

# It Ain't Over Till the Robot Lip-Synchs

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Watching "Mathew in the School of Life," John Moran's dazzling science-fiction techno-opera, it is easy to imagine having stumbled into a phantasmagoric music box where elaborately programmed robots replay the same nightmarish scenarios

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over and over into infinity.

Performed with an astonishing precision by the Ridge Theater, the two-hour production, which plays at the Kitchen through Oct. 29, brings the kind of epic multimedia theater associated with Laurie Anderson and Philip Glass to the next technological level. But instead of aspiring to intellectual contemplation, Mr. Moran revels in carnival humor and fun-house imagery. "Mathew" may be an allegorical Passion play, but it owes a lot more to "Young Frankenstein," "Tommy" and vaudeville slapstick than to "Parsifal."

As in his earlier operas, "Jack Benny!," "The Manson Family" and "Everyday Newt Berman," all of the music and dialogue in "Mathew" is "found sound." What comes out of the actors' mouths is expertly lip-synched. And under the direction of Bob McGrath, the cast executes a range of body movements, from the conventionally human to the jerkily robotic, with impeccable timing and mastery of psychological nuance.

The opera has a lot more dialogue than actual music. And what orchestral segments there are, Mr. Moran explains in a program note, are not sampled sections of other works but "separate samples of individual notes for each instrument, played on the keyboard." In Act II, which takes place on Good Friday, Mr. Moran's assembled Minimalist themes express a groaning, half-human sadness.

"Mathew," which takes place on a remote space station at some time in the future, follows the education of an android over four days, from Maundy Thursday to Easter. As he is electronically infused with human knowledge and mechanical skills, Mathew (who is played by three actors, including Mr. Moran) is instructed on all sorts of tasks by trainers who speak in the clipped macho argot of high-school sports coaches. Wandering through the proceedings

is a patriarchal commentator named Justinus who delivers quirky spiritual homilies in the recorded voice of the poet Allen Ginsberg. Justinus and Mathew's teachers arrange themselves behind a scrim in mock celestial tableaux that resemble the celebrity boxes on "Hollywood Squares." Slides and film clips of Mathew's curriculum dissolve in and out of these zany groupings.

Of all the behavior patterns Mathew learns, the one drummed into him the most ferociously is the ritual of a policeman drawing a gun and ordering a suspect to "freeze." More than once, actors pantomime the famous video of the Rodney King beating.

Mathew's education is lent an eerie poignancy by Laurie Olinger and Fred Tietz's scenic design, which integrates children's storybook imagery into this dark mechanistic fable. Mathew eats his first meals in a cute cutout kitchen. Among several scenes whose settings evoke Edwardian children's literature, the most virtuosic is an entr'acte playlet in which the actors, dressed as pirates and captives, dramatize a fragment of a Peter Pan-like pirate tale. As they repeat it over and over like a broken record, each time using the same exact body language, it becomes increasingly nonsensical. The opera concludes with a more intricate and spellbinding variation of the same idea, but this time it is a mocking, mechanistic vision of heaven, imagined as a recurrent nightmare that eludes interpretation and that is never exactly the same.

Of course the science-fiction world of "Mathew" isn't really that far from the present. We live in the age of information overload and absorb a continual electronic bombardment of violent sounds and images. "Mathew" wonders how much humanity we have left, even now.