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Uncanny Valley: From Shepherdstown to Manhattan

by Peter Marks

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Deeply absorbing drama may not be the export that comes most vividly to mind when one thinks of West Virginia. Certainly, though, *Uncanny Valley*, Thomas Gibbons's cerebrally challenging play about a near future when manmade beings begin to replace man, makes an important contribution in advancing that cultural connection.

The play, running through Oct. 26 at Manhattan's 59E59 Theaters, isn't the only work ever to have gone forth from Shepherdstown, W.Va.'s Contemporary American Theater Festival, the event that for 23 summers has been commissioning and producing new plays in the state's panhandle, about 90 minutes from Washington. In 1999, for instance, Jeffrey Hatcher's "Compleat Female Stage Beauty" was born at the festival, later to be turned into the feature film "Stage Beauty" with Claire Danes and Billy Crudup.

Uncanny Valley though, a product of the 2014 festival, is the first show the organization has taken on the road and presented in New York. And the work, directed by Tom Dugdale, turns out to be a very good showpiece for this new milestone in CATF's development.

In its exploration of the uncertain ethical terrain of artificial intelligence, *Uncanny Valley* does travel some fairly familiar paths. But through the creation of a hybrid of his own, a kind of sci-fi melodrama, looking at the fallout from the increasingly fraught relationship between a scientist and the robot she schools in the complexities of human interaction, Gibbons creates a fascinating scenario. The questions the play raises—can, for instance, a robot's consciousness attain a level of sophistication that qualifies as sentience?—compels one to consider whether like the Tin Man, a manufactured being might actually someday possess a heart.

The office of Claire (Barbara Kingsley), a senior researcher in robotics, is where we meet Julian (Alex Podulke), or more to the point, Julian's torso. He's being assembled, limb by mechanized limb, by the technicians of the company that has financed his construction. Claire has the painstaking task of building into the lifelike robot—whose skin is an “eighth-generation polymer” and whose hair is made of “micro polymer filaments”—the nuances of human cognition. (Jesse Dreikosen and Therese Bruck, the set and costume designers, convincingly turn Podulke into a robot-in-progress.)

The first half of the play is consumed with Julian's training, and, thanks both to Podulke's astonishingly disciplined physical performance and Gibbons's imaginative take on how that schooling might occur, the process is enormously engrossing. It's "Pygmalion" for the "A.I." age. "In my mind, is there an 'I'?" Julian asks. Is, in other words, an awareness of self the defining characteristic for acceptance as something more than a reasonable facsimile of our species?

The tone of *Uncanny Valley* veers at times toward the drily instructive, and some of the futuristic embroidery suggests that other technologies have not kept pace with the development of Julian: are they still using hand-held cellphones at this juncture of the "not distant" future? Still, in Julian's endearing innocence, we can't help but root for him as he wrestles with the concept of emotion and other aspects of identity. In the play's murkier second half, Claire, coping with a husband of advancing senility, is forced to confront her own unresolved feelings about Julian, as well as the disturbing consequences of her life's work, when a disconcertingly more autonomous Julian pays her a follow-up visit. The brittle and less confident Claire becomes, the better Kingsley's performance gets.

The unsettling details of their reunion will be left for audiences to discover. It's to the credit of Gibbons and Dugdale that *Uncanny Valley* maintains such a firm hold on us that, until the very last blackout, we remain tantalized by the mystery of what courses through Julian's circuitry.