



Robots Steal The Musical Show

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They could be accused of giving somewhat mechanical performances, but this was the first time Igor, Leila and Bruno had trodden the boards – and they are robots.

The three high-tech actors are currently starring alongside two human thespians in the world premiere of "Robots", a musical which mixes drama, humour and science.

An eerie sound echoes above the audience from the lungs of the world's biggest cinema organ. The curtain opens and a flickering candle glides into the 19th-century-style living room, carried by Igor, a metallic butler, accompanied by Bruno, a state-of-the-art robotic dog.

The two humble servants prepare to wake their master, a man (actor Branch Worsham) who lives in self-imposed exile with his automatic friends. They announce the imminent visit of a woman (Laurence Iseli) who will turn his passionless, controlled world upside down, forcing him to choose between the new intruder and her robotic double, Leila.

Robots, which runs from May 1-16 at the Barnabé Theatre in Servion, near Lausanne, is the brainchild of Swiss theatre director Christian Denisart.

His future-retro "Pygmalion-like" robo-musical, which resembles a silent movie, poses serious questions about the fantasies and risks of an automated society.

"Robots is more than just a play, but I hope that when people leave the theatre they walk away with a story in their heads not a technological exploit," he told swissinfo.

Theatre director Christian Denisart (ZVG)

Long-term collaboration

The musical is the result of over ten years' collaboration between the Swiss theatre director, the Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne, the Lausanne Cantonal Art School and the Barnabé Theatre.

Robots is the providential convergence of like-minded people, schools with an excellent reputation, an experienced automation specialist and a theatre

"that dared take a risk", explained the director.

A spin-off company from the institute called BlueBotics developed the three robots, and François Junod, an artist from Sainte Croix in canton Vaud, helped bring the sensual dancer, Leila, to life.

"Scientists and artists have the same way of thinking," said Denisart. "They both work with the abstract and they only thing they want to do is to explore uncharted areas."

Whirring around

Although they do not talk, the computerised robots can act on their own and interact with the two actors and the set, whirring around the stage guided by ultra-sensitive 360-degree laser sensors.

Their choreographed hour-and-a-half performances are totally programmed into their system.

"The robots know what to do by heart," joked Denisart.

But humans initiate their actions. With his headset and two monitors, Olivier Renault, a computer programmer-actor, controls the three robots' precise entrances, exits and individual movements, which have been recorded into small "play" and "stop" sequences.

"It's a bit like Cape Canaveral backstage," said Iseli, referring to the spacecraft launch site in the United States.

The slow, lyrical onstage ballet is the result of three months of intensive rehearsals.

"We rehearsed with the actors and when we were ready we programmed the machines and put them all together," said the director. "But we had to redo things as the robots had their own rhythms and we had to follow them. You can't go faster than the machine."

"We decided not to oppose that as it gives it a certain poetry."

Igor the faithful butler (theatre barnabe)

Bringing to life

For the actors this meant having to adapt to the robots and act "for two", while trying to make their movements as natural as possible, said Iseli.

"You have to be extremely precise; you focus on the functional and the gestures," she said, adding that the music helped set the tempo.

But you can also cheat when bringing the robots to life, said Denisart.

"If you learn a robot's trajectory and you walk just in front of it, everyone thinks the robot is following you," he noted.

But working with an expressionless, metallic double can be really disconcerting, added Iseli.

"Sometimes I recognise myself in the dancer robot ," she said.

"But I don't go home and have dreams about robots all night – more like nightmares that the thing could stop in the middle of the show."

Despite only eight planned performances at Servion, Robots seems to have a bright future. Festival organisers from Zurich and Italian-speaking Switzerland, as well as from Canada and Japan, plan to introduce the robo-thespians to new audiences.

swissinfo, Simon Bradley in Servion

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