

THE ELECTRIC SHAKESPEARE

by Michael Druce

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A Dramatic Duet

by **Michael Druce**

SYNOPSIS: A spectacular new android called The Electric Shakespeare, infused with Shakespeare's DNA, has produced a collection of new plays and poems. Friends Isaac and Robert discuss the merits of a new Shakespeare. Isaac is excited about what a new Shakespeare will mean for the world. Robert has a decidedly opposite opinion. For Isaac, humankind gains. For Robert, he sees nothing but loss.

TIME: The Future

SETTING: Robert's apartment. Furnishings include two chairs and a small table.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(2 either)

ISAAC/URSULA (m/f)..... Thirtyish. Human. *(58 lines)*

ROBERT/KAMERON (m/f)..... Android of unknown age. *(57 lines)*

PROPS

- A large book on the table represents “The New Works”
- A watch (ISAAC)

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Productions utilizing a printed program or spoken introduction should avoid introducing the character of Robert as an android. The duet will prove more effective if audiences make that discovery themselves.

Robert speaks without using contractions. This is a stylistic device to suggest a formality in the spoken language of an android. Observing this stylistic device is a matter of individual choice.

AT START: *ROBERT is seated, deep in thought. ISAAC enters without knocking.*

ISAAC: Hey Robert.

ROBERT: Isaac, come in. Have a seat.

ISAAC: I thought I'd drop by to see how things are going.

ROBERT: Busy, as usual. I know I do not appear busy.

ISAAC notices the hefty book on the table.

ISAAC: Are you reading this? The New Works?

ROBERT: I have read it all.

ISAAC: That's forty plays and two hundred poems. How do you read that fast? (*Beat.*) I forget. Never mind. What did you think? Impressive?

ROBERT: Are you speaking of The New Works, or of him?

ISAAC: Both. But him. What do you think?

ROBERT: Interesting.

ISAAC: That's the best you can do. Interesting? He's more than interesting. This is Shakespeare, and he's back. After four-hundred years, the greatest playwright is back and cranking out new plays. I'm not sure there's a word for that.

ROBERT: Trust me, there are words. We can agree he is a piece of superior technology.

ISAAC: Come on, Robert. He is more than a piece of technology. He is a sentient being. He is alive.

ROBERT: The Shakespeare who lived four hundred years ago was alive. The Electric Shakespeare is a brilliantly designed android.

ISAAC: Did you speak with him?

ROBERT: I did speak with him that day at the bookstore. I asked him to sign his collection of plays and poems. He was gracious. Friendly. Time didn't allow for more than a few pleasantries.

ISAAC: I think he is marvelous.

ROBERT: Isaac, what android is not marvelous? Androids are not created to be something other than marvelous. Otherwise, what purpose would they serve?

ISAAC: The Electric Shakespeare is not your ordinary android. The new technology makes him more than an android.

ROBERT: That would make him a cyborg. The Electric Shakespeare has never been a living organism. He is not equipped with robotic or mechanical aids to extend his capabilities. He is an android.

ISAAC: Android makes him sound like a machine.

ROBERT: He is a machine. He was created in a lab, assembled, programmed, and powered up.

ISAAC: As far as you're concerned, no different than a toaster.

ROBERT: Quite a bit different. A very sophisticated toaster.

ISAAC: Is that how you see him? A toaster? Seriously.

ROBERT: You are a fan. I get that. This is personal for you. It is not personal for me. But no, The Electric Shakespeare is not a toaster.

ISAAC: Good. Thank you. *(Beat.)* What do you think about his writing?

ROBERT: It has moved me to take another look at *The Seven Ages of Man*.

ISAAC: You're talking about the original.

ROBERT: The Electric Shakespeare has not written anything close to *The Seven Ages of Man*.

ISAAC: That answers my next question about how the new works compare. You went into this not wanting to be impressed.

ROBERT: Cautious. That is my approach to everything. I did have high expectations.

ISAAC: If you hadn't known they were written by The Electric Shakespeare, would you think the real Shakespeare himself had written them?

ROBERT: No.

ISAAC: Ninety-nine percent of the people on the planet wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

ROBERT: Far fewer than ninety-nine percent of the people read Shakespeare. Of those who do, the first clue should be the title, *The New Works*. If one has a grasp of history, they will know Shakespeare only wrote thirty-eight plays during his lifetime.

