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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**ANDROID VERSUS HUMANS IN ALAN AYCKBOURN'S COMIC POTENTIAL.**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, science fiction has been attracted by researchers but this trend has not expanded to literature. There are many playwrights who fall into the category of science fiction as Robert Anderson, Edward Bond, John Guare, David Henry Hwang, Sam Shepard, J.B. Priestly and Alan Ayckbourn. But despite the fame of their authors, they seemed to have little or no connection to the science fiction community. Rarely has a science fiction writer embraced by this community ventured into theatre, and rarely has science fiction playwriting aroused interest among science fiction audiences. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore that the door is still opened to a new dimension of the theatre which will raise playwriting above the ordinary. This idea is through Alan Ayckbourn's (1939- ) science fiction play **Comic Potential** (1999). His play illustrates Ayckbourn's innovation of new methods and ideas that take place in the future and beyond expectation. It explains how Ayckbourn skillfully deals with comedy in order to stir both laughter and bewilderment of his audience.

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## Android Versus Humans in Alan Ayckbourn's *Comic Potential*

In recent years, science fiction has been attracted by researchers but this trend has not expanded to literature. There are many playwrights who fall into the category of science fiction as Robert Anderson, Edward Bond, John Guare, David Henry Hwang, Sam Shepard, J.B. Priestly and Alan Ayckbourn. But despite the fame of their authors, they seemed to have little or no connection to the science fiction community. Rarely has a science fiction writer embraced by this community ventured into theatre, and rarely has science fiction playwriting aroused interest among science fiction audiences. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore that the door is still opened to a new dimension of the theatre which will raise playwriting above the ordinary. This idea is through Alan Ayckbourn's (1939- ) science fiction play *Comic Potential* (1999). His play illustrates Ayckbourn's innovation of new methods and ideas that take place in the future and beyond expectation. It explains how Ayckbourn skillfully deals with comedy in order to stir both laughter and bewilderment of his audience.

Critics vary in their interpretation about the definition of science fiction. Kincaid in his essay "On the Origins of genre" exclaims that "a definition attempts to fix the pattern that applies to science fiction, but the pattern [...] is in constant flux, and no definition has successfully managed to encompass all that is, all that it has been, and all that it might be" (414). Heinlein offers a more specific definition when he insists that "science fiction must use the scientific method and reflects the knowledge of the time while taking into account how these will affect humanity" (8). Ray Bradbury believes that the emphasis should be on the study humanity over science, "since fiction is really sociological studies of the future, things that the writer believes are going to happen by putting two and two together" (as cited in McNeilly 17). It is clear that science fiction makes no attempt to describe what is real; instead it images, changes and explores what is new. In this introduction to *The Road to Science Fiction*, Gunn expands upon this idea by saying that "traditional literature of change, and thus of the past, science fiction is the literature of change, and thus of the present and the future" (vi). Therefore, science fiction expects its readers to be looking for something new and different.

By searching about science fiction in literature, one can notice that there is no first book that is called science fiction. Since the early nineteenth century, science fiction has provided to literature. In 1818 Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* was based on science fiction since the story created imaginary worlds which suggested that human's innovations could reach into the machinery of the universe. In 1895, H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, reached many years into the future to argue that man could invent and travel across the future even if people didn't believe in science. Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* (1919) employed a collection of allegorical characters to explore the dangers of the British character with its own destiny. David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920) is another science fiction story where Maskull was sent across the terrain of an alien planet in search of his own soul. By searching beyond the familiar world, science fiction challenges accepted assumptions about reality and raises significant questions about the nature of being and the purpose of life itself.

While the theatre insists on occupying itself with the present, science fiction continues to devote itself to the art at which it has always excelled: imagining new possibilities for humanity beyond past and present experience. It was science fiction writers whose imaginations put submarines, rockets, atomic weaponry, space ships, and computers to work before they had even been invented. Smith Bacon observes that science fiction was "a powerful tool of mind that could have actual effect on the world, science fiction was dreams that might come true" (266). But although hundreds of plays based on science fictional premises have been written, few of these scripts have a direct connection with the science fictional genre. Most seek not to challenge the audience, but to entertain it, and few achieve even that goal. The theatre has never taken science seriously and that is due to many facts. One possibility is the theatre's presumed incapability of physically producing the fantastic worlds and events of science fiction literature. Roger Elwood summed up the problem in 1976 in his introduction to *Six Science Fiction Plays*:

There are not a great many science fiction plays available.

