

Technical Foul

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'Henceforward'
Other Theatre, Chico

British playwright Alan Ayckbourn's clever scripts deserved much of the credit for the Chico area's myriad of successful productions of his plays over the last year or so.

And Ayckbourn deserves much of the blame for the relative failure of Other Theatre's *Henceforward*, directed by Joyce Henderson.

It wasn't the fault of the actors—the play's characters are predictable except when their actions are entirely unmotivated, and the plot's convolutions offer little space for humor.

Billed as a "futuristic black comedy," *Henceforward* is set in New York City 20 years from now, and technology is a primary focus. This production's stage is fascinatingly technical, from its stereo equipment to a beautifully executed video answering machine. The video screens and tape recordings went off smoothly.

The key piece of futurism is robot housemaid Nan 300F, played by a charming Leesa Palmer in the first act and Drisha Lee Leggitt in the second.

The always outstanding Jerry Miller plays Jerome, *Henceforward*'s main character, though he seems to simply *be* most of the time rather than do or say anything in particular. (Saturday evening's production *dragged*.)

Jerome is a composer of synthesizer music who has been unable to write since his wife left him four years ago, taking their daughter Geain, now 13. To impress a social worker who may bar him from seeing Geain, Jerome tries to hire Zoe (Leggitt), an actress, to portray a doting fiancée.

There is no chemistry between the two, but they go to bed near the end of Act One anyway, mechanically and without motivation. When, the following morning, Zoe discovers Jerome has been tape-recording her every sound, from laughter to passion (for musical purposes), she becomes furious, delivering an impassioned monologue about how Jerome "doesn't know anything about love."

Love? Who said anything about love?

Having had most of the act's lines and interest, Zoe then stalks off the set for good. At the end of the first act, Jerome decides to mold Nan 300F into his perfect mate, presumably to be based on the less than pleasant Zoe.

Predictably, Leggitt plays Nan in Act Two, much more likably than Zoe. Palmer is excellent as bitter wife Corinna, and the act's first



PHOTO/MARK THAMMAN

Future Shock: Leesa Palmer (left) plays Nan300F, an erratic robot maid belonging to Jerome (Jerry Miller) in Alan Ayckbourn's *Henceforward*.

15 minutes are easily the play's best. Miller is finally given some emotion and interesting lines to play with.

When Geain finally makes her appearance, she is a transsexual, albeit a stunningly unfunny one; Michele Doyle does little with her few lines. Social worker Mervyn (a pleasant Archie Koenig, who tended to mix up character names) is presumably onstage just to show off more gadgetry, including the complex wires of a personal alarm system.

A highlight is a protracted dialogue about why humans are superior to machines.

None of the characters, with the exception of Nan, is particularly likable, but the subject of love appears again, uninvited, near the end of the play. For reasons unexplained, Corinna asks Jerome to come home, gushing, "I love you, Jerome. We both love you. Love, love, love!"

Some questions were left unanswered. Who was "the man downstairs"? What happened to Zoe? Why was she in the play at all? Was Saturday just a bad bad night? Who exactly was Deborah? If *Henceforward* is a comedy, why isn't it funny?

We have seen the future, and it is pointless.

Henceforward continues through July 8 on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings at 8 p.m.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN