

Capek's Masterpiece

CHARLES LUKENBILL

In R. U. R. Capek dramatizes the impending danger to mankind's vitality of machine-like efficiency. Here is a pleasing fantasy attempting to develop a notion implicit in Mrs. Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the peril of man's creating a monster destined eventually to destroy him. Of course, Capek changes this notion somewhat by giving it a social application. It seems that he is primarily concerned with the future of mankind. However, his "planetary consciousness" has not a scientific basis; it springs rather from a desire to save human values from the enslavement of industrial civilization.

Capek develops these ideas in a daring vision of mechanical men, who first appear as a blessing to man, making him free from toil, but who finally are the cause of his destruction. The play is rather melodramatic but it has the power to stir the imagination of the masses, provoking some amount of thought among them as to a possible solution of this momentous problem. However we may disagree with his views, we must give him credit for the acute intellect, inspired observation and deep sympathy with common humanity revealed in his play. His is not the American, or perhaps better called "Anglo-Saxon," comic spirit, nor the fine, sad hopeless laughter of the Russians; but rather it is a humor colored by vigorous satire, active and witty, at the bottom of which one cannot fail to perceive a deep love of humanity.

To some the conflict may seem quite obvious, but others develop a different interpretation. Some would say that the conflict is simply "the robots versus the human race." I would go farther. I believe that one is more correct in saying that the

conflict rests between mechanical progress and humanity. Of course, in this particular play mechanical progress is symbolized by the robots and the men who created them and continue to produce them; the author depends largely upon three of his human characters for his symbolism of humanity.

Let us consider first those who represent humanity. The most important of the three, possibly, is Nana. She is typical of her sex, I think, in that she holds to her conservative points of view while the men go stumbling blindly through new ideas. She objects to the manufacture of robots because it is unnatural, and in her primitive philosophy anything unnatural is against the will of God. Nana does seem to be a deeply religious person though ignorant. She seems to sense something amiss with the idea of robots much in the same manner in which the dogs reacted. Of the three characters symbolizing the humanitarian viewpoint, Nana is the most consistent in her convictions.

Alquist speaks out on the value and dignity of human labor. Thus he becomes a part of the humanitarian side of the conflict. I don't doubt that many of the remarks made by Alquist are the convictions of Capek, who once said, "A man who is working, searching, and doing things is not and cannot be a pessimist. Every genuine effort implies faith." Alquist feels that desire which is inherent in all mankind to some degree . . . that desire to work with the hands. However, Alquist may seem to be romanticizing in that he chooses to ignore those labors which are pure drudgery without any hint of dignity, but I think not. Alquist believes that it is

natural for a man to use his hands for labor. It follows then that he would think that doing what God willed man to do, that is labor with his hands, was honorable.

Helene Glory, the third of the characters representing the argument for humanity, has traits in common with the two already mentioned. Her outstanding conviction is her humanitarian attitude. She seems to express Capek's deep love and compassion for humanity more than any of the others, but she is not so consistent in her convictions, and her ideals fade as time passes.

Let us consider now the symbolism of the robots and those characters in favor of this mechanized progress. Capek uses the robots as symbols of the technological progress of man. They represent the ultimate in man's continuous search for labor-saving devices, but man was not meant to be mechanized. This very mechanization deprives him of his individuality.

"I wanted to turn the whole of mankind into an aristocracy of the world. An aristocracy nourished by milliards of mechanical slaves. Unrestricted, free and consummated in man. And maybe more than men." This quotation which is a statement of Domin shows clearly that he was an idealist. He dreamed of a Utopian world served by his robots. He was striving so hard to achieve this goal that he was entirely blinded to the fact that such a mechanization of the world was fraught with grave dangers to humanity.

Doctor Gall symbolizes the pure scientific approach to the problem . . . man's insatiable thirst for knowledge. Busman is a symbol of the profit motive. Even in our world of today there are those who have no conscience where profit and personal gain are concerned. The character, Busman, does add a touch of dry comedy.

