

BACKSTAGE

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

A SLIGHT HEADACHE

LMCC Swing Space Project at South Street Seaport Museum's Melville Gallery

Nineteenth-century sideshow barkers and performers may have been hammy and affected, but the hammy, affected performances in *A Slight Headache*—conceived, written, and performed by Alyson Pou—tried this 21st-century critic's patience.

A story about a mother-daughter team joined at the hair ever since the daughter sprang fully formed from the mother's head, the production is described as a solo performance/installation. The installation, consisting of six ersatz "wonders"—a bearded piranha, mummified alligators, the skull of a baby Cyclops, all in glass bell jars on podia around the seating area—is worth a look on its own. Pou developed the piece through many residencies, including a fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society.

The playing space is lovingly decorated as a 19th-century dime museum—the small stage has footlights; the curtains are red and gilt. But the dapper humbug tour guide (Gregory Cohen Frumin, who is also the puppeteer—a few shadow puppets round out the cast) takes far too long with each wonder and fluffs every other word. A character called Maestro (Matt Falber) sings "My Wild Irish Rose"; he also underscores the performance. Finally, Pou appears in a gorgeous and elaborate costume covered with thick red hair in many braids—Emily Pepper did a bang-up job of costume and wig design—and tells her story.

When she plays the daughter, her voice becomes higher and breathless. The daughter wishes to cut the bond of hair, although scissors have never worked. The mother is controlling and drinks. She promotes the daughter as a psychic, but the daughter's talent is really olfactory—she can smell disease past and future. Consumption, she says, smells of mold and honey.

There is originality and lyricism in Pou's writing, but somehow the story never comes to theatrical life.

*Presented by LMCC Swing Space Project
at South Street Seaport Museum's Melville Gallery, 213 Water St., NYC.
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(212) 868-4444 or www.smarttix.com.*

Reviewed by Gwen Orel

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