The two forms do not meld easily. It is difficult to translate the imaginative leaps characteristic of science fiction writing into the hard reality of dialogue between articulate characters. Writing a science fiction play is a bit like trying to picture infinity in a cigar box. The whole effort

can too easily degenerate into space opera. So, you do not often find a playwright who writes science fiction, or a science fiction writer who writes plays. Beside that, the science fiction plays that do exist usually require sets and costumes that are more elaborate and expensive than those used in traditional theatrical productions-and when corners are cut, it seems to show. (vii)

This discouraging opinion is based on the assumption that in order to have theatrical science fiction, one must have motion -picture realism. In fact, dramatists have been most successful in bringing science fiction to the stage when they abandon attempts at realism in favor of other kinds of drama. They have produced great prose without relying on robots, laser guns, aliens and other realistic clichés of the science fiction genre.

Another reason beyond disappearing of science fiction plays from theatre is the appearance of the science fiction plays from theatre is the appearance of the science fiction magazine. Hugo Gernsback, the publisher, is called by many authors and fans the father of science fiction. Grand M.I. Asimov says:

Even now, when I know the long and respectable history of science fiction, I can't accept it with my heart, I cannot shake the worship felt by a 9- year old I once knew long ago. To me, deep in my soul, science fiction began in April 1926, and its father was Hugo Gernsback. (as cited in Gunn *Alternate Worlds* 11).

Since the 1960s, people have been reluctant to theatre and the reason behind that is the appearance of the science fiction films. Science fiction and the movies have gone together since the beginnings of that medium. Clute and Nicholls point out in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*:

From the outset, the cinema specialized in illusion to a degree that had been impossible on stage. SF itself takes as its subject matter that which does not exist [---] so it has a natural affinity with the cinema: illusory qualities of film are ideal for presenting fictions about things that rare not yet real. SF, no matter how sophisticated, by definition must feature something new; some alteration from the world as we know it [---]. Film, from this viewpoint, is sf's ideal medium. (219)

Through films, fans and people can catch movies they missed, view films that did not reach wide release or simply enjoy classic favorites. There are many lists of the scientific films as George Miles' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), *The Invisible Man* (1933) by James Whale, *Godzilla* by Ishiro Honda (1954), Franklin Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes* (2001), several films by Peter Jackson as *Lord of Rings* trilogy, *King Kong* (2005) and *District 9* (2009).

Computer and video games are another source which lead to the disappearance of the science fiction theatre. Computer games have also become a popular source of science fiction. The obvious popularity of non-textual science fiction has resulted in the rise of conventions dedicated to media aspects of genre. The biggest example of this type of convention is Dragon Con, "the largest multi-media, popular culture convention focusing on science fiction and fantasy, gaming, comics, literature, art, music, music, and film in the universe" (Dragon Con, 2016). Dragon Con has attracted thousands of people and that leads to the lack of attending theatre.

Alan Ayckbourn has rejected to join the new wave of writers at the beginning, but he gradually became one of them. He shares with them many of their characteristics. They are young, theatrical, sensational fantastic, outrageous and shocking. Their art is described as "pop", meaning that they often choose popular up-to-date and obvious subjects for their writings. They usually introduce homosexuality, prostitution, violent death and shallow humour. They may do work for radio and television, but ultimately go back to the theatre (Brown 7,9). It is obvious that they all respond to their society in their themes, settings, characters and dialogue.

The most important step in Ayckbourn's early career was in 1957 when he managed to obtain a permanent job as a member of the famous director Stephen Joseph's Theatre-in -the Round company at Scarborough (Billington 3-4). Up till now, Ayckbourn is still working at and for Scarborough theatre. He feels that he owes so much for the place and its pioneer Stephen Joseph. Thus, he has written the majority of his plays for this theatre. It gives him a good chance of direct contact with the audience. His audience in Scarborough are always anxious and excited as they can never predict what he is going to produce for them next. The only thing they know for sure is that his new play will bear challenge and delight.

