

Theater

Review: Death and the Powers: The Robots' Opera

The future is now—and the robots can sing.

By Jenna Scherer



Hal Cazalet in *Death and the Powers*

Photo by Jonathan Williams

It's happened: the robots have taken over. But they're not Terminators, Cylons or even Decepticons. They're roving walls, intricate chandeliers and rolling bots with triangles for heads. They don't look like us, but they are us. And they sing.

These automatons comprise about half the cast of *Death and the Powers*, the ridiculously ambitious opera-meets-robotics project now onstage at the Cutler Majestic Theatre. A collaboration between the American Repertory Theatre, the MIT Media Lab and MIT's FAST Arts Festival, *Death and the Powers* is the kind of show that invites hype like none other.

Buildup can be a killer, but not in this case. *Death and the Powers* is a truly impressive piece of theater,

one that's got the weight to back up all its flash. Conceived by musician/inventor Tod Machover with a libretto by three-time Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, the show uses snazzy robots, high language and soaring vocals to grapple with one big question: What does it mean to be alive?

Big-deal baritone James Maddalena stars as Simon Powers, a billionaire inventor who's about to die, and not too keen on the whole mortal coil thing. So he uploads his consciousness into a robotic system of his own creation, allowing him to live on forever. His daughter Miranda (Sara Heaton) has her doubts; his assistant Nicholas (Hal Cazalet), a cyborg himself, is pumped; and Simon's wife Evvy (Emily Albrink) is just about ready to fall apart at the seams.

Maddalena soon leaves the stage, but his voice doesn't; he's down in the orchestra pit, singing through the LED walls, chandelier and various other robots that populate the stage. The bulk of the story is comprised with how both his loved ones and the world at large cope with this Simon 2.0.

As technically challenging staging goes, *Death and the Powers* is definitely on the tricky side. But director Diane Paulus musters both her human and robot performers to tell a clear visual story. This is opera, so everything is fairly grand and bombastic. But with only four key characters onstage, the show also has a surprisingly human scale. MIT Media Lab's robots are slick and expressive, visually evoking everything from iPods to 2001's HAL, while remaining something entirely new.

But it's the humans that make the show, and Paulus has picked some great ones. Maddalena has to exit to forward the story—and it's a shame to lose his expressive physical presence—but we've still got Albrink, who expertly pulls off what we can only describe as a love scene with the chandelier, and Cazalet, whose tuneful tenor pipes make up for a certain one-note quality in Nicholas's character. The finest performance of the evening comes from soprano Heaton, whose Miranda acts as the voice of humanity in the show. She and Maddalena share a father/daughter showdown that's the night's most genuinely moving moment.

Death and the Powers' main downfall is that while visually impressive and intellectually fascinating, it isn't as emotionally resonant as it could be. Machover and Pinsky's foursome are more ideas than they are fully-fledged characters; but that's hard to avoid when you get into this kind of heady airspace.

Whatever its failings, the fact remains that *Death and the Powers* is like nothing anyone's ever seen before. Genuine technical innovation in theater (and we're not talking actors falling from webs) is a rarity these days, particularly when paired with a great idea. So bow to our robot overlords—they have lovely singing voices.

American Repertory Theatre and MIT FAST at the Cutler Majestic Theatre. By Tod Machover, Robert Pinsky, Randy Weiner. Dir. Diane Paulus. With James Maddalena, Emily Albrink, Sara Heaton. Tickets: \$25 and up. Through Mar. 25.

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