

Universal Robots



Pictured: Jennifer Gordon Thomas, Jason Howard, and Tarantino Smith (lying down) in a scene from Universal Robots (photo © Sandy Yaklin)

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Martin Denton · July 9, 2007

Mac Rogers's new play *Universal Robots* is one of the best new works I've seen in the theatre all year. It's only running one more

week as part of Manhattan Theatre Source's Straight from the Source festival; it needs to come back for an extended stay later on.

Rogers has used Karel Capek's famous play *R.U.R.* as inspiration for *Universal Robots*, along with some of the events of Capek's life and that of his brother Josef; this is no simple adaptation, though, but rather a sort of mashup of the original play, the Capeks' biographies, and a good deal of mid-20th century history, all filtered through a very contemporary horror/sci-fi sensibility. The result is a drama that's astute, ideological in the best possible way, and enormously compelling and entertaining.

The play begins in Czechoslovakia, shortly after World War I. Tomas Masaryk has been elected the newly formed country's first president, and among the leading lights of his circle is playwright/poet/political columnist Karel Capek. In Rogers's world, Capek has not a brother but a sister, Josephine, with whom he collaborates on some of his plays (and Rogers shows us some quick samples right up front: socialist satires called "The Insect Play" and "The Absolute at Large"). The Capeks and a couple of their friends—fellow playwright Salda and scientist Peroutka—meet Friday nights at a cafe run by the homely Radosh, and here they brainstorm their next stage opus, "The Drudges," a science fiction play about a society where the firstborn children of each family are genetically altered so that they lack ambition, existing only to serve their younger siblings, whose intellectual and artistic pursuits can thus be realized without interruption.

The friends wonder: Could such a world ever really exist? However, before they can start debating the question, a young woman named Helena Rossum appears at Radosh's cafe, with what looks like a man in a wheelchair. But the man isn't breathing; in fact, it's not a man at all, Helena explains: it's a machine, created by her mother. The idea of the Drudge has been realized by science, the Capeks realize. Josephine will eventually christen these entities "robots," and the world will never be the same.

Rogers follows *R.U.R.*'s basic outline, showing how the robots are then built to serve mankind, become enormously successful, and then are chartered for a more insidious purpose—namely, to help the Czechs fight the incipient Nazi menace. It's tremendously skillful alternative history, culminating in a robot rebellion that makes for an edge-of-your-seat finish equal to the best story-telling of stage or screen. There's plenty to mull over, ideologically and dramatically, after the curtain comes down.

Rogers has masterfully directed the play himself, in the very intimate Manhattan Theatre Source

CAST

Esther Barlow, Jason Howard, David Ian Lee, Michelle O'Connor, Ridley Parson, Nancy Sirianni, Tarantino Smith, Ben Sulzbach, Jennifer Gordon Thomas, James Wetzel

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY

Mac Rogers

LIGHTING

Travis Ryder

STAGE MANAGER

Shey Lyn Zanotti

PRODUCING COMPANY

Manhattan Theatre Source & Gideon Productions, LLC

space. Design elements are simple and spare, and transitions between scenes are brisk and economical, with the tension building generously throughout. The cast is exemplary, with 10 actors playing dozens of characters. Rogers and his actors have done particularly splendid work realizing the robot characters, who speak very consistently in an odd mechanical style and tone that becomes less and less so as their intelligence increases. Standouts in the company include David Ian Lee and Jennifer Gordon Thomas as Karel and Josephine, Nancy Sirianni as Rossum, and Jason Howard as Radius, the first robot.

Though *Universal Robots* is long (more than 2-1/2 hours), it makes for such riveting drama that I was never aware of the passing of time—I just wanted to see what was going to happen next. You can't ask for anything better than that in the theatre. This is brilliant drama, and deserves to be not just the hit of the summer indie season, but of the fall and winter as well.

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