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Dancing some pleasing duets at the Contemporary American Theater Festival

by Celia Wren / *The Washington Post*

Topicality and personality are dancing some pleasing duets at the Contemporary American Theater Festival, the annual cavalcade of new and newish plays in Shepherdstown, W.Va. The five dramas and comedies that are running in rotating repertory at the festival, through Aug. 3, explore ripped-from-the-headlines topics such as economic inequality; prejudice against minorities and outsiders; and sexual assault in the military. Fortunately, for the most part, the playwrights have succeeded in weaving such themes into the lives of vibrant and quirky characters, whose vim, banter and idiosyncratic perspectives — channeled here by terrific actors — tend to banish the arid ponderousness that can be the bane of the Issue Play.

Perhaps the most memorable character appears in Thomas Gibbons's "Uncanny Valley" — the festival's most satisfying offering — and happens to be a robot. Julian (Alex Podulke) is a human-shaped artificial intelligence who can think, learn and maybe even feel, thanks to the coaching of a scientist named Claire (Barbara Kingsley). We meet Julian gradually, in brief, taut scenes: First he is just a head; later, he appears with a torso, then an arm, and so on, until we see him marching in ungainly fashion around Claire's office as he tests his new legs.

The great pleasure of the production, directed by Tom Dugdale (and part of a National New Play Network “rolling world premiere”), is watching the marvelous Podulke create a being that is at first mechanized, but then increasingly and eerily human in gaze, movement and speech. By the play’s final scene, after a thriller-worthy plot twist has radically altered Julian’s identity, this piece of anthropomorphized technology is almost —but, creepily, not quite —like an ordinary mortal.

But “Uncanny Valley” isn’t merely an acting tour de force: It asks philosophical questions. What makes us conscious? What makes us human? What are we trying to say when we crook our fingers in air quotes (a gesture Julian initially has trouble understanding)? Julian and Claire’s story is timely, given that, in real life, last month, a computer program may have passed the famous Turing Test (it convinced multiple interlocutors that they were conversing with a human). But the real strength of Gibbons’s play is that it makes us think, not so much about science news, but about our own awareness and the mysteries of the mundane.