

**The New York Times**

# Having It All, Except for Humanity

‘Uncanny Valley,’ a Jaunt Into the Future

by Laura Collins-Hughes

October 16, 2014

He who dies with the most toys wins, or so they say. But what’s the point of having all those playthings if death is going to rip you from them anyway?

In Thomas Gibbons’s futuristic two-hander “Uncanny Valley,” presented by the Contemporary American Theater Festival at 59E59 Theaters, a very wealthy man named Julian hasn’t quite found immortality, but he has bought a means to forestall his demise for at least a couple of centuries.

With pancreatic cancer about to kill him, Julian plans to download the contents of his mind into an artificial human that carries his DNA and looks just as he did at 34, more than half a lifetime ago. The machine will assume his identity and his existence.

“I haven’t had enough,” Julian tells Claire, a neuroscientist who has spent her career working on artificial consciousness. “This world, this life! I can’t even imagine having my fill.”

The simulated Julian (Alex Podulke) is at first little more than a talking head in Claire’s office. Soon he gets a torso, then one arm and another, eventually an entire body. Schooling him, before the download, in the ways of our “skittish species,” Claire (Barbara Kingsley) explains the phenomenon of the uncanny valley: People

get creeped out when something — such as the android Bina48, which inspired this play — looks almost, but not quite, human.

Mr. Podulke's alert, sympathetic performance never elicits that shuddery sensation. Instead, he makes Julian a recognizable Mitt Romney type — even in the stiff, mechanical manner Julian has early on. Post-download, endowed with an oligarch's smooth, entitled confidence, he retains a faint androidal echo in his speech and seems just disconnected enough from the concerns of ordinary humans.

The notion of human consciousness transplanted into machines is in the air right now. In Brooklyn, a different play called "The Uncanny Valley" features two actors and a RoboThespian, which is exactly what it sounds like. In Los Angeles, holograms substitute for dead loved ones in Jordan Harrison's "Marjorie Prime."

Mr. Gibbons's "Uncanny Valley" is set perhaps 40-some years in the future but deliberately, somewhat jarringly, designed to look like now. It's a techno take on the Pinocchio story: We watch Julian become an almost-real man, with Claire as one of a team of Geppettos. At 70, worried about her ailing, older husband, she's familiar with the ravages of mortality that the wealthy can now escape.

Yet, as directed by Tom Dugdale, Ms. Kingsley seldom seems truly present, so it is difficult to believe in Claire the way we do in Julian. He is only a simulated human, and there may be a void where his ethical compass ought to be. But we're sort of rooting for him just the same.