*Comic Potential* is one of Ayckbourn plays in which life cleverly imitates art. The play reflects Ayckbourn's fascination with technology. It is "a science fiction romantic comedy that takes place in the near future" (Jessica Williams: online source). At the same time, it is considered to be a comedy classic dealing with an old-fashioned romance. In *Comic Potential*, Ayckbourn mixes innovation with traditionalism. He uses classic techniques as pratfalls, double-takes and slapstick, but also, he has given farce and comedy his unique stamp. His use of juxtaposition in his play goes further to oppose human to machines. This idea expresses Ayckbourn's fears of technology and industrializations as elements of destruction in modern world. As for irony, it is introduced in *Comic Potential* in an exaggerated way, in order to evoke disturbed laughter, as most of the ironies of the play are due to fact that while the machine (actoid) is taking on human nature, man is taking on some features of the machine.

Concerning the structure of the play, as it is always the case with Ayckbourn, he surprises his audience with his innovation. The play consists of two acts. The first act normally contains three scenes which have quite familiar length. While the second act has ten scenes of act one take place in the TV studio within a few days. Act two is different; it has six interchangeable locations, as Adam and Jacie are on the run trying to escape and protect their love, and actually their project too. The most frequent location is the studio. Then there are four locations at the Grand Hotel: the foyer, the boutique, the restaurant and the bedroom.

Concerning the plot of *Comic Potential*, it opens in a television studio in "the foreseeable future when everything has changed except human nature" (John Allsopp: online source). By that time, the stars of soap opera are not real actors. They have been replaced by well programmed computerized robots called actoids. The dramatic irony is that the actors (actoids) pretend to be more mechanical than they are. As a matter of fact, they may not act better than human actors, but at least they are cheaper and have no complaints.

Chandler Tate who was used to be a great American film director, has fallen foul of studio bosses. He prefers to be called Chance, and the irony is that it is his last chance to improve his performance in the studio. His program is already losing its viewers whose number has decreased from sixteen million to only fourteen.

**Chandler:** Shit! Do you think it's about the drop to fourteen million?

**Chandler:** -----. It's about the fourteen million, it has to be---

**Trudi:** if we don't finish this episode, it'll be eight million---

**Chandler:** Who cares? Show them an old episode, they'll never know. When's that going to bother our viewers? They're all subnormal, anyway--.  
--. (*Comic Potential 5*)

Adam Trainsmith is a young writer of comedy and one of Chandler's biggest fans. At the same time, he is the nephew of Lester Trainsmith, the owner of the studio and the whole business. Adam wishes to convince Chandler to make good movies again. He wants "to restore the great days of film making when the length of a drama was dictated by its content, not by its place on a schedule" (Paul Allen 300).

When Adam visits the studio, he discovers the talent of one the actoids named Jacie Triplethree or JC-F 31-333. Jacie shows remarkable comic potential when she responds to a joke without being remarkable to do so. She thinks it is a programming fault, but in fact she is taking on some human features. Then Adam comments saying: "that's natural. We see something funny, we laugh. Involuntarily, sometimes. We can't help ourselves" (*Comic Potential 20*). Adam asks Jacie whether she found Keaton funny. Jacie replies; "that's look he gave". By this Jacie means one of the basic old technique of comedy called the double take, or generally speaking, the take. Adam starts to explain it with elaboration:

It's a well-known comic device-the double take-or in Keaton's case the quarter take. --- But at the other end of the scale you have someone like-let's see-James Finlayson. --- He was famous from the Laurel and Hardy movies---. Well, Finlayson would do takes where he literally took off and left the ground. Bold massive takes. Like this. (21)

Jacie looks confused so Adam starts to teach her by giving a practical example. He asks her to imagine that she is reading a book, and then he continues:

You hear me come into the room---You know it's me, so you don't look up at once. What you don't know is that--- I have fallen in a puddle outside the house and I am covered in black slimy mud from head to toe.

