



UNCANNY VALLEY

BY THOMAS GIBBONS



DRAMATISTS
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UNCANNY VALLEY
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UNCANNY VALLEY was produced in a rolling world premiere, as part of the National New Play Network's Continued Life of New Plays program, by the following theaters:

UNCANNY VALLEY was produced by Contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, opening on July 11, 2014. It was directed by Tom Dugdale; the set design was by Jesse Dreikosen; the lighting design was by John Ambrosone; the costume design was by Therese Bruck; the sound design was by Elishaba Ittoop; the dramaturg was Adrienne Sowers; and the stage manager was Cat Wallis. The cast was as follows:

CLAIRE Barbara Kingsley
JULIAN Alex Podulke

This production moved to 59E59 Theater in New York City, opening on October 2, 2014. The cast and production team were the same with the following exception: The stage manager was Lori M. Doyle.

UNCANNY VALLEY was produced by InterAct Theatre Company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, opening on April 8, 2015. It was directed by Seth Rozin; the set design was by Nick Embree; the lighting design was by Peter Whinnery; the costume design was by Susan Smythe; the sound design was by Christopher Colucci; the dramaturg was Kittson O'Neill; and the stage manager was Tom Helmer. The cast was as follows:

CLAIRE Sally Mercer
JULIAN Frank X

UNCANNY VALLEY was produced by San Diego REPeritory Theatre in San Diego, California, opening on April 18, 2015. It was directed by Jessica Bird; the set design was by Robin Sanford Roberts; the lighting design was by Kristin Swift Hayes; the costume design was by Michelle Hunt Souza; the sound design was by Kevin Anthenill; the dramaturgs were Dawn Moore and Danielle Ward; and the stage manager was Heather M. Brose. The cast was as follows:

CLAIRE Rosina Reynolds
JULIAN Nick Cagle

UNCANNY VALLEY was produced by Capital Stage in Sacramento, California, opening on June 17, 2015. It was directed by Jonathan Williams; the set design was by Stephen C. Jones; the lighting design was by Ron Madonia; the costume design was by Mari Carson; the sound design was by Ed Lee; the literary manager was Stephanie Tucker; and the stage manager was Jack McDowell. The cast was as follows:

CLAIRE Jessica Powell
JULIAN Michael Patrick Wiles



UNCANNY VALLEY was developed by TACT/The Actors Company Theatre, New York City.

CHARACTERS

CLAIRE — a neuroscientist, seventy years old.

JULIAN — an artificial human in his mid-thirties.

PLACE

Claire's office.

TIME

The not-distant future.

NOTES

Each scene should be followed by a blackout, as brief as practicable. The play should be performed without an intermission if possible.

Clothing and furniture, for the most part, should be as they appear today. The design should gesture at the future without being ostentatiously “futuristic.” The cell phone and tablet in the play will have been superseded; I've included them for convenience, but other possibilities may work.

There are no restrictions on race or ethnicity for either character.

We will be there when the brass head speaks.

—Warren S. McCulloch,
“Where Is Fancy Bred?”

UNCANNY VALLEY

Scene 1

Claire's office. A wooden desk and chair. On the desk are a lamp, a computer, a box of tissues, a few pens, and various papers. Nearby is a coat rack on which hang a briefcase, scarf, and coat. A large carpet covers most of the floor. A door upstage.

A bookcase holds various objects: a flute, a phrenologist's head with the mental regions mapped, an artificial female head, several framed photographs.

In one corner is a floor lamp. Upstage, sunlight streams in through a curtained window. Hanging on one wall are two framed diplomas. The other walls display more photographs and a couple of small paintings.

Claire sits in a chair facing a richly-carved antique wooden table a few feet away. Seventy years old, she is dressed in tasteful, muted clothing.

On top of the table is a black rectangular base three or four inches high. The base supports Julian, an artificial human consisting of a head, neck, and shoulders. The neck and shoulders are clothed in an open-collared shirt.

Julian's head is male, lifelike, indistinguishable from a person's. He has the appearance of being in his early thirties. His hair is moderately long and dark. His eyes are closed.

Claire gazes at him for a few moments, then speaks.

CLAIRE. Open your eyes, Julian.

(Julian opens his eyes.)

Blink.

(Julian blinks his eyes. From now on, he blinks normally.)

Open your mouth.

(Julian opens his mouth wide, then closes it.)

Raise your eyebrows.

(Julian raises his eyebrows, then lowers them.)

Smile.

(Julian smiles. Claire smiles back and announces brightly:)

We begin!

Scene 2

CLAIRE. Turn left, then right.

(Julian turns his head to the left.

He turns it to the right.

He returns to his original position.)

Watch me, then try it again.

(Claire turns her head left, right, and back in one continuous, fluid movement.

Julian performs the same movement smoothly.)

Good. Now ... let's put everything together.

(Pause.)

You've just entered a crowded room. There's a gathering of some kind — a party or reception. You scan the room, looking for anyone you know. Then an old friend approaches — me — whom you haven't seen in a while. You raise your eyebrows in recognition. You smile. You open your mouth to greet me.

(Pause.)

Convince me.

UNCANNY VALLEY

by Thomas Gibbons

1M, 1W

Drawing on current research in artificial intelligence and robotics, UNCANNY VALLEY charts the relationship between Claire, a neuroscientist, and Julian, a nonbiological human. As Julian is “born” a few body parts at a time over the course of the play, Claire teaches him how to be as human as possible: mirroring people’s speech, engaging in small-talk, playing a musical instrument. Their deepening friendship and Julian’s growing “humanity” lead to the revelations of an unhealed sorrow in Claire’s personal life and, ultimately, the purpose for which Julian has been created. UNCANNY VALLEY explores the painful divide between creator and creation, the inherent unpredictability of consciousness, and how we are redefining what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.

“... cerebrally challenging ... Gibbons creates a fascinating scenario. The questions the play raises — can, for instance, a robot’s consciousness attain a level of sophistication that qualifies as sentience? — compel one to consider whether like the Tin Man, a manufactured being might actually someday possess a heart. ... until the very last blackout, we remain tantalized by the mystery of what courses through Julian’s circuitry.”

—The Washington Post

“... Thomas Gibbons’s futuristic two-hander UNCANNY VALLEY [is] a techno take on the Pinocchio story: [Julian] is only a simulated human, and there may be a void where his ethical compass ought to be. But we’re sort of rooting for him just the same.”

—The New York Times

“[A] riveting exploration of robotics and the relationship between the creator and the creation ... The reversals and inversions explored in UNCANNY VALLEY play tricks with your head — when Claire goes into clipped professional mode, in contrast, Julian becomes touchingly human. But what does that mean? Is feeling and emotion what makes us human? Or is it the act of creation — to take an idea, a divine spark and make it real?”

—DCTheatreScene.com

Also by Thomas Gibbons
THE EXHIBITION

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