

Twenty-one
Time Hugo
Nominee!

The New York Review of Science Fiction

www.nyrsf.com

March 2010
Number 259
Vol. 22, No. 7: \$4.00

Robots, directed and conceived by Christian Denisart

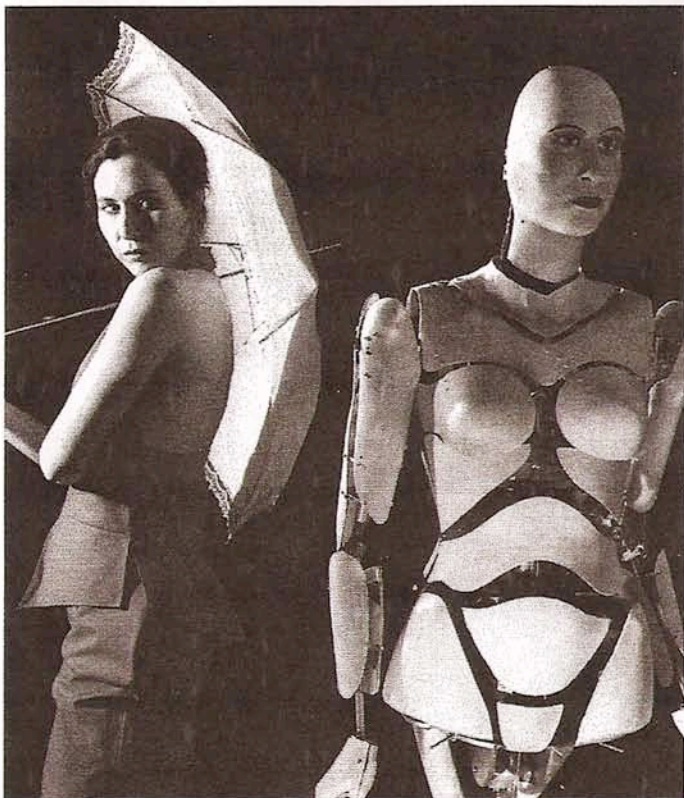
Produced by Le Voyage Extraordinaire, Branch
Worcham. Laurence Iseli. 2009.

reviewed by Jen Gunnels

Once upon a time there was a man with three robots.

I first read about the play *Robots* in the July 2009 issue of the *IEEE Spectrum*, which is not the usual venue for theatre reviews. *Robots*, however, actually has robots as members of the cast, so I can understand why engineers might get excited about theater in this instance. Unfortunately, all they published was a single photo and less than a paragraph, which only mentioned the engineering involved. Director? Theater? Actors? What-ever. Did you see the robots? The play has real robots! The thought of mechanical as opposed to human cast members was sufficiently intriguing to prompt further investigation into the production. For my efforts, I was rewarded with a recording of the original performance, courtesy of the director.

Robots, produced by Le Voyage Extraordinaire, premiered at the Théâtre Barnabe in Servion, Switzerland on May 1, 2009. Billed as a musical (and it is, but in an unconventional sense), the play follows



(Continued on page 8)

Special ICFA 2010 Issue

The Challenge of Robots on Stage

L. Timmel Duchamp: Anger and Joanna Russ
Mike Barrett: The Haunting Elizabeth Walter
Joan Gordon on Robert Charles Wilson's America
Alex Donald zone-crawls with David Williams
Wendy Bousfield disassembles Cory Doctorow
David Mead: At war with Paul McAuley
Hugh Howey on Michael Shea's screen violence
Dan'l Danehy-Oakes on Steve Englehart's return
Plus: Mirlees, Wolfe, Jablov, and more!

L. Timmel Duchamp

Burning the Complacent Veldt of Narrative: Reading On Joanna Russ

I. Russ's Place in the Genre

Over the last three decades of the twentieth century, Joanna Russ produced an important body of work, ranging from short fiction and novels to incisive criticism, essays, and a book of acute political analysis. In Wesleyan University Press's new critical anthology *On Joanna Russ*, Graham Sleight declares that Russ "produced one of the three or four finest bodies of work in speculative short fiction" (200), while Samuel R. Delany names her "one of the finest—and most necessary—writers of American fiction to publish between 1959 . . . and 1998" (185). Most feminist sf critics would also credit her with having laid the foundations of feminist sf criticism besides having written one of feminist sf's most acclaimed and necessary novels.

