

New Theater Corps

An Insightful Look at What's Happening on The New York Stage

THEATER TALK has enlisted a group of up-and-coming, young theater professionals to see and review some of the latest stage productions in the NY Tri-State area.

We hope the comments they post on this blog will be useful.

Sunday, July 15, 2007

[Universal Robots](#)

When Karel Capek and his brother wrote *R.U.R.*, they were imagining a future of robotics that had theretofore been untapped. However, it's Mac Rogers' look back at the world that gave us *R.U.R.*, and the modern political ramifications that he builds into his adaptation that makes *Universal Robots* seem so much more fulfilling.



Photo/Sandy Yaklin

Reviewed by [Aaron Riccio](#)

Mac Rogers has done precisely what the humans of Karel Capek's seminal play, *R.U.R.*, did: he's built a better machine. His reimagining of Capek's work, now titled *Universal Robots*, explains how the eccentric Rossum built robots for the Republic of Czechoslovakia with the assistance of the persuasive Karel Capek (a very sharp David Ian Lee). While the moral and some of the characters are the same, the story is filled with a far more emotional ichor, and although Rogers' script is a bit overlong with historical fact and satire of Capek's early years, his second act is a phenomenally well-acted and -scripted piece of theater. I don't think *Universal Robots* will rise up and conquer humanity, like robots of both Rogers' and Capek's play, but I with a few tweaks, this play can certainly conquer a larger house.

The way Rogers has rewritten characters to produce actual drama is very effective: Karel's brother Joseph is now his sister, Jo (Jennifer Gordon Thomas), and is the true emotional yin to

his ethically solid yang. Unable to ignore the virtual slavery, her compassion recasts her as a robot activist, whereas the male dominated Republic only listens to the romantic science of Peroutka (a nicely nerdy Ben Sulzbach) and the fierce realpolitik of president Masaryk (a gruff, fittingly flustered James Wetzel). In another twist, the robot inventor, Rossum, is now actually Rossum's widow, who, in a maddened state of grief, assumed his experiments, oblivious to the toll this has taken on her daughter, the innocent and beautiful Helena (a bubbling Esther Barlow).

The structure and direction, both by Rogers, are also very clever. By using a narrator (One, played by the crisp, clear, Michelle O'Connor), Rogers is able to loop around in time and abbreviate scenes that would otherwise be too long. In this vein, he's able to mock Capek's original style, dabble in some Brechtian analysis of Communism, and make some nice statements of his own ("Who is the most dangerous man in the world?" "A beautiful dreamer with the means to realize his dreams."). The downside is that these early moments all come across as asides to the central narrative, and stretch the show. Given the excellent cast, it's not a terrible use of time, but it makes the first and second halves of the play quite disparate.

A great deal of this bias, however, may be due to the scene-stealing Jason Howard, who not only comes to life as Robot Radius, but also makes the show come to life as well. His eerily precise recitations of robot rules not only match the alienating qualities the script requires but are replicated in his motion and emotion. Mr. Howard isn't the only actor in the show to have such range (indeed, most of the actors are double cast), but his "upgrades" are the most apparent.

Save for a few moments of flubbed lines (of which there are many), *Universal Robots* is a widely appealing play, one that not only shows off Rogers' talent as a writer, but as a director as well.

Manhattan Theatre Source (177 MacDougal Street)
Tickets (212-501-4751): \$18.00
Performances (through 7/19): Monday-Thursday @ 8:00