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Crude mechanicals

A century ago, a play gave us the word 'robot'. Now, in two new productions, androids are taking to the stage. **Natasha Tripney** meets their creators

A figure sits alone on stage dressed in comfy jumper and trousers, one leg crossed over the other. He slowly moves his hands and turns his head. But this sole performer in Uncanny Valley, by theatre company Rimini Protokoll, is not human. It is a lifelike animatronic model of the German writer Thomas Melle.

The show's director, Stefan Kaegi, had seen animatronics used in museums, where he found there was not sufficient time for what he calls the "empathy mechanism" to kick in. But he wondered what would happen if the robot became a performer, "someone with whom we start to identify". His idea was to create a monologue for a robot that looked as human as possible - not perfect but average and fragile. Evi Bauer, who worked on the robot's design, suggested that the best way was to find a human subject and make a copy.

The question was who?

Melle had recently published *The World at My Back*, a philosophical exploration of his bipolar disorder that Kaegi had found intriguing. Melle, in turn, liked the idea of being made into a robot.

The costume department

at the Munich Kammerspiele theatre company took a silicone cast of Melle's head - a claustrophobic process documented in the production - and then there were, says Kaegi, some "spooky moments" for Melle meeting his robotic doppelganger. The result is undeniably disconcerting. Even though its inner workings are visible through a gap in the back of the robot's head, its movements are delicate and somehow tender.

Science fiction often shows us technology taking over, but Kaegi needed to programme the robotic Melle's every movement: "I wasn't working with an artificial intelligence. I was working with a very dumb machine." But then, he says, all of theatre is an exercise in programming, from lighting to sound. People, too, are largely preprogrammed in

the ways we behave, including our routines and our small talk. The show asks how free we really are: "How dependent have we become not only on technical devices, but on algorithms that help us to take decisions?"

The word "robot" was introduced into the English language by a play: *RUR* (Rossum's Universal Robots), a 1920 drama by the Czech writer Karel Čapek. And in the 100 years

since, they have become a staple of film and television. From *Star Trek: The Next Generation* to *The Terminator*, robots in pop culture are usually there, Kaegi observes, to play on our fears of technology taking control or as a way of exploring our own humanity.

Despite, or perhaps because, of their un-humanness, performance makers have explored robots' theatrical potential in numerous ways. The Serbian choreographer Dragana Bulut's *Future Fortune* has dancers interacting with a humanoid robot, and the Japanese director Oriza Hirata's *Robot Theatre Project* uses robot performers alongside human actors. Last year, to mark the centenary of *RUR*, a team of Czech scientists and dramaturges created a new play written by computer. (The result had lots of repetitive dialogue and a preoccupation with sex.)

Tim Foley's *Electric Rosary*, which opens at Manchester's Royal Exchange in April, is set in a convent whose nuns welcome a robotic sister into their order. The idea for the play came to Foley on a visit to a monastery with his father, where he saw the ageing monks using quad bikes. He imagined a scenario where the nuns bring a robot in to do the cooking and cleaning, but it "starts to get something out of it". This robot is designed to learn by example so Foley explores not just the behaviour of other characters but "the agency and humanity that robots are developing themselves".

One of the reasons robots don't feature as often on stage as on screen, Foley suggests, is a practical one. Without access to CGI, you have to either create a robot - as in *Spillikin* - or have an actor play one. Each presents different challenges. For *Electric Rosary*, they opted for the latter approach. There won't be

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an attempt to make the performer look like a robot using masks. Instead, Foley says, “it’s through speech and movement that she’ll show her artificial manner. But as time passes and she adapts to requirements, she’ll begin mimicking what it is to be human, and then potentially mastering it”.

Foley’s robot is a dramatic catalyst, a way of exploring the nature of faith. “If the idea is we’re constructed by a higher power,” he asks, “are we then a form of artificial intelligence? If we’re made in the image of God and a robot is made in ours, is there a hierarchy here? Or will we be equal in the eyes of God?”

Uncanny Valley is at Battersea Arts Centre, London, from tomorrow until Saturday; Electric Rosary is at Royal Exchange, Manchester, 23 April to 14 May

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Czech scientists
wrote a play
with a computer.
It had a lot of sex

Acting up ...
the animatronic
star of
Uncanny Valley

