

## Chicago Opera Theater: Tod Machover's *Death and the Powers* at Harris Theater - HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

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Tod Machover's seminal new opera, *Death and the Powers* wrestles with enormous questions: what is being? Where do you exist? Do you exist in your body? In your memories? Could you "download" that very essence of you into a "System" in order to transcend matter and time? If so, would you really be the same "person"? For you philosophy lovers out there, it's 90 minutes of pondering dualism verses monism. Tech lovers will marvel at the "musical Chandelier, comprised of long Teflon strings which resonate through remotely actuated electromagnets as well as on-stage performers plucking," and "a new technique called Disembodied Performance which uses innovative sensors and analysis software to translate...sounds and gestures into the behavior of the set." I was seated by Machover and was delighted – and awed – to watch his fingers dance over the customized iPad that he used to control and interact with the sounds.

Before I get into the body of this review, allow me to just say this: GO SEE *DEATH AND THE POWERS*. Really. It is the most outstanding new creation you will see this year – maybe even for a few seasons, depending on how long it takes for this level of ingenuity to disseminate.

The story centers on billionaire inventor Simon Powers, who is determined it is "never the matter that matters" in the "post-organic" age, and thus "downloads" himself into the "System" in order to allow his essence to achieve a kind of transcendent immortality. His wife, Evvy, something of an Ophelia, slowly goes insane from wandering about all day attempting to "listen" to the essence of her husband in the System. Nicholas, Simon's protégé, with one mechanical arm, orchestrates the download and acts as something of a part organic-part machine mediator between the Simon of the System and the material world that still wishes to connect with him. But how? Where IS Simon? This is the question that constantly plagues his daughter, Miranda, with whom all the metaphysical quandaries of being are entrusted.

We are introduced to these characters by four glowing robots with triangular "heads," resembling something like animated podiums (this a production with which MIT is involved, after all), that throw us into the deep end of the philosophical pool from the moment the lights drop with the questions: "What is death? Is it a form of waste?" "What is suffering? How can I perceive what I cannot feel?" The story of their human creators before they disappeared is then uploaded through a breathtakingly impressive technological display.

James Maddalena (famous for originating the role of Richard Nixon in John Adams' *Nixon in China*) is brilliant as Simon, crass and brash, yet tortured at his fraying edges. Emily Albrink delivered fantastically as Simon's wife, ("third and favorite") Evvy, particularly as she increasingly disconnected from the world. Hal Cazalet channeled the blind enthusiasm of Nicholas, but I found Sara Heaton a little too mechanical as the daughter, Miranda. That was particularly frustrating to me, since she – above all the other characters – is supposed to be the voice of humanity, in love with touch, and taste. She's got a lovely solid voice, but her acting wasn't nearly sensual enough for one so sentient. Doug Dodson, David Kravitz, and Tom McNichols rounded out the cast as representatives of The United Way, The United Nations, and The Administration, respectively.

My one major criticism is this: there needed to be greater contrast between the human (“organic,” “meat”) and the machine. We were confronted with stunning technology all the way through. Opera has never seen anything like this. But when at home, reading through the original libretto by Robert Pinsky, former U.S. Poet Laureate, as printed in the July/August issue of *Poetry* (which was free for the taking on tables in the lobby – better handed out with the programs in my opinion), I found what I was missing in the stage production. Pinsky’s text depicts the opening scene taking place in a room with Victorian touches – human history – juxtaposed with the modern, whilst on stage there was no such foil. It was all electronics, light, metal, nothing organic other than the humans. Also, in the text we are introduced to Simon as a truly disintegrating man, with his body failing him as he labors to move in his wheelchair. In the stage version Simon is bounding around in full health prior to being “downloaded.” It would have been much more striking and emotionally rich to stick to the libretto, putting Maddalena in a wheelchair, and thus confronting us directly with what we value about our ability to enjoy life: our health and well being. Then his manic desire to overcome that aspect would have been more potent, and would have provided a higher level of dramatic tension for us to resolve.

I’m looking forward to more opera companies adopting Machover’s adventurous methods. Don’t get me wrong, I adore Baroque operas and old school sets, but it is always good to see a genre look toward the future. The Boston Modern Orchestra Project led by conductor Gil Rose was flawless throughout. Alex McDowell, known for his production designs for the movies “Fight Club,” and “Minority Report,” lent a moody blue overcast to the otherwise impressive light show (tip of the hat to lighting designer Don Holder). Directed by Diane Paulus, choreography by Karole Armitage, sound design by Chris Full, story by Randy Weiner and Robert Pinsky. Hyperinstruments and other New Performance Technologies by MIT Media Lab. Production in collaboration with Chicago Opera Theater and the American Repertory Theater.

Performances continue at Harris Theater on April 8 (7:30pm), and April 10 (3pm). Please, do yourself a favor and don’t miss the most important music experience of the season. Trust me, you’ll be thinking about it long after the house lights come back up.

Editor's Note: *Incidentally, an article ran recently in Time Magazine dealing with just this issue: The Singularity Movement. Reading it before, or after, the performance will make it doubly thought provoking.*