

# ACTING, AUTOMATION, AND EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY IN *THE SALON AUTOMATON*

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*The Salon Automaton* begins with a long slow lighting fade accompanied by an audio track that sounds like a historical version of *muzak*: simple, melodic, repetitive, and decidedly mechanical in its production. About halfway through the fade one can clearly make out the silhouettes of four seated characters and a set that is framed in the shape of a birdcage in cross section. Gradually, over the very long fade, some details emerge from the dark and we are confronted with the scene of an intimate salon. The salon has a lived-in feel, mildly decrepit and a bit dusty, but elegant and charming in a style that combines hints of Art Nouveau with an Edwardian manor house. There are four characters in a semicircle on chairs around a coffee table, which serves as the scene's centrepiece. The characters are seated and completely still, strikingly still, eerily still. Their stillness is beyond a freeze; they are rapt in a restful yet lively suspension. The bulk of the set is now fully lit, and the characters sit like a portrait, suspended in time, evoking the distilled quality of suspense itself. The tableau remains static, immobile, until the central character, the Hostess, speaks. When she speaks only her lips and eyes move, the rest of her body remains rigid, in solidarity with her three guests. She welcomes her guests and invokes the muses. When her invocation is complete we hear the sound of a mechanical clock: tick tock, tick tock. The eyes of the Hostess move in time with the sound. Tick tock. She lifts her hand with a clear and singular

articulation of the wrist. Tick tock. The Hostess's eyes dart in the direction of stage left, at her two female companions seated there, then stage right, where the lone male character sits immobile, focused front.

The Hostess is Nathalie Claude, the creator and performer of this “play for one flesh-and-blood actress and three automatons.” Claude has created a theatrical world for herself and her three android co-stars that is distinctly Edwardian in its aesthetic yet resoundingly Enlightenment in its philosophical and scientific premise. René Descartes's *Treatise of Man* proposed a definition of man as statue or machine inhabited by a thinking ghost—introducing the concept of interactive dualism and laying the philosophical basis for the greatest question of the Enlightenment: what is meant by human? The Enlightenment was also, not incidentally, the golden age of the automaton. The advent of mimetic machines, such as Jacques de Vaucanson's “high-society spectacle in which an android played the flute and a mechanical duck was seen to digest its food,”<sup>1</sup> comes on the heels of Cartesian dualism and aligns the invention of such “toys” with the philosophic considerations of their time. (A fact that resonates well with Donna Haraway's suggestion that “the boundary is permeable between instrument and concept. Historical systems of social relation and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge . . . mutually constitute each other.”)<sup>2</sup> The style and content of Claude's work are essentially concerned with the human condition in a timeless way that gathers historical and contemporary philosophies of human beings together. Her relationship to the automatons—as her cultured guests—ultimately brings into focus the fact that our own human existence is moving towards an increased automation and, like the key-wound mechanisms of the clockwork automaton, towards an inevitable halt. The Hostess's drama is consciously enacted and re-enacted week after week, every Friday night. All four characters overtly theatricalize the body—and inspire theoretical rumination on the art of acting and the trouble with mimesis, in general. In fact, the automaton may be seen as an extension of the actor whose actions,

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1 Gaby Wood, *Living Dolls: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 15.

2 Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 23.

through familiarity (memorization) and repetition (rehearsal), become automated, become second nature, and result in a new and spontaneous vitality.<sup>3</sup> The paradox of spontaneity emerging from mechanistic repetition, whether rehearsed (as in the case of the actor) or programmed (as in the case of the automatons), invokes the force suggested by the Cartesian ghost in the machine (a potential energy in all matter), and is made manifest in this production where the fully mechanized, electronic energy of Claude's twenty-first century automatons are expected to keep pace with the organic energy of the charismatic actor that is Claude herself. And they do, they really do!