The conflict calls up the question of progress. Charles Beard in *The Idea of*

Progress seems to have the opinion that all progress is good and that things will get continually better in progress. Beard also says that the problem of progress is not one of retreat but one of choices and uses of ends and methods. There is some contradiction in these ideas but a general view of Beard will permit us to say that he thinks progress is good and inevitable.

Capek does not disagree that progress is inevitable, at least to a certain point, but he does present the possibility that not all progress is good. It does not seem to me that Capek is saying in his play that all technological progress is bad, but rather that such progress is dangerous and that man should proceed with caution else he will in the end destroy himself.

Capek believes that even though man destroys himself, some part of him will live on. This belief is probably his reason for writing the Epilogue to *R. U. R.* Perhaps he even believes in the indestructibility of the qualities of humanity as a whole. Of this much I am sure: Capek is saying in his Epilogue that out of man's self destruction will come new life and new hope.

Capek preaches the folly of regarding work as a curse, exemption from toil as a blessing, and industrial efficiency as an end in itself. Perhaps we have missed the real meaning in the play, but if we consider our working men as mere machines and strive to make them so, they will some day wreak revenge upon those who thus abuse them. What constitutes civilization is not its machinery, but rather its human values. How absurd the manager's dream — "to turn the whole of mankind into an aristocracy of the world, and nourished by milliards of mechanical slaves, but unrestricted, free, consummated in man and perhaps more than man!" The plan failed, and Alquist, who alone remains alive, suggests why. "There was something good in service and something great in humility;

there was a kind of virtue in toil and weariness."

The problem is not solved in the play.

Karel Capek merely presents it for your consideration and thought.

The Wistful Fable Of The Willows Of Willow Lane

R. HANCOCK

Although willow trees, weeping willow trees, genus *Salix babylonica* (in case any botanist is listening), spring from the earth, there is something unearthly about them. This was the first profound observation in an exhaustive and exhausted one-man study made recently. It was discovered also that they provide atmosphere. Many writers have made good use of a stout willow; some use them as trapezes for school-skipping farm boys in blue jeans, characters like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn; several use them as an aid or receptacle for hiding passionate love letters, lockets, charms; many, for background in murder mysteries, and still others as property of ye ole Southe'n mansions, mansions that figure largely in the winning of the Civil War, Scarlet's last stand, etc.

We have had willow trees on our street ever so long, as far back as I can remember and farther. I recall seeing a photograph of our then new white bungalow with two skinny, scrawny willows implanted strategically in our too-small front yard. On one of the margins of the photo was inked the date "1929". Perhaps it was a gay coincidence, or just a sundry fancy, but I too, was a skinny stripling then, although a trifle more human. Being born in '29, a "depression baby," I felt akin to those willows and measured myself to them. As they grew, so I grew; as they gained stature and venerability, so I gained childhood and adolescence.

One day, having time to measure myself to them again, I found, to my utter consternation, that they had grown much taller and decidedly broader. I had lost out! What had happened, I was at my wit's end to know. I thought perhaps I had an overactive pituitary gland, or that the trees had lost theirs entirely. Soon, however, I was informed that a tree's life span was of shorter length than mine. I was, as you may or may not have guessed, astonished. What could I do? Perhaps I could chop them down to my size—Washington did it, why couldn't I?

Taking my little wooden tomahawk from the wall of my bedroom, I raced out of the house with the defiling instrument in hand and gave one mighty, crushing blow. . . . After wiping the dirt from my eyes and picking myself off the ground, I looked down—one splintered tomahawk was distributed throughout the epidermis of my hand. I surmised I should conceive a better plan next time; besides, Washington didn't tell a lie and got whipped for it.

Then after thinking an afterthought, I gave the whole plan up. After all, most of the neighbors' willows were at the same growth; I would be chopping for the rest of my life. Of course I could take up forestry and/or lumberjacking and learn the latest methods to dispatch thick-trunked willow trees. Thinking better of this, however, I scampered off to several discouraging, if not disastrously confining years, in