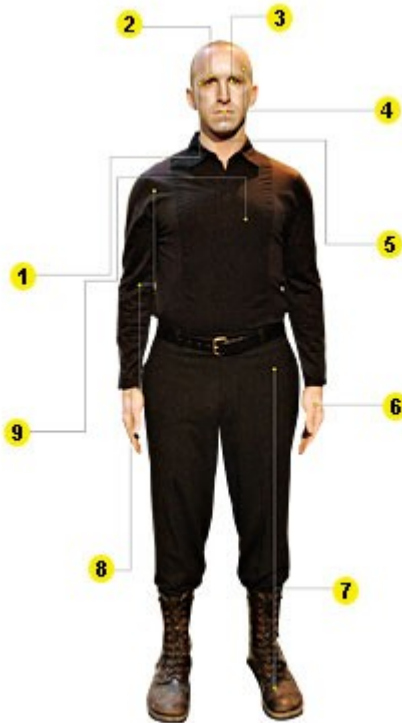


- By Boris Kachka
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Karel Capek’s 1921 play *R.U.R.*—which popularized the word *robot* and introduced us to the trope of automatons taking over the Earth—was written as a political farce. Mac Rogers’s loose and sweeping adaptation, *Universal Robots*, playing at Manhattan Theatre Source (through March 7), is a more tragic affair and extends to encompass World War II and the fascinating life of Capek himself. It also demands an actor capable of playing the lead robot, Radius, as he slowly becomes more human—but without resorting to kitsch or costumes. Jason Howard (left) is the right man for the job, thanks to a very technical approach, a side career in website programming, and a recovering addiction to sci-fi and fantasy. He broke down his own cyborg impression for us, piece by piece.

1. Not-So-Rapid Eye Movement

At first, Radius “can only see obstacles or light sources. It’s kind of an algorithm: Over a two-second period, whoever’s moving the most is the person you look at, unless your name is called. Also, there’s no eye

movement, only head movement.” As Radius evolves, a sinister scanning eye motion owes something to the Terminator.

2. Emotional Deficit

Howard, a casual Trekkie, liked Spock much more than Data but didn’t find either very useful; they were too human. Data would, for instance, raise an eyebrow, “that little bit of emotion, and judgment. That judgment isn’t earned in a robot.”

3. Tones of Voice

Howard watched clips of Stephen Hawking and listened to his own Mac’s robot voice, called Zarvox. “It becomes almost a musical when you think about tones,” he says. “I was playing with a 6-5-1 tonal combination, but the director thought it was too comical.” Eventually, Radius uses more tones, as though switching to a higher-definition digital recording.

4. Automatic Responses

“There will be a moment or two of tears, of *Why is there water coming out of my eyes?*” A week before opening, Howard says: “I haven’t decided yet how I’m going to react” to that.

5. Fear Factor

HAL from *2001* was a great inspiration—not for his voice but for that moment when, on the verge of being unplugged, he asks, “Dave, will I dream?” “The computer becomes afraid,” says Howard. Radius has a similar experience of sudden human vulnerability.

6. Battle Scars

Toward the end of the play, Radius experiences post-traumatic stress, which he exhibits as only a robot can. He adopts a head-twitch (“the reset action”) and a simultaneous twitch of his damaged left arm. “That together becomes a sense of love and grief coming through the armor of ‘I’m a robot and I’m in control.’”

7. Battle Stance

“I’m trained in stage combat. It almost becomes like a dance—the way of shifting weight when I’m turning direction. I don’t turn from the waist, I turn from the hip sockets and rotate my feet.” Every other part of his body stays fixed.

8. Joint Endeavor

At first Radius moves his limbs only on single axes. Howard avoids the flailing movements typified by the *Lost in Space* robot. But then, deeper into the play, Radius gets an upgrade. “I spread [my fingers] out and then I’m moving my wrists, elbows, shoulders, using the rotator cuffs.”

9. Love Connection

The plot advances when robots are programmed with a “blanket of sensors.” The first time Radius is hugged, “I have no sensors. I observe what [the woman hugging him] does. In the next scene, I feel it, and I understand what this human feels toward me. I touch her in the face to see what it does. That’s the scene where I learn to love.”

10. Character Development

For Howard, playing a robot meant the chance to build a character as precisely as possible, “to illustrate what they do, second to second—how they react to stimuli.” Still, “if I was a robot the whole time, it would mean nothing to me. It’s being the robot and breaking out and becoming a new being that makes the role special.”