The opening sequence of Claude's play accentuates the dramatic tension between motion and stillness—between life and death—through the gradual revelation of the distinction between Claude and her machines, and the demonstration of the various “degrees of liberty”<sup>4</sup> of each of the automatons. In *The Salon Automaton* the first human expression that we hear from the automatons is the sound of breath. This emission of breath invokes the ancient concept of *pneuma*, the human spirit as embodied in the breath through which imagination and emotion can be transferred from one individual to another. The Hostess invites her automated companions to breathe with her, summoning them to action, and enjoining them to begin their performance by warming their voices and tuning themselves to each other “in perfect communion.” Claude's early training in the European tradition of *mime corporel* and her work with physically based companies such as Omnibus and Carbone 14 contribute to her unique prowess as a performer and her highly gestural and focused acting style—her face and body comprise a language unto themselves. Claude's command of the stage and expertise in its conventions render

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3 Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993), 16.

4 “Degrees of liberty” is the term Claude uses in the text to refer to the automatons' capabilities; what they are able to do. All three have a detailed set of motor “skills” involving the face, neck, and arms. In addition each automaton has a “special skill”: the Drinking Patroness drinks champagne, the Dandy Poet can gesticulate grandly with both of his arms, and the Cabaret Artist has increased gesticulation in her right hand and wrist and each of her fingers can move individually.

her performative passions infectious to an audience. She is, as Erin Hurley has written, “a hugely charismatic performer with a gift for seriously, emotionally, imaginatively and intellectually engaging spoof.”<sup>5</sup> Nathalie Claude is a funny and compelling artist who fully inhabits her characters, drawing spectators into the spatially and temporally determined fantasies that form the basis of her work as a creator/performer. As a creator/performer her reputation is built on her solo work and this, *The Salon Automaton*, emerges directly out of that work, constituting the third instalment in a series known as *The Madness Trilogy*. The first two instalments, *Lapine-Moi/Rabbit-I* (2005) and *Cerveau fêlé 101/Broken Brain 101* (2006), rely, like *The Salon Automaton*, on an overtly theatrical performance and staging style along with the distinct maintenance of a fourth wall; they are worlds unto themselves, inhabited by original and meticulously detailed characterization and design elements. (Original and—I just have to add—brilliant sound scores by Isabelle Lussier are a fundamental element in each of the three instalments, for example). But *The Salon Automaton* marks a stylistic departure within the trilogy in a number of ways. *Lapine-Moi/Rabbit-I* and *Cerveau fêlé 101/Broken Brain 101* are considerably shorter works (twenty and thirty minutes long respectively) and are each completely bilingual; they are written in both English and French, alternating between the two languages with such fluid clarity as to render translation for a unilingual (English or French) audience unnecessary. But the thing that separates *The Salon Automaton* from its predecessors, positioning it firmly on the outskirts of the solo tradition, is the presence of three lifelike automated characters who populate the world of the salon and who, as I suggested above, wholly engage the sympathies of the spectator on a deep emotional and intellectual level. Through recorded human voices, gestural mimicry, and their intimate relationship with the Hostess these robots embody the theoretical premise of the James–Lange theory of emotion, which holds that physiological manifestation is the essence of emotional response; that is to say, emotions are not only communicated through a physiological response but also that emotion may not even be said to exist without it.

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5 Erin Hurley, “Companioned Solos: Nathalie Claude’s Trilogie de la folie,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 149 (2012): 23.

Therefore, the impact of a passion expressed by an actor (or an automaton), if accurately executed, will illicit exactly the same response from an interlocutor or spectator as the expression of a genuine emotional experience because the “mind’s perception of the physiological manifestation is the emotion.”<sup>6</sup>

