



Review "Death and The Powers": Life-Altering Experience

On 04.04.11 at 8:48 AM |

[Chicago Opera Theater](#) presents



DEATH AND THE POWERS

At Harris Theater, 205 E. Randolph

Music by [Tod Machover](#)

Libretto by Robert Pinsky

Story by Robert Pinsky & Randy Weiner

Conducted by Gil Rose

Directed by Diane Paulus

April 6th and 8th at 7:30pm

April 10th at 3pm

[Buy Tickets](#)

Running Time: Ninety minutes with no intermission

Reviewed by Katy Walsh

I've been to the future! Theatre has survived arts budget cutting. Unfortunately, starving actors have not! They've been replaced by robots. [Chicago Opera Theater](#) presents the Midwest premiere of ***DEATH AND THE POWERS***. Robots tell a parable of creation. A wealthy man, struggling with a debilitating disease, decides to amputate himself. His mind will be severed from his body and hosted into a machine. He is buying eternity. His partially robotic assistant gets it and helps with the conversion. His final wife and daughter are devastated! Is he leaving them forever? Will he be the same person as a nonperson? How does one love a machine? ***DEATH AND THE POWERS*** is an out of body, afterlife experience.

The first four minutes transfix like walking into the Apple Store. There are unfamiliar, sleek, shiny machines lit up in animation. The robots move, talk and sing. They inquire about 'suffering.' They define death as having 'data rearranged.' They aren't plugged in... to emotion but they are fascinating to observe! It's all the flashing lights and movable mechanics that gives ***DEATH AND THE POWERS*** a modern twist on humanity. For an opera, the audio takes a back seat to the visual spectacle. The designers have super charged the look to transport into a sci-fi realm. Peeks of humanity contrast brilliantly within the non-organic environment. For one scene, the large raggedy chorus provide gritty realism. The sequence focuses on their hand movements as they try to grab onto the daughter for help. Another strong human feeling is captured on video montages emphasizing mortality. The production's mechanics are visually stunning in modernism and imagination.

The challenge is that opera is ultimately passionate one on one drama. Singing to a machine loses some of the emotional connection. Without that human intimacy on stage, it's difficult for the audience to become engaged in the story. For the principals' parts, the beginning scene feels deeply the anguish and loss. On stage or as a voiceover, [James Maddalena](#) (Simon) commands the stage as a powerful baritone. Maddalena's singing grows in strength as his fleshy self disappears from view. He sustains a presence but it's artificial. Singing with lively flirtation, [Emily Albrink](#) (Evvy) tries to seduce her husband's essences. With headphones, Albrink continues to focus on her marriage channel by cutting off the external world. It's an ironic gesture of necessity. Hal Cazalet (Nicholas) self-identifies poignantly as man and machine. Cazalet sings his human and mechanical part descriptions with confident matter-doesn't-matter. Inclined to stay meat, [Sara Heaton](#) (Miranda) sings her human conflict with heart-ripping emotion. Heaton's captivating scene with the chorus is fused with gritty reality of survival.

DEATH AND THE POWERS is a life-altering experience. For the existentialist, it asks 'What does it mean to be here on earth but not be human?' For the spiritual, it wonders 'Is afterlife transforming into any non-bodily form?' For the techno-geeks, it demands 'Does my marriage to my Ipad cut me off from the outside world?' ***DEATH AND THE POWERS*** boldly goes where no man has gone before... into a machine.

Feeling somewhat disconnected without his cell phone, Tom describes it with 'ungainly technical marvel.'