In her introduction to the volume, editor Farah Mendlesohn establishes the centrality of anger in Russ's work, implicitly inviting the reader to attend to its presence (or not) in each of the book's chapters. She characterizes Russ as "a writer whose angry creativity burns the complacent veldt of narrative" and asserts that the "core of Russ's work" is "rupture, or the refusal to go along with the storying of the world" (vii). "Burning through each tale are the questions, *Whose narratives are these? Who benefits from this storying of the world?*" (viii). "Reading Russ," she confesses, "can be exhausting, emotionally harrowing" (ix). Most intriguing for me, she states: "Russ produced a body of work whose influence has been complex. She is a writer whose work provokes reaction rather than emulation . . ." (ix).

Two-thirds of the way through the volume, in the first paragraph of his outstanding "Art and Amity: The 'Opposed Aesthetic' in Mina Loy and Joanna Russ," Paul March-Russell notes the persisting tendency of critics to smooth over the jagged, angry edges of Russ's work, to effectively neutralize the challenges it continues to issue, by reading her wit as merely entertaining and—in effect—apolitical. Even those critics who declare Russ's work as subversive do this, he says.

(Continued on page 4)

Robots

continued from page 1

three days in the life of the Man (played by the American actor Branch Worsham), who has one last chance to connect to the world of flesh and blood outside his apartment. He has contentedly relied upon his creations, three robot companions, to meet his every need until he has the chance to meet with the Woman (Laurence Iseli). The actors do not speak, and the absence of verbal language makes the play ideal for international touring and for conveying a modern technological tale à la the Brothers Grimm. While the story itself contains an element of Pygmalion and Galatea, there is no happy ending, and the robot Galatea remains a machine.

The set and costumes, designed by Gilbert Maire and Cécile Collet respectively, add to the fairytale quality by suggesting neither modern nor Victorian elements. Think of Jules Verne meets IKEA by way of Frankenstein's lab. It works well, and the aesthetic is very much intentional. The creator/director of *Robots*, Christian Denisart, has been a fan of Jules Verne since childhood, which explains both the concept behind the stage design and the name of his production company. Surrounding the whole is the vast pipe organ of the Théâtre Barnabe. The organ provides the music throughout the play, acting as a Greek chorus, commenting on both the action and the emotions of the characters. The music, composed by Lee Maddeford, has elements of the carnivalesque in its calliope sound, but the repetitious themes of certain scenes are more reminiscent of a Phillip Glass score. Because of the total lack of spoken dialogue and the extensive use of music, the production might be considered a dance piece but not in a traditional sense. Choreographers Corinne Rochet & Nicholas Pettit have created a subtle blend of mime and modern dance.

The action opens with the incongruous juxtaposition of Igor, the robotic butler, carrying a candle. The candlelight reflecting off the metal gives an unsettling feeling due to the disjointed image. Simultaneously, there is a sense of the impersonal, in the metallic

sheen of the robot, and the intimate, in the soft candlelight. Such juxtapositions occur throughout the play, creating a subtle sense of estrangement. While Igor goes about the start of an average day, Bruno, a cross between a dog, a roomba, and a large MP3 player, circles about underfoot. Within the first act, Worsham brilliantly portrays a quiet, gentle man with harmless quirky behaviors. His ritualized, repetitive behavior, such as placing a hand on his head and turning in a circle every time he comes to a certain place on the stairs, creates an extremely likeable if pitiable character.

A letter announces the arrival of the Woman. A flurry of activity replaces the Man's sedate routine as he rehearses *exactly* what will happen during his meeting with the Woman. When she arrives, bit by bit, things begin to go wrong, as she fails to behave according to his script. His pride and joy, the robots he has created, make the Woman uneasy at first. Her lack of comfort comes through in the dismissive and disrespectful (perhaps even cruel) behavior with which she treats them. Granted, they are robots and as such have no feelings to injure, but it is evident that they are in some respects extensions of the Man. Such actions seem especially callous since the Man's pride in his creations and his desire to please her are so evident.

