

Karel Čapek



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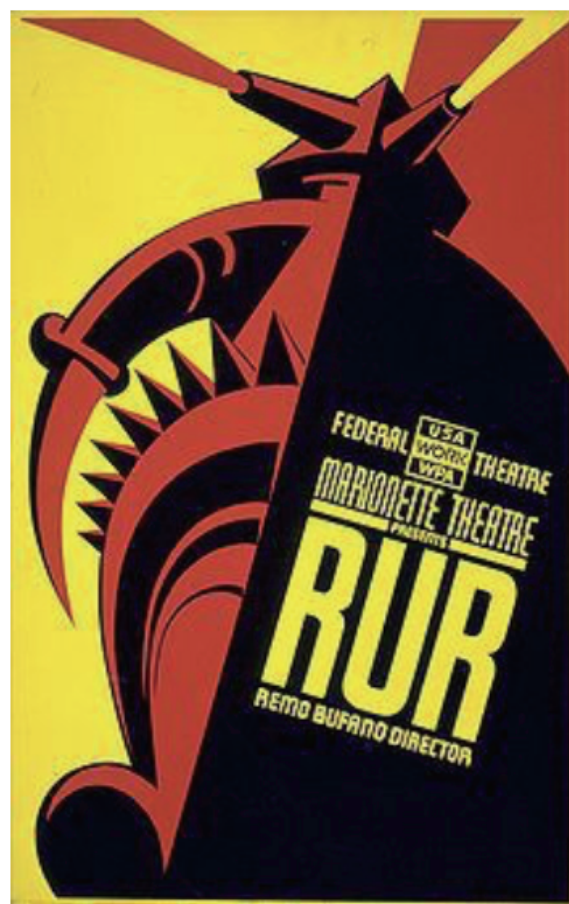
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Karel Čapek:

Karel Čapek (9 January 1890 – 25 December 1938) was a Czech writer, playwright and critic. He has become best known for his science fiction, including his novel *War with the Newts* (1936) and play *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*, 1920), which introduced the word robot. He also wrote many politically charged works dealing with the social turmoil of his time. Influenced by American pragmatic liberalism, he campaigned in favor of free expression and strongly opposed the rise of both fascism and communism in Europe.

Though nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature seven times, Čapek never received it. However, several awards commemorate his name, such as the Karel Čapek Prize, awarded every other year by the Czech PEN Club for literary work that contributes to reinforcing or maintaining democratic and humanist values in society. He also played a key role in establishing the Czechoslovak PEN Club as a part of International PEN.





Poster for a Federal Theatre Project production of R.U.R. directed by Remo Bufano in New York, 1939.

Helena, the daughter of the president of a major industrial power, arrives at the island factory of Rossum's Universal Robots. She meets Domin, the General Manager of R.U.R., who tells her the history of the company:

In 1920, a man named Rossum came to the island to study marine biology, and in 1932 he accidentally discovered a chemical that behaved exactly like protoplasm, except that it did not mind being knocked around. Rossum attempted to make a dog and a man, but failed. His nephew came to see him, and the two argued non-stop, largely because Old Rossum only wanted to create animals to prove that not only was God unnecessary but that there was no God at all, and Young Rossum only wanted to make himself rich. Eventually, Young Rossum locked his uncle in a laboratory to play with his monsters and mutants, while Young Rossum built factories and cranked out Robots by the thousands. By the time the play takes place – around the year 2000 – Robots are

Helena meets Fabry, Dr. Gall, Alquist, Busman, and Hallemeier, and reveals she is a representative of the League of Humanity, a human rights organization that wishes to "free" the Robots. The managers of the factory find this a ridiculous proposition, since they see Robots as appliances. Helena requests that the Robots be paid so that they can buy things they like, but the Robots do not like anything. Helena is eventually convinced that the League of Humanity is a waste of money, but continues to argue on the fact that robots should still have a "soul". Later, Domin confesses that he loves Helena and forces her into an engagement.

Act II

Ten years later, Helena and her nurse Nana are talking about current events—particularly the decline in human births. Helena and Domin reminisce about the day they met and summarize the last ten years of world history, which has been shaped by the new worldwide Robot-based economy. Helena meets Dr. Gall's new Robot experiment, Radius, and Dr. Gall describes his experimental Robotess, Robot Helena. Both are more advanced, fully featured versions. In secret, Helena burns the formula required to create Robots. The revolt of the Robots reaches Rossum's island as the act ends.

Act III



Final scene of Act III.e

The characters sense that the very universality of the Robots presents a danger. Reminiscent of the Tower of Babel, the characters discuss whether creating national Robots who were unable to communicate beyond their language group would have been a good idea. As Robot forces lay siege to the factory, Helena reveals she has burned the formula necessary to make new robots. The characters lament the end of humanity and defend their actions, despite the fact that their imminent deaths are a direct result of those actions. Busman is killed attempting to negotiate a peace with the Robots, who then storm the factory and kill all the humans except for Alquist, the company's chief engineer, whom the Robots spare because they recognize that "he works with his hands like the Robots."

