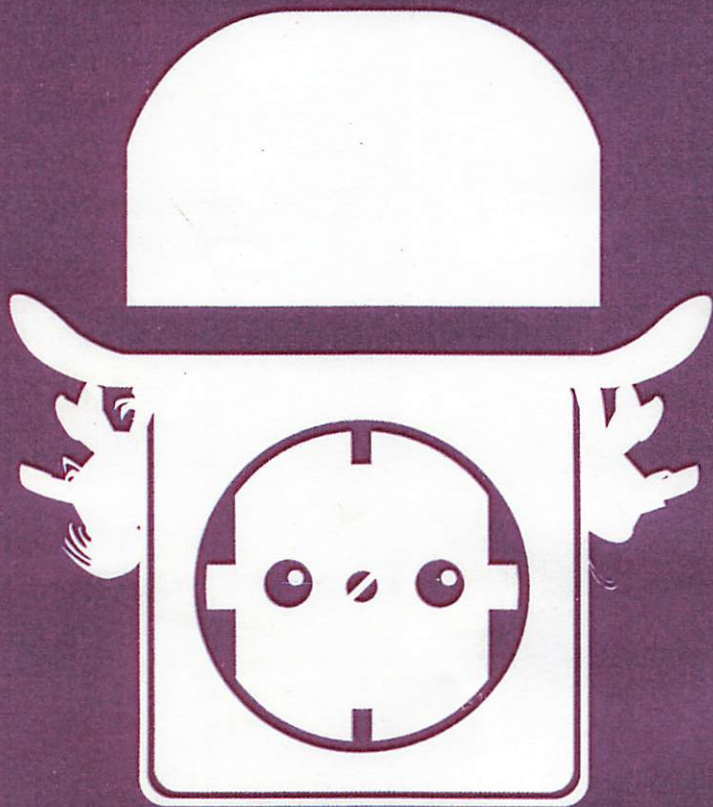


Alan Ayckbourn's

COMIC POTENTIAL

A comedy of runtime errors



Summer term production 2010

maniACTs
the english department drama group

Humans Playing Robots Playing Humans

"I wonder what makes us build inefficiently-shaped human robots instead of nice streamlined machines?"

"Pride, sir," said the robot.

- Terry Pratchett: *The Dark Side of the Sun*

What Terry Pratchett describes here has been a popular topic in cinema for many years. Numerous movies have devoted attention to the fascination of artificial intelligence packed in a human shape. Alan Ayckbourn's actoids are by no means an isolated example, but allude to a long-standing tradition of depicting robots in film.

One of the first movies to feature a real-life robot was Fritz Lang's silent film *Metropolis*. Back in 1927, Lang depicted the creation of a *Maschinenmensch*, which was given the identity of Maria, the revolutionary leader of Metropolis' working class, misused by Joh Frederson to suppress the revolters. Lang's epos had a huge influence on the science fiction genre and later android films. Suddenly, human-like robots could be found everywhere.

Next in our "Robot Hall of Fame" (by the way, such a thing really exists and can be found in Pennsylvania, USA), we shouldn't forget those two famous metallic comrades-in-arms against the dark side who shared a weird but entertaining kind of friend-

ship in George Lucas' *Star Wars*: the golden android C3PO and his beeping companion R2D2, whose dialogues transfer real people's conversations onto a more robotic level: "The city's central computer told you? R2D2, you know better than to trust a strange computer!"

But there is also a darker tradition of android cinematography, building on the omnipresent fear that we might be beat and ruled one day by the machines we created – as it happens in *Terminator*, where a network of artificial intelligence becomes self-aware and decides to get rid of those annoying humans (us).



Metropolis, 1927

It sends out the cyborg assassin T-800, a rather close-mouthed robot free from any emotion and strictly following his one order: to kill.

Luckily, cinema got over that! With David, the child-like robot with the ability to love, 2001's *A.I.* made people suddenly sympathise with products of artificial intelligence. Robots were no longer beings without any sense for empathy but, to put it bluntly, somehow equal to us: consider the depressive and paranoid android Marvin in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* or the greedy Bender of Matt Groenig's *Futurama*.

Nowadays, the typical fictional robot is hardly distinguishable from "real" people. They behave exactly like we do and it is quite hard to find distinctions between "them" and "us". In



Anthony Daniels as C3PO in *Star Wars*, 1977

Comic Potential, Ayckbourn cleverly picks up this topic by turning the tables on a familiar theme: instead of humans playing robots, the audience witnesses acting machines pretending to be humans – but of course, those machines are played by real flesh and bone actors.

- Julia Liebermann

- 1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.**
- 2. A robot must obey any orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.**
- 3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.**

- Isaac Asimov: *The Three Laws of Robotics*