The first act sets the tone for the two systems of communication in progress—the spontaneous and socially intuitive (Woman) and the rehearsed and predetermined (Man)—and both miss their marks. The Man cannot relate to the spontaneous behavior of the Woman (nor to her greater interest in *him* and not the robots), and the Woman cannot appreciate the difficulty of interaction for the Man. The first date falls apart with regret for the outcome on both sides and with no sense that a happy resolution is possible.

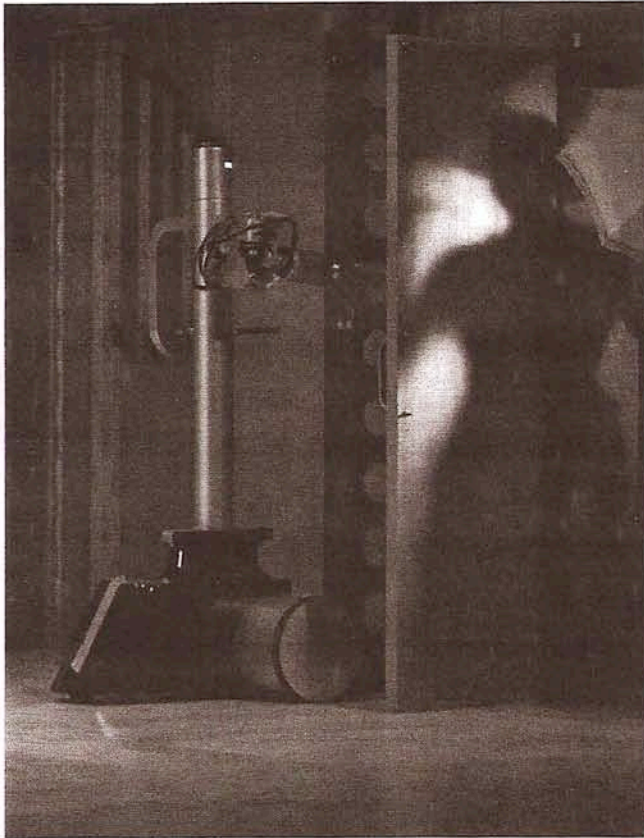
The second act follows the aftermath of the initial, and disastrous, meeting between the Man and the Woman. He cannot cope with the unpredictable nature of human relations after the easy predictability of programmed robots. Reluctantly, he returns to a canvas-covered object upstage in his laboratory workspace. Unveiled, the audience sees the outline of a sophisticated robot, Leila, reminiscent of Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. The countenance of the robot is refined and resembles the Woman seen in Act I, but her torso is constructed of panels, like a tailor's mannequin, with large wheels for feet. Then it/she opens her eyes. The delicacy and grace of movement is amazing and disconcerting. She is so very obviously a robot, intentionally unfinished and mechanical, and yet the movement, the gestures are so human. The two then act out the idealized meeting as planned by the Man.

The initial focus remains on Leila—her movement and design are riveting—but as the act continues, she simply becomes another character. During part of the scene, the Man and Leila dance, mimicking what the Man had intended for the Woman. While this robotic substitution is slightly disturbing, Worsham brings a sweet charm to the situation. At the end of their dance, the Man and Leila move downstage and center. The Man breathes hard, chest moving up and down after his exertions. Then I noticed the action of the robot, and the play once again twisted back to uncanny and disturbing, the Dancer's chest moved in time with the Man's, as if too were breathing hard. No, this play did not leave me completely comfortable.

In the final act, the Man once again faces the Woman, this time without his robots. He comes to a decision and resolutely sends Igor and Bruno off stage. He then tries to interact with the Woman. At one point, he is distracted, and the Woman, left to her own curiosity, finds Leila. Her reactions of shock, disgust, and jealousy alienate her from any meaningful interaction with the Man. She destroys the robot, leading to the final tragedy of her own accidental death and the symbolic death of the Man's hopes of being able to relate to humans.

