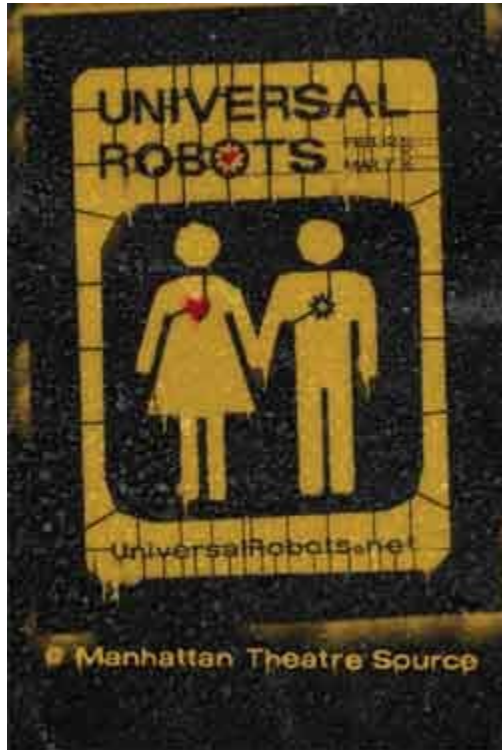


Geek Theater: Universal Robots

By Teresa Jusino

I'm about to tell you all something very important, so I hope you're paying attention...



If you have access to New York City in any way between now and March 7th, run - don't walk - to see *Universal Robots* at Manhattan Theater Source. If you're in the Tri-State area, take a bus or train. In fact, don't even waste time reading this review. There are only a few performances left, and I'm going to be going back several times with friends, so you'll want to make sure you get tickets now.

For those of you who need a review to get you up off your ass and to the theater, here you go. Read. Quickly.

Universal Robots is an adaptation of Karel Capek's 1921 play, *R.U.R (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, which introduced the term "robot" to the world. In Mac Rogers' glorious "adaptation", Karel Capek is himself a character, and Rogers entwines elements of Capek's real life with the action of the play, creating an entirely new work. Capek and his sister Jo are prominent playwrights in 1930s

Czechoslovakia, and their Friday night salons with

fellow artists are the intellectual hub of the capital. Capek, a liberal, shuns Communism and right-wing nationalism equally, seeing the destructive possibilities in extremism in all its forms. He is also a friend and supporter of Czech president, Tomas Masaryk. One Friday night, as the intellectuals sit around discussing art and politics, a woman enters the cafe with a strange mannequin, and she wants to speak with Karel and Jo. The thing is, the mannequin can move - all on its own! We see what happens when people and governments create and use artificial life, and that life decides that it wants a say in its own future.

So much work that is inspired by things like science fiction, or comics, or any form of geekery is *ironic*. We've gotten so used to certain forms that we feel the need to poke fun at them at every turn. While this might certainly be fun, it is rarely meaningful. *Universal Robots* isn't campy, cheesy sci-fi. It's a work that is capable of shaking you to the core, forcing you to examine your own humanity, ideals, and faith. It was not what I was expecting, and it was everything that I look for in a piece of theater. That has a lot to do with Mac Rogers, a prolific playwright whose work I'd never seen before and will now probably go and see forever. His dialogue is humorous and poignant, and the characters he's created are finely-etched and lived-in, human and robot alike. The structure and pacing of the play are just right, and it was only after I was already on the train home that I realized that the play is over three hours long. It

didn't feel that way. In fact, if there were more play after the final scene, I would have gladly stayed all night.

Rosemary Andress' direction also deserves special praise. Working in small theater spaces can be difficult, but Andress did a wonderful job creating a sense of place and time even without much wiggle room, and she expertly maintained a wonderful dramatic tension. Her work helped me understand the term, "had me on the edge of my seat."

Lastly, I cannot end this review without giving special kudos to one of the finest ensemble casts I've ever had the pleasure of watching. There was not one weak link in the bunch. However, Jason Howard was an absolute standout in the double role of Radosh and Robot Radius. In the first half of the play, he plays Radosh, the cafe owner who hosts the intellectuals every Friday. He doesn't have much stage time at first, and yet he tugs at your heart every time he steps on stage. Interesting then that he breaks your heart when he's playing Robot Radius, the robot who first realizes that robots must also deal with their mortality, what it's like to care about someone else, and what it's like to not want to die. Howard is brilliantly human in both roles, and his is a powerful stage presence.

Universal Robots is a play that is not only a current must-see, but one that deserves more productions. It deserves bigger stages and audiences. It, like the sentient robots it depicts, deserves a life.

Universal Robots is playing now through March 7th at [Manhattan Theatre Source](http://ManhattanTheatreSource.com) in New York City. For more information, or to buy tickets, visit: www.universalrobots.net