does excitable mean? How does the music throughout the play help the audience to understand what is going on?

3. The play is an “Instant Message,” or IM. The action is “told” in past tense to the “audience” who is in fact a person being asked to help find the robot Jenny Chow. Can you relate to this person being addressed? Why or why not? If you were this person being addressed, would you feel compelled to help Jennifer find Jenny Chow? Why would you (or would you not) help Jennifer?

Level 2

1. Throughout the play, the playwright drops words like “cathedral,” “ritual,” “Christ,” “Morman,” etc. To what extent can you see this play as a comment on religious experience in today’s world?

2. Throughout this study guide, the word communion comes up often, but there is no definition of communion in the glossary. Find or come up with at least three different definitions of the word communion, and then apply those definitions to three different parts of the play.

3. What is the connection between these two binary oppositions: real/unreal and biological/artificial? Are there direct correlations between the two binaries? Use examples from Jenny Chow to make your point.
An Intelligent Glossary

agoraphobia: the fear of public and open places
android: an automaton that resembles a human being
automaton: a robot, basically
biological mother: female who provides ovum for and gives birth to infant
cathedral: an often big but always significant church
CIA: Central Intelligence Agency – an independent agency whose job it is to collect and coordinate intelligence about “enemies” of the United States government
chronologically: in temporal sequence – first this happened, then that
communion: (Look it up in as many dictionaries as you can)
Cyborg: a human being with mechanical or technological characteristics, attributes, and parts
Ethernet: the instrument of network sending radio frequencies between a given net of computers
excitable: able to get excited; or excited by the slightest incentive
“going into the field”: the notion of going away from one’s regular environment to do important practical work that is often exciting and risky for various reasons
Homo Sapiens: us; modern humans
infallible: totally unable to make an error – pretty darn perfect
intelligent: having the ability to obtain and use knowledge
“isn’t that how we got penicillin?”: reference to Sir Alexander Fleming’s discovery of a small ring, or zone, around some unwanted fungus in his lab; in this zone, Fleming noticed, bacteria do not grow
“just-say-no”: slogan of a specific campaign against drug use started by Nancy Reagan in the 1980s
litany: a long and often monotonous recital, listing, or narration of something or things – a patient who loves going to the doctor every week will address the doctor with a litany of physical, mental, and social problems
Neanderthal: a crude, extinct species of humans (or perhaps non-humans) who nonetheless made and used tools to their (and our) advantage
NSA: National Security Agency – they encrypt codes and such to protect the nation’s information systems
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD): an anxiety disorder distinguished by the patient’s constant disturbing thoughts and abnormal infatuation with things
ritual: a religious, social and even personal act performed regularly and often with ceremony – Jennifer Marcus’ spraying of disinfectant certainly qualifies
Rubik’s cube: Erno Rubik’s little invention – a puzzle in the shape of a cube, which consists of smaller cubes of various colors that need to be lined (or rather planed) up
secular humanist: a person whose philosophy promotes human rather than religious principles; a person who believes such a philosophy is possible
self-preservation: the instinct in living organisms to do what must be done to stay alive – not to be confused with intelligence
Tourette’s: a neurological disorder distinguished by the patient’s physical and/or vocal Tics
Web Links to Reviews and Information on Rolin Jones

http://www.dramatists.com/cgi-bin/db/single.asp?key=3605

http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/theater/reviews/14541/


http://www.suntimes.com/entertainment/stage/281867,SHO-Sunday-fine04.article

http://books.google.com/books?id=ru55LPze51cC&dq=rolin+jones&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=LvAo_JiSVJ&sig=L9niu58KPxST18rZvM1OEoSpVq0

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