Claude’s automated companions are in fact contemporary electronic mechanisms replicating historical clockwork automatons. They are, in short, performing the role of automatons performing the role of guests at the Hostess’s salon. The original clockwork automatons, popular as marketing tools (think of its contemporary offspring, the Eaton’s Christmas window displays) and spectacle (smoking monkeys or toy acrobats were popular versions), predate audio recording technology. Rather than mechanically generated sound, Claude’s automatons have recorded vocal tracks performed by actors. Likewise their motor mechanisms are not the windup clockwork variety, but rather the product of advanced electronics and detailed programming. The control software was custom designed for the show by Simon Laroche who, Claude asserts, “kind of created the characters with me, because in rehearsal he proposed a lot.” As the robots evolved along with the script, the text influenced the gestural programming of the characters so, for example, “Simon would make a gesture combining the neck and the eye as the Patroness said: ‘Welllllll.’ ” It was a unique rehearsal process because “everything had to be decided in advance, every gesture, every mood.” There were, Claude notes, “two puppet masters, in a way.”<sup>7</sup>

Laroche’s custom program “resembles a lighting-control software with recorded cues, and timing and delay transitions in between.”<sup>8</sup> The show has more than 1,500 cues for the movements and voices of the automatons alone (not including the traditional lighting and sound cues for the production).

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6 Roach, 84.

7 Nathalie Claude, Personal Interview with Moynan King, 12 Aug. 2013. All subsequent quotations from Nathalie are taken from the same interview.

8 Simon Laroche, Personal Interview with Moynan King, 5 Aug. 2013. All subsequent quotations from Simon are taken from the same interview.

And in addition to these there were specially programmed cues (such as the automatic blinking of the eyes, or mouth-movement sequences, for example). During the show, cues were being recalled for playback and would automatically follow one another until an indication in a cue would tell the software to wait for further human input. (Laroche)

This interplay of technology and “human input” are key to the theatrical magic of this unique play, and something to bear in mind as you read. In a recent discussion with Claude I asked her what it was like to perform with automated humanoid actors. “They are very reliable,” she said with glee, and continued:

They are rigorous, like clockwork. I am used to working with very precise actors who know their craft, and the intonation of the automatons was very real and very true but the intonation was exactly the same every night. There was no surprise; the only surprise was if something went wrong—if there was a delay, or something froze on the technical end. At the same time I really managed to get lost during the performance, and sometimes I truly forgot they were robots. I thought they were fabulous actors!

Claude’s theatrical manifestation of the search for the perfect companion has its roots in the literary tradition of Prometheus, Frankenstein, and Pygmalion. At the base she had decided everything; she had control of everything. And her character, the Hostess, is in turn revealed to have created her companions herself. “So,” Claude reminded me, “if anything happened I had the knowledge and the improvisation skills to deal with it. Let’s say the Dandy Poet burst into flames—I could have continued the show.” Claude’s confidence and radical narcissism are transferred onto the Hostess, who is “on top, no matter what. The Hostess was the hostess of the whole ceremony.” This ceremony is characterized, at its foundation, as a disavowal of the isolation and desperate loneliness of a character plagued with a contagious illness. This disavowal is one that breaches the boundaries of sanity (remember this is the final instalment of Claude’s *Madness Trilogy*), and insanity is the historical hallmark fate

of the character who keeps company with mechanical or otherwise fabricated beings. While Claude expresses complete satisfaction with her mechanical collaborators on stage, the same cannot be said of the desolate Hostess, whose frustration with her companions' limitations results in behaviour that is ultimately unhinged. And as the Hostess spirals into the depths of her own madness the sympathies of the audience become singularly invested in the automatons. The existential crisis of the lonely, sick Hostess is expressed as the existential crisis of the automatons, as they panic, wondering, in a moment of Cartesian reversal, "I do not think, therefore do I not exist?"

In production, *The Salon Automaton* ends as it begins, with a long slow lighting fade. The mechanical tick tock of the windup clock has been replaced with the electromagnetic sound of a theremin, whose eerie tone is uncannily corporeal and humanoid. The dramatic tension between motion and stillness, between life and death, are once again brought into sharp relief. The mortal stillness of the Hostess is paradoxically contrasted with the emotional physiology of the slowing movements of the automatons, whose voices meld in expressing infinite awe at the wonder of "your humanity, your humanity, your humanity . . ."