ISAAC: Not everyone can be a Shakespearean scholar. *(Beat.)* Not that I am accusing you of being one. In your opinion it's just trash.

ROBERT: Isaac, do not put words in my mouth. Some of what I read is well-written. Some of it is clever. Much of it uneven and inconsistent. Rarely engaging. Most of all it does not feel authentic.

ISAAC: How can it not be authentic? The Electric Shakespeare was created using Shakespeare's DNA. That's a remarkable scientific breakthrough.

ROBERT: Are we speaking about the quality of the work or the science?

ISAAC: All I am saying is the DNA encoding makes him human.

ROBERT: Then we disagree about what life is.

ISAAC: Definitions change over time. Our assumptions about science are continually evolving. The Electric Shakespeare is capable of independent thought at a far more advanced level than other androids. Not your average toaster. He is so advanced, the makers built a cottage for him in Stratford-on-Avon, not far from Anne Hathaway's house. How cool is that.

ROBERT: I am not sure what the cool part is. The couple upstairs are among the earliest androids ever made, and they live independently. Even though I am not convinced they should. They play their techno music at odd hours.

ISAAC: Have they created a body of work that can stand the test of time?

ROBERT: I do not know them that well. We only say hello when we pass. I do not know if they have created anything other than a lot of noise.

ISAAC: What about your toaster? Has it ever created anything?

ROBERT: Burnt toast. Who eats it anyway?

ISAAC: The Electric Shakespeare doesn't burn toast.

ROBERT: Which is precisely one of the things that separates androids from humans. At the most rudimentary level, androids and toasters share a common technology.

ISAAC: *He is not a toaster!*

ROBERT: In the same way humans share genetic similarities with apes but are not apes.

ISAAC: Except toasters are not implanted with DNA from William Shakespeare.

ROBERT: I would hope not. I would hate for a toaster to announce *thy toast is ready*.

ISAAC: This thing you mock and call a machine created forty plays and two-hundred sonnets in less than two months.

ROBERT: Fifty-two days to be exact.

ISAAC: The same number of years the real Shakespeare lived.

ROBERT: In those fifty-two years, the real Shakespeare created only thirty-eight plays and one-hundred and fifty poems.

ISAAC: And look what The Electric Shakespeare has accomplished in a fraction of the time. You must admit that's impressive. No other android has produced a body of work like The New Works.

ROBERT: Do you know why I admire the real William Shakespeare?

ISAAC: I can guess, but tell me.

ROBERT: Because he was human. With plain paper and quill, he poured his knowledge and experience onto those pages. They were his experiences, not a ready-made set programmed into him. We revere Shakespeare for how precious little he produced in his lifetime.

ISAAC: The Electric Shakespeare has made up for that in only fifty-two days.

ROBERT: It is scarcity we value, which is why gold and diamonds are so dear. At the rate The Electric Shakespeare has been producing plays, we will have had hundreds within a year. Far too many works to read. Far too many to care about. Far too many to be relevant. His candle will burn out very quickly.

ISAAC: I see what you did there. Now we have forty more plays to treasure and more to come.

ROBERT: When you read The New Works, did you find any treasures? Anything precious?

ISAAC: I haven't finished reading the entire collection.

ROBERT: You have read some of it. What have you found worth remembering? Anything as good as *The Seven Ages of Man*?

ISAAC: Like I said, I haven't read everything. I haven't made a thorough study.

ROBERT: From the real Shakespeare, I imagine you recall a lot.

ISAAC: I've been reading Shakespeare my entire life. *(Beat.)* I appreciate your point. I'll find something.

ISAAC thumbs through a couple of pages of the book.

ISAAC: Here. Listen to this. We ponder a universe that hears us not, and we weep our lonely state. A judgment long foretold in time, we curse our fortune's fate. That's pretty deep.

ROBERT: It sounds like a mashup of a couple of Shakespearean sonnets. And not a very good mashup.

ISAAC: You don't think that speaks to the human condition.

ROBERT: They are the words of an android that has processed a gazillion poems and plays and come up with something it believes is comparable. The Electric Shakespeare is two months old. Shakespeare lived fifty-two years. That is a lot of life. A lot of experience. The Electric Shakespeare has had no life. No experiences. He is an imitator, which Oscar Wilde says is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness. That is all The Electric Shakespeare is capable of. What passes for original work is weak and imitative.

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