You look up casually, you see me, register my presence but your book is so interesting you go quickly back to it. You do that... Now, as you look at your book again, the image of me suddenly registers on your brain. You realize what you've seen. You look at me again. Quickly, sharply this time. Amazed. (21-22)

Actually, it is not Jacie that makes benefit of the information, but also do most of Ayckbourn's readers and audience who want to learn.

Jacie keeps imitating all what Adam says. He implies that Jacie could become a good comedian. Then he promises that he will teach her the custard pie slapstick, as another old technique of comedy. Jacie is very eager to know about it so she asks Adam if it is funny. Adam answers that it is funny only if it is in the right hand:

In the right hands. It's a-It's basically just a pie. Full of custard-or usually cream. Flat on a plate. And when someone annoys you-or gets up your nose-you know-(miming)-you take the pie and you squash it in their face and you twist it-like that-so it-. (22-23)

Jacie copies Adam's mime and tries to decide if this is always funny.

When Jacie makes a double take without being asked to do so, Chandler gets mad and blames Trudi and Prim for that mass. when Chandler starts to swear them, Prim warns him not to swear in front of the actoids. They will record the swearwords and this will require much editing. Chandler calls Trudi and Prim "a pair of talentless dykes" (26). They go off, threatening to charge him officially.

Ayckbourn expresses in *Comic Potential* his point of view about real comedy. Adam tells Chandler that he is ambitious to write real comedy, but Chandler ignores that; confessing that there is no need for writers any more. That is because "the soaps don't get written, not any more, they just happen" (31). Their characters are so well programmed that they can keep the viewers entertained for hours. Thus, the actoids are considered to be a miracle of modern technology. This reveals Ayckbourn's fear and worry of technology. Though Chandler assures Adam that those androids can only do funny things, but they cannot produce comedy. He believes that the writer of comedy is like magician, the always introduces the unexpected as Alan Ayckbourn himself.

**Chandler:** The great Oliver Hardy, he's a chimney sweeps sitting in the fire place. The whole chimney's collapsed. All the bricks are coming down, showering down on his head. He sits there letting it happen. It finishes. He looks at us--- He looks at us--- He looks up the chimney, appealing to heaven-a last brick hits him in the face. We know it's going to happen, but not when it's going to happen or, just as important, how it's going to happen. That's comedy. (32-33)

Moreover, Chandler informs Adam that the basic double-take cannot be used any more. Instead there must be some variations. While Chandler is showing Adam Series of small mini-takes, Jacie laughs again. Adam confesses to Chandler that he is responsible for teaching Jacie the take, and tries to convince him that Jacie is exceptional and has a sense of humour. Chandler insists that 'it' not 'she' is just like all other actoids. "It's a dishwasher" Chandler says; "It's a floor polisher. It's a tumble dryer, that's all it is" (34). When he hears Adam calling her "Jacie", he tells Adam that it has no name; it only has a registration number. He says that "JC" stands for Juvenile Character. Adam urges Chandler-or Chance- to give him a chance and let him try some new ideas for Jacie. He begins to teach Jacie how to read and she is eager to read a lot.

Adam and Jacie are progressing throughout Adam's project but Clara interferes and tries to spoil their development. Clara insists that other experienced writers can co-operate with Adam in his project, and that Jacie can be replaced by a household actress. When Adam objects, she starts to insult Jacie severely, ignoring the menacing music that comes from Jacie. "It's an actoid". Carla says, "it has all the personality of a meat safe". She adds "a piece of scrap metal cavorting around with about as much sex appeal as a tin of corned beef" (57). The astonishing surprise is that Jacie gets angry. She picks up a custard pie that is prepared for the scene and squashes it in Carla's face. She does so exactly the same way Adam has taught Jacie. All the attendants laugh, and Jacie is so pleased with their reaction. Lester insists on doing the program under Carla's conditions. He is afraid that next time, Jacie can kill someone. He believes that she is unstable, so he orders her to get melted down. Meaning to be returned to the factory, where her memory can be erased and restarted with a new one.

