

## ***Universal Robots* is intellectually challenging, dark, moving, and gripping: science fiction on stage**

By Ian Randal Strock February 26, 2009

If you enjoy being part of the show, and you love science fictional speculation, alternate history, political theory, the lives of artists, or the act of creation, you'll definitely want to get to Manhattan Theatre Source by 7 March. Mac Rogers's *Universal Robots* is both detailed and engrossing, and the stage and set are so minimalist as to be almost invisible.

While I talked about the setting of *Soul Samurai* as intimate (see [this review](#)), that theatre is downright roomy compared to the situation in which we saw *Universal Robots* last night. This tiny theatre (about twenty by thirty feet) is ringed on three sides with two tiers of chairs, providing seating for an audience of 50. The door through which the audience enters is the same door the cast appears and disappears through. We were in the upper tier of seats, so we were unmolested, but many people sitting in the lower tier had to move from time to time, to avoid being stepped on by the actors giving us their story. And what a story it is.

The script is intellectually challenging, but at times dark and moving. Rogers took as his foundation Karel Capek's classic 1921 play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, which introduced the world to the word and concept "robot". In Rogers's hands, that play becomes a piece of history. Capek (David Ian Lee), along with his sister and writing partner Josephine (Jennifer Gordon Thomas) are part of a circle of artists and intellectuals who frequent an unnamed cafe in Prague, just after the Great War. While they write and create art pushing their own political agendas, whether it's the Capeks' work always lauding and supporting the new, first president of the newly independent Czechoslovakia, or the Communist Vaclavek (Tarantino Smith)'s rants against the tyranny of democracy. But they're a cohesive group, sharing ideas, hopes, and dreams. And quietly watching them, always watching but not participating, is the waiter Radosh (Jason Howard). Radosh knows he doesn't have the intellectual capacity to keep up, but he's happy to be able to listen.

Then one night, the Capeks' friend, President Marasyk (David Lambertson), shows up, and the conversation turns to a discussion of how Czechoslovakia might be saved from too many artists producing too little "useful" work. The Capeks write a play about the necessity of a working class, which has an unintended effect: a woman shows up at their cafe with a dead person, no, a doll, no... well, you can guess from the title. But why has she brought this marvelous invention to a bunch of playwrights? Because she knows they have the ear of the president, and he has the funding to turn this cottage industry into a reality, if they can convince of the need and safety of it.

The discussion turns moral and philosophical, but inevitability is writ large, and Rossum's robots become a reality. Setting the play in a small, new country, struggling to make its way in the larger world gives President Masaryk much more room to be human and fallible, while at the same time striving to do good.

Along the way, there's an unrequited love affair that ends in death, but then, just possibly, gets resurrected. There's a requited love affair that may end in tragedy, and then, perhaps, unrequition. There's an odd scientist who may be Rossum's widow, except that she's quite certain she is Rossum. And there are the wonderful robots. Designed to do the drudge work which any developing country needs, they are continually enhanced and improved.

Time passes, and then comes a day when Capek—no longer a playwright, he hasn't the time, he's the president's adviser—introduces Bernard Baruch (Ridley Parson), on a mission from President Roosevelt to either get the secret of the robots, or convince Czechoslovakia of the need to produce robots in order to turn back the rising tide of the Nazis and the threat they pose to the rest of the world. Again, inevitability rears its ugly head, in the need to avert a war and save a race. But tragedy follows success, as it always does, and the horrors we create are, once again, shown to be far worse than the horrors we avert.

With no set, minimal props, and very little room in which to work, the marvelous actors draw us in quickly with a very dense script of discussion that starts with political theory and carries us through innovation, love, failure, success, and memory. It's a terrifying, wonderful way to spend an evening.

Talking with Mac Rogers after the show, he commented on how infrequently theatre and science fiction seem to mesh, but he's managed it very well in this case. And while I caught many references to the wider science fictional world (echoes of *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* coming first and foremost to my mind), others in the audience remarked on parallels and shout-outs to other Capek plays, to Czechoslovakia (the real country), and more.

Rogers writes "I was inspired to write *Universal Robots* partly by how much I liked Karel Capek's play, but even more by the ways in which I didn't like it." The play is, he says, partly slapstick, entirely allegory, with cardboard characters and poor theatrical pacing. So he set out to correct the play, and then "I read Ivan Klima's amazing biography of Karel Capek... and this turned the whole project upside down. What I learned was that Capek's life was at least as interesting as his plays, if not more so." So he "re-conceptualized the play at that point. I didn't want to write an adaptation anymore. I had a whole new idea: a play about Capek—but not the real one, an imaginary Capek inspired by aspects of the real one. I wanted to mash up details of his real life with plot elements from *R.U.R.* to create a science fiction story about the enormous forces that radically change our societies, and the flawed human beings who try to harness and steer those forces—while simultaneously laying the groundwork for that final scene I loved so much."

While all the actors are wonderful, I especially want to single out Jason Howard as the robot Radius, who not only humanifies an inhuman character, but is amazing when presenting a malfunctioning robot. *New York Magazine*, too, found him wonderful, and ran [this article](#) on the actor and his performance.

*Universal Robots* is at [Manhattan Theatre Source](#), 177 MacDougal Street (just south of 8th Street) in Manhattan, New York. The show runs Wednesdays through Saturdays at 7:30PM, until 7 March. Tickets are \$18. Also, be sure to check out [the play's web site](#).

*Universal Robots* is written by Mac Rogers, directed by Rosemary Andress, and stars Esther Barlow, Jason Howard, David Ian Lee, David Lamberton, Michelle O'Connor, Ridley Parson, Nancy Sirianni, Tarantino Smith, Ben Sulzbach, and Jennifer Gordon Thomas.