UCSC performance piece explores progress, technology and the newspaper

By WALLACE BAINÉ
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Who hasn't wondered what would happen if Walt Disney's Carousel of Progress were re-imagined by 21st century digital-arts students?

Now, that dream has become a reality with "Stop the Press!"-- an ambitious experimental evening of performance art that defies pat description. It's part an intellectual joyride of technological history, part a debate on the odd relationship between humans and their machines and part a meditation on an inexorably changing moment in the media universe.

"There's no designated seating per se," said event director Kimberly Jannarone, "though we'll provide seats for those who need them. It's an environment that you move through and there's something in every corner of the room."

Imagine a Disney attraction where you provide your own locomotion, as you experience theatrical displays of antique technology as well as provocative arguments on media theory, not to mention music and dance illustrating our deeply entwined symbiosis with the stuff we create.

The project is the work of faculty, undergrads and grad students in UC Santa Cruz's Digital Arts and New Media DANM program and Theater Arts program. The idea was sparked almost a year ago when some of those who would later design the show passed by the old Sentinel building in downtown Santa Cruz and saw, through the large Cedar Street window, the vast, ink-stained room that at one time housed the newspaper's enormous offset press.

"That got us thinking about where media was headed," said DANM grad student Jessica Hayden, "and that's still an open debate."

The technological upheavals of the newspaper industry was a central factor in the design of the project's main narrative, and resulted in a conceptual dance piece in which several performers will interpret the personality of a handful of newspapers - USA Today, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times and the Sentinel, among others - through dance.

But if the changes in the newspaper business served as the catalyst, the inspiration was Disney's Carousel of Progress, a popular attraction in Disneyland's Tomorrowland in the 1960s and '70s before it was moved to Disney World in Florida. The Carousel of Progress, reportedly Walt Disney's favorite attraction, was a starry-eyed tribute to humankind's technological accomplishments through the prism of one family's experience, from the
gramophone to hi-def TV in its most recent update.

UCSC Theater Arts professor Jim Bierman, who was part of the creative team that put together the Carousel of Progress, was instrumental in making that connection.

The design of "Press!" is inspired by the "steampunk" esthetic, a style that harkens back to Victorian-era obsession with industrial technology. But this time, the steampunk vibe is updated to the 1950s.

Additionally, the project features debates between actors playing leading thinkers on technology, most notably Ray Kurweil, the futurist who predicts that humans and computers will merge into one organism, and Bill Joy, Sun Microsystems co-founder who has expressed grave reservations about technological threats to humanity.

Another debate pits actors playing New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd and Google CEO Eric Schmidt on the future of the print media.

"The whole piece is structured around the struggle between the organic and the inorganic," said Jannarone, "and we try to figure out at what point does technology present a danger to everything that makes us human."

The experimental theater experience lasts about an hour, but those who come early can explore other aspects of this complicated project and indulge in a bit of nostalgia for technological innovations that have outlived their usefulness, which may one day include the newspaper.

"People are always nostalgic for old technology as it passes from view. We mourn everything. We're a very sentimental lot," said Jannarone.

Stop the Press!' plays at the Experimental Theater at the Theater Arts complex at UC Santa Cruz on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 7 and 9 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. Tickets are $14 general, $11 seniors and students. Call 459-2159 or visit www.santacruztickets.com.

**If you go**

'Stop the press!' produced by: The Theater Arts Department and the Digital Arts & New Media program at UC Santa Cruz
when: Twice nightly Thursday through Saturday, 7 and 9 p.m., and 3 p.m. Sunday through March 7.
where: Experimental Black Box Theater at Theater Arts Complex on the campus of UC Santa Cruz
Cost: $14 general; $11 seniors, students and UCSC staff; free for UCSC undergrads with ID,