Jacie does not mind to be melted since she has nothing to care about. But after she has a wonderful romantic scene with Adam, she refuses to melt down since she has wonderful memories that she wants to keep. Tim Richardson explains: “[Jacie] decides to have herself melted down rather than suffer any longer the confusion which comes with emotion. But she is pulled back from the brink by her love for Adam, a love founded in a shared of comedy---for Ayckbourn it provides the way into a human universe which has as much joy as pain to offer” (online source). Prim told Adam an important fact about Jacie.

What it talks about, Adam – the words it uses – it’s so-called conversations of all the characters it’s played in all the shows it’s ever been in. its personality is nothing more than that. Every time you speak to it, you trigger some response. It pulls it out of its memory bank and blurts it back at you. (*Comic Potential* 60)

The strange thing is that the more the proofs are given that Jacie is just a machine; the more they prove her humanity. When one focus on what Prim says, one agrees with Adam who tells her that this might be what all humans do. There are many situations that are unfamiliar to Jacie. When she faces such situations, there is a lot of fun and laughter. For example, the scene where Adam takes Jacie to the hotel boutique to buy her a dress. Jacie has never chosen a dress, so she says: “but I don’t know what I want to wear...I’ve never played this scene before. I just get given things to wear by the wardrobe department...” (73). There are other people in the boutique; an assistant and a man with his girlfriend. One can get the feeling that the real girl and Jacie are to some extent alike. The man is so bored, as he has been in the boutique for more than seven hours. The girl cannot decide which dress to choose. She hates all the dresses, and basically, she hates her body shape. While the girl is inside the cubicle, Adam is shocked of Jacie’s comment about wearing a dress; “I don’t want to wear any clothes at all...” (73).

The whole situation shows that appearance verses reality. It shows that the characters of the programs are not actors but android since neither the man nor the assistant knows that Jacie is not human.

In *Comic Potential* Ayckbourn wants to “demonstrate a link between sex and comedy”, and as long as he puts limits for the sexual relation between Adam

and Jacie, he also wants to show the way in which sex and comedy can “from an alliance against the forces of mechanistic logic, whether these are the computers themselves or the people who use them in the vain belief that the world can be sensibly planned” (Ayckbourn *The Crafty Art of Playmaking* 301). In Act two, Scene nine in the Mombassa Hotel, a prostitute enters Jacie’s room and warns her that it is not a respectable place. Jacie increasingly becomes miserable and despaired and she tells Adam that she does not feel good about what he has involved himself in with her. She indicates that she is not real and that she is just a machine. She confesses to Adam saying:

I’m not Jacie, Adam. I am JCF 31 triple 3. There is no Jacie. There’s no real me. I’m a machine, Adm. I wasn’t taught to think of myself as that, but I acknowledge now that I am. On the one hand, it’s a fact that every day we stay together, you’ll change and I’ll stay the same. I’m nineteen years old and I have been like this since the day I made. (*Comic Potential* 99)

She is so sad and wants to go back to the factory and be melted down since she can no longer control herself. She even cries without having a stimulus to do. Jacie believes that she has some faults and at the same time she cannot cope with Adam’s love. By being more and more human being rather than an android, Jacie increasingly becomes miserable and despaired.

Throughout the play Jacie becomes more progressive and development, the more she believes that she has some faults. Therefore, at the end of the play, she hates the fact that she only can retrieve her programmed responses. The irony is that the anger she directs at Adam just proves that his project is not true anymore. When Adam confesses to Jacie that he loves her and “once we’re out of here, we’ll”, Jacie sarcastically interrupts him saying: “What? Get married? Have children? Become sheep farmers?” Adam gets angry and wonders what programme she is in now. The surprise is that Jacie rebelliously and freely says:

This is not a programme. This is me talking Adam. And I’m lost and I don’t know what I’m doing and nobody’s telling me and the only person in the world that I trust is standing here talking to me like a child. And I refuse to be treated like that, do you hear me? You make plans for our future without consulting me, you dress me up like some mindless puppet,

you humiliate me in shops and restaurants, move me in and out of hotel rooms and make me feel like a second-hand trollop and then you won't even make an effort to understand what I'm trying to tell you- well, you can just go to hell and screw yourself and see if I care, you-stupid fuck dyke. (100)

