

OPINION

Portraying a robot on stage allows us to explore what it is to be human

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Jeffrey Wright interacts with a robot on Westworld.

HBO CANADA

This summer, on the first day of the workshop reading of my latest play, veteran Ottawa actor Paul Rainville asked me: “How do I play a robot?”

He was referring to his character, Adam, the husband and father in *The Anniversary*. It’s a near-future tale about three adult children who return to the family home to celebrate their parent’s 30th anniversary. Key detail: Adam’s a robot.

On first impression, the answer to the actor's question might seem obvious. After all, who hasn't seen dozens of fictional depictions of robots, from superhuman gunslingers in the *Westworld* TV series to clunky metallic C-3PO of *Star Wars* movie fame. Just give your speech a slightly metallic Siri-esque pacing and edge, or add some mechanical physical twitch, and the audience knows you're a robot.

But on the centenary of the invention of the term robot – a word born in the theatre – the answer of how to act like one is more complex than ever. Exploring the question with the cast took us deep into why robots are the perfect narrative foil for helping us see what it means to be human – and why theatre forces us to question the nature of our creations.

As a playwright, you don't fully know what you've conjured until you hear the script read aloud. It's when actors voice and embody the characters that they "come to life," a phrase that I think is important to consider in a play with a character who happens to be robot. And this is the thing. *The Anniversary* isn't a play about a robot, it's a play with a very advanced humanoid social robot, in the same way that there's a human mother and three human children.

Thandie Newton in *Westworld*.

JOHN P. JOHNSON/COURTESY OF HBO

The question of how to play a robot isn't one I'd initially considered, because I'd planned to cast a real robot. *The Anniversary* was inspired when, several years ago, I met the remarkable humanoid robotic actor, Robothespian. It (or is that he/she or they?) was performing on a little podium in an atrium at the Perimeter Institute of Theoretical Physics in Waterloo, Ont., a building in which questions about the nature of nature, of what is possible, are the work du jour.

I was fascinated by the way people responded to Robothespian. A small group would walk into the atrium and someone would point and say, "Oh, cool, there's a robot!" Activated by movement, Robothespian's head pivoted up, eyes widened, cheeks warmed red and the robot spoke a greeting. I watched confusion pass over previously confident visitors' faces. And then,

inevitably, they responded as anyone of us does to a greeting from another person. Because, I witnessed, our social responses are hardwired, whether triggered by an artificial human or one like us.

It proved too expensive (for now) to cast Robothespian, so, with encouragement from my creative collaborator, University of Ottawa theatre professor Kevin Orr, I pivoted to a human actor as Adam, and wrote the script from this perspective. I'm glad I did. It forced me and the cast to grapple with how, during the current rise of social robots, we experience the intimate and subtle tango between technological and social change that defines postmodern culture.

Indeed this techno-social dance began on stage. The term robot debuted a century ago when Czech playwright Karel Capek premiered *Rossumovi Univerzalni Roboti* in Prague on Jan. 25, 1921. "Robot" was coined by Capek's brother from the Czech term *robota*, an earlier version of serfdom in which tenants paid rent through a system of forced labour akin to slavery. The word hit Broadway in 1922 with the first English-language performance of *RUR*, the play's commonly used abbreviated name.

Capek's play is a blunt social commentary echoing the widespread rise of violent workers' rights movements at the time, from the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution to the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. The robots in *RUR* are intelligent, but feeling nothing; they are artificial biological beings created as a vast, disposable industrial slave work force. In appearance, they are almost identical to their human masters, dressed similarly, visually distinguished by brass numbers on their chests – an eerie foreshadowing of the Nazi's yellow star for Jews. In the playwright's notes, Capek instructed that the robots' "movements and speech are laconic," the terse comments of exhausted workers. However, in the end, the robots evolve a sense of self, revolt and demand to be treated as equal fellow beings.

C-3PO in Star Wars, portrayed by Anthony Daniels.

This insistence on being treated as persons is a remarkable semantic bridge between the theatre, the later invention of real robots and ultimately today's boundary blurring between us and our technologies. The word "person" has its roots in *persona*,

Latin for an actor's mask or character in a play and now synonymous with an individual human being. Thus there is a wonderful layered, question-inducing complexity in a person playing a robot who appears as a person.

Yet, with all this back story I hadn't answered the key question, so it was helpful when Rainville asked, "How was Adam programmed?" It forced us to discuss individual agency and self-determination. Adam, I said, is more than his programming – he is an emergent personality. Which brings us to the intersection of human consciousness and whether there will ever be such a thing as not just artificial intelligence (AI) but artificial consciousness.

In theatre, at least, there already is. The actor isn't really playing a robot, he is playing a character (a word that, when referring to individuals, has its origins in the theatre, first appearing in print in a 1600 play by English playwright Ben Jonson.) This means the actor brings to the part the same empathy, care and attention to dialogue, relationships and actions as he would any other role. The key to becoming Adam wasn't to think about robot-ness but about the character as a father, husband – and, yes, a robot – not in any stereotypical sense but as Adam emerges in the text.

In the workshop, I saw that just like Capek's *RUR*, mine is a robot-inspired emancipation play. Each family member is trying to be free to be themselves in a complex, modern family – including Adam. In this universal desire for individuation we all see a core part of our human nature. And, I believe, when the theatre darkens for plays such as *The Anniversary*, we glimpse the light of our future relationships with the others we now call robots.

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