R.U.R.

(Rossum's Universal Robots)

A play in introductory scene and three acts

by Karel Capek

Translated into English by David Wyllie

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Harry Domin: Director General, Rossum's Universal Robots

Fabry: Technical Director, R.U.R.

Dr. Gall: Head of Physiology and Research Department, R.U.R.

Dr. Hallemeier: Head of Institute for Robot Psychology and Behaviour, R.U.R

Busman: Commercial Director, R.U.R.

Alquist: Head of Construction, R.U.R.

Helena Glory

Nana: Her Nanny

Marius: Robot

Sulla: Robot, female

Radius: Robot

Damon: Robot

1st Robot

2nd Robot

3rd Robot

4th Robot

Primus: Robot

Helena: Robot, female

Robot servant

and numerous robots

Domin: in introductory scene, about thirty-eight years old, tall, clean shaven

Fabry: also clean shaven, fair, serious and delicate features

Dr. Gall: light build, lively, dark complexion and black moustache

Hallemeier: heavy build, noisy, big ginger moustache and ginger shock of hair

Busman: fat, bald, short-sighted Jew

Alquist: older than the others, dressed without care, long grey hair and beard

Helena: very elegant

In the play proper, all ten years older.

In the introductory scene, the robots are dressed like people. They are slightly mechanical in their speech and movements, blank of expression, fixed in their gaze. In the play proper they wear linen blouses seized at the waist with a belt and on their breasts wear a brass number

Intervals after the introductory scene and the second act.

Introductory Scene

Central office at the factory of Rossum's Universal Robots. Entrance stage right. Through the windows can be seen endless rows of factory buildings. Stage left, further administrative areas.

Domin: *(Sitting at a large American desk in a swivelling chair. On the table are a lamp, telephone, paperweight, files, letters, papers etc. On the wall, stage left, are large maps showing shipping lines and railway lines, large calendar, clock showing just before midday; on the wall stage right are printed posters: "The Cheapest Workforce You Can Get: Rossum's Robots", "Latest invention; Robots for the Tropics. 150 d. each", "Everyone Should have a Robot!", "Reduce the Cost of your Products! Order a Robot from Rossum's!". Also other maps, shipping timetable, notice board with telegrams, rates of exchange etc. In contrast with the content of the walls, the floor is covered with a magnificent Turkish carpet, stage right is a round armchair, settee, sumptuous leather armchair, bookshelves containing not books but bottles of wines and spirits. Stage left, safe. Beside Domin's desk a typewriter at which Sulla is writing)*

Domin: *(dictating)* "... cannot take responsibility for items damaged in transit. The captain of your vessel was given warning at time of loading that it was not suitable for the carriage of robots, and so damage to its cargo cannot be charged to our account. Yours faithfully, Rossum's Universal Robots." Is that it now?

Sulla: Yes

Domin: New letter. Friedrichswerke, Hamburg. Date. "We are pleased to confirm receipt of your order for fifteen thousand robots ..." (*telephone rings. Domin lifts receiver and speaks*) Hello, central office ... yes ... certainly ... oh yes, as always ... of course, send him a telegram ... fine! (*hangs up*) Where were we?

Sulla: ... your order for fifteen thousand robots.

Domin: (*thoughtfully*) fifteen thousand robots, fifteen thousand robots,

Marius: (*enters*) Mr. Domin, there is a lady outside who is asking ...

Domin: Who is it?

Marius: I do not know. (*gives him visiting card*)

Domin: (*reading*) Mr. Glory, managing director of ... Show him in!

Marius: (*opens door*) Please come in, madam.

(*enter Helena Glory. Exit Marius*)

Domin: (*standing*) Do come in.

Helena: Mr. Domin, the managing director?

Domin: At your service

Helena: I've come to see you ...

Domin: ... with the visiting card of Mr. Glory — no more need be said.

Helena: Mr. Glory is my father. I'm Helena Glory.

Domin: Miss Glory, this is an exceptional honour for us that ...

Helena: ... that you can't just show me the door

Domin: ... that we can welcome the daughter of an illustrious businessman like your father. Please take a seat. Sulla, you can go now (*exit Sulla*)

Domin: (*sitting*) How can I help you, Miss Glory?

Helena: I've come here ...

Domin: ... to see our factory for making people for yourself. All our visitors want to see the factory. And of course you're very welcome.

Helena: I thought it wasn't allowed to ...

Domin: ... enter the factory? Well, of course it's not, but everyone who comes here has a recommendation from somebody, Miss Glory.

Helena: And do you let everyone see it ... ?

Domin: Not all of it. Making artificial people is an industrial secret.

