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Regional

## Death and the Powers: The Robots' Opera

**(Cutler Majestic Theater, Boston; 1,186 seats; \$110 top)**

By [Frank Rizzo](#)

An American Repertory Theater, MIT's Fast Arts Festival and Chicago Opera Theater presentation of an opera in one act, with music by Tod Machover, libretto by Robert Pinsky and story by Pinsky and Randy Weiner. Directed by Diane Paulus.

Simon Powers - James Maddalena

Evy - Emily Albrink

Miranda - Sara Heaton

Nicholas - Hal Cazalet

The United Way - Douglas Dodson

The United Nations - David Kravitz

The Administration - Tom McNichols

**The merging of man and machine gets a spectacular morphing in the always-fascinating and often-moving "Death and the Powers: The Robot's Opera," receiving its U.S. preem as a collaboration of A.R.T, M.I.T and the Chicago Opera Theater. Mortality, morality and science are the big subjects this technopera grapples with in former poet laureate Robert Pinsky's playful, lyrical and existential libretto.**

**Tod Machover creates a mesmerizing score that blends the coolness of dissonance with the warmth of melody, backed by a 19-piece orchestra and sung splendidly by a cast headed by a powerful and charismatic baritone James Maddalena ("Nixon in China").**

Helmed by Diane Paulus with a skillful hand on the joy stick as she balances human and technical needs, the piece is sure to become a flashpoint: Is this the future of opera or merely "Futurama"?

This opera opens with the gathering of a group of glistening, whizzing white robots (think of Apple finally having it all) that are manipulated by an off-stage MIT team. These iBots of this now humanless world are there to tell a pre-programmed tale they've told before. Yet they still can't comprehend its meaning and ask: "What is this death? What is suffering? How can I perceive what I cannot feel?"

Narrative centers on Simon Powers (Maddalena), a dying billionaire genius who seeks to defy the notion that you can't take it with you when you go -- by not going. Instead, he has found a way to download his consciousness and virtually stick around via an elaborate "System," consisting of three towering light-sensitive edifices and a mysterious sculptural chandelier.

But the on-stage presence of Maddalena does go with his character's demise with a cheery "See you later!" -- but his spirit remains very much engaged as part of the "System." For much of the rest of the opera Maddalena sings unseen in a booth in the orchestra pit, wired to elicit changes in sound and light to the LED-programmed towers on stage.

Alex McDowell, best known for his film design ("Minority Report"), makes his stage bow here and -- complimented by Donald Holder's lighting and Chris Full's sound -- the stage environment dazzles. (The development and production team number more than 60.)

Powers' disembodied, flickering, intoning self continues to communicate, like Oz, with his family: his third wife, Evvy (soprano Emily Albrink), his daughter, Miranda (soprano Sara Heaton), and his surrogate son and associate, Nicholas (tenor Hal Cazalet).

Their reaction to his circuitous-existence and their decision whether to follow this techno-golem toward the light make up the rest of the work. Nicholas is excited; Evvy is entranced (and expresses it beautifully in a sensual aria and dance with the chandelier where she longs for her husband's touch).

But Miranda feels the pull of her mortal coil -- as well as from the hordes of wretched humanity left behind. (Cue the wretched humanity, a la "Metropolis.") It's Miranda's poignant end aria that speaks to the heart and the soul of self -- and what remains a mystery to the machinery left behind.

The show will play the Chicago Opera Theater run next month.

Conductor, Gil Rose; production design, Alex McDowell; costumes, David C. Woolard; lighting, Donald Holder; sound, Chris Full; sound technology, Ben Bloomberg; choreography, Karole Armitage; visual and software design, Peter Torpey; media design, Matt Checkowski. Opened, reviewed March 18, 2011. Runs through March 25. Running time: 90 MIN.

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