In an interview with Denisart on October 29, 2009, with his agent Marc Lambelet assisting with interpreting, I had the opportunity to learn more about the conception of the play in addition to the challenges associated with directing three robots. I asked what first prompted the production concept, and Denisart replied:

Ten years ago, I saw on TV a robot balancing from branch to branch. It looked elegant and quick and not what I expected from a robot. I loved robots but didn't know that technology

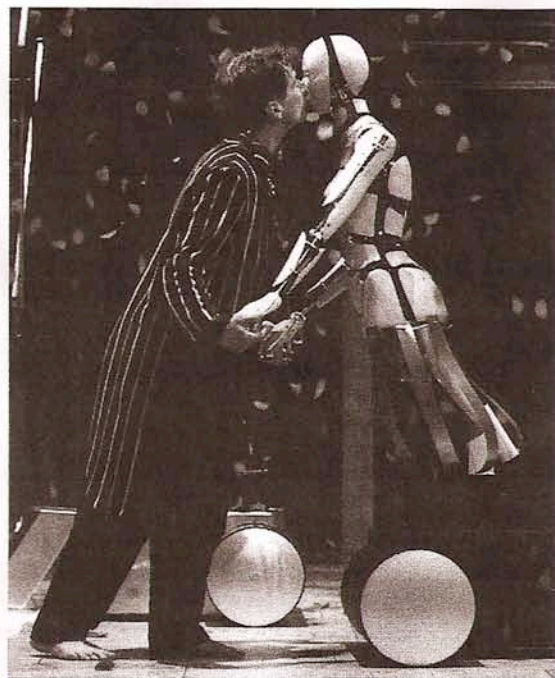


Igor meets the Woman at the door



The Man and Leila

More photos from Robots can be found on pages 1 and 23



The Man and Leila, dancing

had advanced enough to do this. That's what made me feel it was possible to put robots on stage. I went to François Junod with [a] written synopsis of the play and asked if this was possible. [Junod] said that is possible and was interested in the project.

When he first thought about the play and started writing eight years ago, Denisart only wanted to address the questions of what our relationships with technology *could be*, not necessarily to comment on them or to create a message. He made it clear to me that he does love technology, but he regards the relationship between human and robot with suspicion. He feels that we are following a dangerous path in this respect:

I read something that said for \$1,800 you can take a three-dimensional picture of someone's face, record their voice, and you get a simulation of that person. At the end of the article, it said you can bring it to [the] homes of others, and they can just have you there all day. I found this disturbing. Understand that I like and am extremely interested in technology, but I am concerned about its social impact.

For the engineering junkies, I will return to the robots. They were developed by François Junod of the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, and the Swiss corporation Bluebotics built the three very distinct robots for the production. They interact with the actors and are in themselves characters within the story, each representing a different type of robot. Igor, the butler, represents the services of industrial robots, while Bruno encompasses those elements of robotics and computers which entertain. Leila, the dancer, moves and acts in such a way that I must use the word *embodies*—it, she, embodies the efforts of robotics to mirror the human. Each robot uses “a laser-based guidance system and a scheme that uses something like a Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) protocol for controlling the humanoid's every move” (*IEEE Spectrum* 21). In going to François Junod, Denisart got an erotic sensuality from Leila that one would not necessarily associate with robotic movement. Junod is extremely well-known for making meticulously lifelike mechanical figures, making possible the subtle gestures required for Leila.

Of course, acting with the robots produced its own difficulties. Because the robots cannot produce readable emotions, the actors must carry all the emotive aspect of the performance. Essentially, they must act to produce both their own characters and those of the robots. Worsham and Iseli do an astounding job in both respects. Additionally, the workshop and rehearsal phase of the production produced some unexpected hitches. Most robots have sensors which allow them to avoid contact with objects. The workshops revealed that the security systems put in to avoid contact had to be removed. Staging a dance while one partner is assiduously trying to avoid the other is fairly difficult. Programmers needed to examine how to help the robots differentiate between good and bad contact. Additionally,

robots are required to do repetitive activity for long periods of time. They will sometimes break down, and while that is not an issue when fetching objects in warehouses, on stage there can be no stops. Such unusual needs presented the programmers with challenges they would not necessarily have encountered in more traditional industrial situations.

The project as a whole interested Junod for several reasons. First, he wanted to examine the challenge in creating technology that can be utilized without extensive training. In addition to usage, robotics in particular has an issue involving appearance. Denisart explained:

Should the robot look humanoid or should it be a cube? Are these assets or frightening things? Designers must reflect on this in making the machine. When the robot is fast, is this good, scary, or worrying? These were issues that were very much of interest in developing the robots. How the audience reacted was good information for [Junod] in research. The play was a kind of laboratory for experimentation.