Helena: Why will you never let me finish what I say?

Domin: Oh, I'm sorry. Is that not what you were going to say?

Helena: I was going to ask ...

Domin: ... whether I might show you something in our factory that the others aren't allowed to see. Well, I'm sure that'll be OK, Miss Glory.

Helena: What makes you think that's what I was going to ask?

Domin: Everyone asks for the same thing. (*standing*) I can personally show you more than the others are allowed to see.

Helena: Thank you.

Domin: All I ask is that you don't say anything at all to anyone else.

Helena: (*stands and offers her hand*) Word of honour.

Domin: Thank you. Would you not like to take off your veil?

Helena: Oh, of course, you'll be wanting to see my face. Do excuse me.

Domin: That's alright.

Helena: And, if you would just let go of my hand ...

Domin: (*releases hand*) I'm sorry, I forgot.

Helena: (*removes veil*) Do you want to make sure I'm not a spy. You seem very careful.

Domin: (*looks at her, enchanted*) Hm — oh, yes, — well — that's just how we are.

Helena: Don't you trust me?

Domin: Exceptionally. Miss, er, do excuse me Miss Glory. This really is an exceptional pleasure. Did you have a good crossing?

Helena: Yes. Why?

Domin: Because — well, that is — because you are very young.

Helena: Are we going into the factory now?

Domin: Yes. I suppose about twenty-two?

Helena: Twenty-two what?

Domin: Years.

Helena: Twenty-one. Why do you want to know that?

Domin: Because ... sort of ... (*with enthusiasm*) You will be staying here for some time, won't you.

Helena: That depends on how much you choose to show me.

Domin: Ah, the damned factory! But of course, Miss Glory, you can see everything. Do please sit down. Would you be interested in hearing the history of our invention?

Helena: Yes, I would. (*sits*)

Domin: Well this is what happened. (*sits at desk, seems captivated by Helena and speaks quickly*) It was in 1920 when old Rossum, still a young man then but a great scientist, came to live on this isolated island in order to study marine biology. Stop. Alongside his studies, he made several attempts to synthesise the chemical structure of living tissues, known as protoplasm, and he eventually discovered a material that behaved just the same as living tissue despite being, chemically, quite different. That was in 1932, exactly four hundred and forty years after the discovery of America.

Helena: Do you know all this by heart?

Domin: I do. Physiology really isn't my subject. Shall I carry on?

Helena: If you like.

Domin: (*triumphant*) And then, Miss Glory, this is what he wrote down in his chemical notes: "Nature has found only one way of organising living matter. There is however another way which is simpler, easier to mould, and quicker to produce than Nature ever stumbled across. This other path along which life might have developed is what I have just discovered." Just think: he wrote these words about a blob of some kind of colloidal jelly that not even a dog would eat. Imagine him sitting with a test tube and thinking about how it could grow out into an entire tree of life made of all the animals starting with a tiny coil of life and ending with ... ending with man himself. Man made of different material than we are. Miss Glory, this was one of the great moments of history.

Helena: What happened next?

Domin: Next? Next he had to get this life out of the test tube and speed up its development so that it would create some of organs needed such as bone and nerves and all sorts of things and find materials such as catalysts and enzymes and hormones and so on and in short ... are you understanding all of this?

Helena: I ... I'm not sure. Perhaps not all of it.

Domin: I don't understand any of it. It's just that using this slime he could make whatever he wanted. He could have made a Medusa with the brain of Socrates or a worm fifty meters long. But old Rossum didn't have a trace of humour about him, so he got it into his head to make a normal vertebrate, such as human being. And so that's what he started doing.

Helena: What exactly was it he tried to do?

Domin: I don't understand any of it. It's just that using this slime he could make whatever he wanted. He could have made a Medusa with the brain of Socrates or a worm fifty meters long. But old Rossum didn't have a trace of humour about him, so he got it into his head to make a normal vertebrate, such as human being. And so that's what he started doing.

Helena: What exactly was it he tried to do?

Domin: Imitating Nature. First he tried to make an artificial dog. It took him years and years, and the result was something like a malformed deer which died after a few days. I can show you it in the museum. And then he set to work making a human being.

(Pause)

Helena: And that's what I'm not allowed to tell anyone?

Domin: No-one whatsoever.

Helena: Pity it's in all the papers then.

Domin: That is a pity. *(jumps off desk and sits beside Helena)* But do you know what's not in all the papers? *(taps his forehead)* That old Rossum was completely mad. Seriously. But keep that to yourself. He was quite mad. He seriously wanted to make a human being.

Helena: Well that's what you do, isn't it?

Domin: Something like that, yes, but old Rossum meant it entirely literally. He wanted, in some scientific way, to take the place of God. He was a convinced materialist, and that's why he wanted to do everything simply to prove that there was no God needed. That's how he had had the idea of making a human being, just like