Jacie does not want to be humiliated so she rebels against Adam. This obviously recalls Pygmalion legend, when the statue of the woman rebels against its creator. When the show comes to an end the audience sees a maturing human being. She appears indistinguishable from any other human woman. David Levy takes the human-robot interaction a step further to illustrate that love between a robot and a human is inevitable given that humans have already developed social relationships with their computers, "if we accept that a robot can think then there is no good reason we should not also accept that it could have feelings of love and feelings of lust" (12).

The end of the play expresses Ayckbourn's feelings toward technology as he considers it a double-edged weapon. Lester the mouthpiece of Ayckbourn sends a message to the audience when he takes to Jacie saying:

At one time, I never liked your things. Quite frankly, I never really trust any machinery and I mistrust artificial intelligence even more----which is ironic when you consider I run the largest company in the world, dedicated exclusively to the production and development of artificial intelligence. But now I'm getting older—and I'm becoming increasingly reliant on artificial intelligence. By the time I'm a hundred and twenty---I shall probably look a little like you. (110)

Lester offers Jacie Carla's job, but she refuses. She believes that there is something wrong with her since she is unstable and cannot control her feelings anymore. Machines vs. human beings, Prim says; "if that was a criterion we'd all be melted down" (11).

Robots, love and comedy are all fascinating subjects of the play. Lester feels sorrow for Jacie's loss "I'm a little sad. You're rather special. You made me laugh. On two occasions. Which is twice more than my three wives ever managed" (112). This indicates that one can very excitedly admire, or even fall in love with a person who can make him laugh. When a technician arrives at the

studio to take Jacie to the factory, Jacie with some difficulty manages to do a comedy trip, in order to give the audience and the cast a last laugh. Chandler wonders who teaches her this comedy and he says;

“If you are going to use a comedy trip---you’re got to make sure you’re not already drawing attention to your feet, otherwise the audience is expecting it --- comedy is surprise”. Then he concludes; “Such a waste! All that potential! Who cares if it’s an actoid or a person or a performing parrot? If it makes you laugh, treasure it. Tragedy? You can get that in the street being run over” (115).

These words are for Chandler’s himself not Ayckbourn’s since Ayckbourn is totally standing the other side of this. He wants to express that neither disastrous and death are defined as a tragedy, nor the happy ending is defined as a comedy.

In the end of the play Adam is alone in the studio and Jacie silently enters the studio without being noticed by Adam. She decides to return back to Adam and accept the job offered by Lester. Adam feels happy. This is what Ayckbourn wants to prove in *Comic Potential*. The end of the play seems really to be happy, but just as the whole play; it has its dark side. Jacie now is in the place of Carla but the irony is that she could be worse as “she has long since overridden her own initial agreement that a sense of humour is a ‘fault’ in a logical machine, and the strength she now derives from it will enable her to take over the whole show” (Allen, Alan Ayckbourn 301). The play ends by warning the audience of the androids since the danger lies in the fact that the actoid Jacie is taking total control on humans. The curtains fall while she is incisively saying; “All right, people, let’s go to work---Action!” (119).

Ayckbourn is totally self-conscious as a playwright since he introduces information about directing, television, and some old techniques of comedy. This is also obvious in introducing some techniques like the play-within-the-play, multiple role-playing, and appearance vs reality. He changes the setting of the play and moves it in numerous scenes. He changes the setting of the play the setting of the play and moves it in numerous scenes. He explores the difference between human and machine through juxtaposition and the use of irony. Irony is used for the sake of creating laughter, as well as evoking the audience to think.

The message that Ayckbourn prevails in his science fiction play is to be wear of technology, otherwise it may lead to destruction. Machines are directing humans and controlling their lives. The actoids are given authority over human beings, the things that must make people feel awfully threatened. Ayckbourn represents love and art as the complex things they are, with no easy answers to be offered to the audience.

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