Science and technology are not foreign subjects to the stage. Going back to the automatons of the early nineteenth century, public display of technology and devices was often theatrical in nature. Thomas Edison made plans to but never did create an artificial woman. She reappears, however, as the character Halavy in the 1886 French novel *L'Ève future* (*The New Eve*) by Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the theater came to rely heavily upon an overt use of technology and current popular science in creating the lavish realism required in staging plays. Actor/director/dramatist William Gillette (1853–1937) was known for his love of gadgetry, which often featured in his popular portrayals of Sherlock Holmes. The most extreme usage of technology within the theatre may be the 1902 Theatre Royal production of *Ben Hur* with its onstage chariot race complete with 16 live horses and a complex series of treadmills and revolving panoramic background giving the illusion of motion. Within the last two decades, several plays, such as *Breaking the Code* (1986) (Turing biography), *Arcadia* (1993) (mathematical biology), *Copenhagen* (1998) (the wartime meeting between Heisenburg and Bohr), *Proof* (2000) (Fermat's theorem), *Fermat's Last Tango* (2000) (a musical concerning Fermat's theorem), and *Now Then Again* (2001) (quantum physics) have utilized aspects of science. However, these plays tend to address the people behind the science or use science as

a plot device and not necessarily to explore the impact of the science itself upon the human. *Now Then Again* intriguingly sets out to record a theory of quantum mechanics in a dramatic form. According to the introduction of the play written by John G. Cramer, himself a renowned physicist, the play uses as a metaphor the depiction of “quantum events as a handshake between the future and the past through the medium of quantum waves that travel in both time directions.” Penny Penniston uses the theory for both the plot and the dramatic structure of the play. While Penniston’s work comes closest to showing how a theory would work in a human situation, it does not intentionally set out to measure audience reception of the theory. In addressing the audience perception of the robots in the piece, *Robots* essentially becomes a laboratory for direct feedback, something not always available to researchers.

Overall, the play is a beautifully crafted piece. My only complaint would be that the action occasionally drags due to robotics. The robots can move only so fast, and this cannot be rectified in any way other than through engineering. Having realized this, Denisart and the actors have attempted to incorporate the slower motion of the robots into the movement of the play as a whole with some success. Other

audience members have mentioned this difficulty, but it is not so great that it detracts from the impact of the whole.

I am delighted that Denisart gave me the opportunity to see a full recording of the show. Snippets of the play can be viewed at the website for *Le Voyage Extraordinaire* <www.lesvoyagesextraordinaires.ch/robots/index_angl.php>. Nothing, however, can really substitute for the energy of a live performance. The robots and the story are simple yet sophisticated. Both convey elements of technology, its use, its representation, and its reception, all of which are pertinent. Perhaps more importantly, this play marks the level of cooperation and collaboration between two seemingly disparate fields. The project helped generate innovations in robotic programming, outlining new problems and their solutions. It also serves as a real world laboratory allowing a more general population to voice opinions on robotic design. Frankly, this play needs to be seen in the United States. I can’t afford a ticket to Switzerland, even if the play does have real robots. ▲

Jen Gunnels lives in the cybernetic wonderland that is Yorktown Heights, New York.

The Sorcerer’s House by Gene Wolfe

New York: Tor Books, 2010; \$24.99 hc; 304 pages

reviewed by John Clute

It may be the case that there is nothing here but a tale that can be seen, nor would this be the first time that Gene Wolfe has allowed his readers to enter a story properly the first time round: usually, as has been said before, it is only the second or third reading that allows you in. A recent Wolfe novel, *Pirate Freedom* (which I reviewed in *NYRSF* 233) can also be understood as having been told in clear: as a paean on the white notes of the scale, no rebus ahoy! to flag us. But although its mirrors and doublings warn that its innards will almost certainly only ultimately be delvable through the usual Wolfe steganography (cf. my review of *The Wizard Knight*, *NYRSF* 196), *The Sorcerer’s House* rewards a simple (which is to say initial) reading even more than its predecessor from 2007.

We are getting into dangerous territory here: but I think I am going to claim that Gene Wolfe’s twenty-eighth or seventeenth novel (or more, or fewer, depending on how to count the Books of the Sun and Latro’s multivolume saga) is a *jeu d’esprit*, that for a moment, five decades down his long career, he has allowed the conjuror who represents the real author on the stage of the page to show his cards at the very beginning of the prestidigitation to come. Which is not to say that the reader of *House* ever sees the conjuror (or the implied author, or the homunculus, or the voice in your ear) in clear, or really (in a sense) at all. This is normal. Almost none of Wolfe’s major novels or series exposes to clear view or ear the semblance or voice of an implied author whom readers normally and half-unconsciously expect their mind’s eye to “meet” when they open the page of a new book; and there is no “Gene Wolfe” to meet in the current novel, any more than there is in his other major books (but see below).

As is the case of so many of those earlier books, a manuscript intervenes in *House* between the implied author and the reader. It may seem tedious to rehearse previous examples, as the litany is well known, but there is a point in doing so. Many of us will remember, for instance, that all twelve volumes that make up the three *Book* sequences are presented either as found physical texts of a confessional memoir and/or biographies; the Latro sequence comprises dozens upon dozens of technically disjointed *aides memoires*; *The Wizard Knight* is the text of a missive, which we are meant to believe has been delivered to the brother for whom it was written; *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* can only be understood after the reader identifies the true author of its central section (and makes some guess as to the reader within the book of that discovered text); I have not myself read *Peace* for three decades, and although I remember it as almost entirely put together as a nesting of interrupted stories, I can no longer pinpoint where some fault line may run between “recounted” material and Dennis’s (which is to say the implied narrator’s which is to say the risen ghost’s) telling of things;

Pirate Freedom is the written-down soon-to-be-published apologia of a bad priest. What each one of these books claims is that the reader is encountering something not so much told as found, and that what is found is belated: that you can never be in the presence of the telling, or its present. Like its predecessors, *The Sorcerer’s House* is estranged from the reader up here in thin air; it is an epistolary novel, and its tesseræ of letters from and to its protagonist have been arranged (as a compiler who does not sign himself Gene Wolfe states) “in a (not *the*) logical order.” Sounds like business as usual.

But as I began by saying, I think it is not; or that, somehow, the reader can get away with thinking it is not. From the beginning of his career, Wolfe has *tended* to structure his novels as I’ve just described—as unfoldings whose tellers are shadowed from us, and whose junction points are exempted from the continuities that implied narrators are intuitively responsible for—but that he does not so structure his novellas and stories. They are *told* by a narrator. *The Sorcerer’s House* is not; but it reads as though its main speaker, the author of most of the letters constituting the text, were speaking to us in clear, fully to be trusted, amiable to us, no agenbite. Though it is 300 pages long, *House* is built to be read in a single sitting. It is a *jeu*.

Very soon we learn that almost every proper name in the book relates somehow or other to the color black; the sorcerer himself—a godgame figure whose legacy and presence underwrites everything that happens to Baxter Dunn, the protagonist—is named Zwart Black, though he sometimes goes as Alexander Skotos (Greek for shadow). We also learn that pretty well everything in the book comes in twos: like all the Blacks, Baxter (who discovers that he is Black’s son) is an identical twin; the book itself, 44 chapters long, is divided halfway through by two chapters (22 and 23) with the same title, “Silver Bullets”; two real estate agents are involved with Baxter, each of whom sleeps with him; there is a good house and a bad house, they are identical, or not. But none of this needs decipherment to work out: everything, at this level of the tale, is told to us.

So once it is understood that *House* is a godgame, and that therefore everything is, in the end, *openly* under the control of an engendering magus or author, the story is not hard to take joy in. Baxter Dunn, newly released from prison, has taken refuge in the small town of Medicine Man (it is that obvious), where he hopes to start life afresh, away from the twin brother he has somehow defrauded, aailable offense. We do not learn how he has settled on Medicine Man. By a series of “accidents,” he discovers that he is heir to a house near the river, a house that expands and contracts to hold the number of people (all connected) who are inside at any one point; from this house it is possible to catch glimpses—it is one of the many echoes in the text of previous Wolfe novels, in this case *Castlevision*—of Faerie.