

How the robots will remember us when we're extinct

Two plays in D.C. are about collectors (human and otherwise)



Review by [Trey Graham](#)

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It's been 100 years since *Homo sapiens* gasped its last, and the robots who remain are preparing an off-kilter tribute: With trillions of terabytes of data and an Earth landfilled with mankind's artifacts, the AI curators at the Human Museum have picked 20th-century disaster movies as the framing lens for their shiny new exhibition. That's the promisingly metafictional conceit that frames Miyoko Conley's puckish new post-apocalyptic comedy — even if it doesn't rank among the somewhat headier concerns that actually drive the show.

Without shortchanging those thematic concerns (more on which momentarily), the imaginative actual intelligences of [Rorschach Theatre](#) have leaned into the whimsical frame: Old hands at using odd venues to tell unusual tales, director Randy Baker and his creative team have built "Human Museum" into a disused downtown retail space, developing what's on Conley's pages to deliver a show-going experience that starts at the street-level entrance and proves easily as entertaining as the events that'll transpire on the stage downstairs. Excess detail about the two-story installation wrapped around the playing area would spoil the considerable fun, but in a suite of rooms devoted to snapshotting the curiosities of human experience, even the restroom signage gets in on the game. (Would that the "immersive" environment surrounding [that other site-specific production across town](#) were anywhere near as engaging.)

In the play's maybe-not-so-distant future, as the staff of the Human Museum puts the finishing touches on that "End of Days" exhibition, one robot fiddles idly with an artifact — a communications device, as chance and authorial intent would have it — that decides to fiddle back. A burst of static, a disembodied echo from deep space and then a staggering possibility: Is there a shred of humanity out there after all? As the half-dozen characters embodied by Baker's winningly committed cast navigate this upended are-we-alone-in-the-universe inquiry, they'll find themselves unpacking ideas about the importance and the limitations of connection, the uncertainties of interpretation, the nature and even the purpose of knowledge.

Their conclusions? Not entirely clear, but perhaps not entirely the point: With Conley setting her small swarm of AIs loose to rummage through the consolations of philosophy, maybe it's the ruminating that's meant to be illuminating. With apologies to Descartes, these robots (and the humans their intelligence reflects) are prone to overthink, therefore they're endearing.

An ensemble effort of the most appetizing kind, Rorschach's staging of "Human Museum" throws an attic's worth of ephemera into realizing Conley's idiosyncratic futurescape, with a look and feel so agreeably cluttered there's almost no distinguishing between props, costumes, set pieces and makeup design. It's all arrayed in the quirky service of a story that's as interested in the act of archiving as in the meaning of the archive: To collect, to hold, to interpret, Conley's wonderfully curious robots seem to be saying, is inevitably to merge the subject into the self.

Collecting and holding and the implications of the object for the owner are centrally at issue in "An Unbuilt Life," another new play having its world premiere in D.C., courtesy of the Washington Stage Guild. Like Conley, playwright Elizabeth DeSchryver has some thoughts about what those acts can reveal — especially, in this case, depending on the circumstances. A recently widowed socialite (Susan Holliday) goes digging into the provenance of an Old Master portrait her art dealer husband had squirreled away in his workshop, enlisting and ultimately ensnaring the late spouse's broker colleague (David Bryan Jackson) and an idealistic young apprentice (JC Payne) whose naive curiosity and blithe confidence lead the three of them straight into World War II-adjacent complications. Doing the right thing will mean destroying at least one reputation, but for Agatha, the protagonist of DeSchryver's play, it'll also mean reexamining many of the previously under-interrogated frames within which she's, well, built her life.

The mechanics of investigating an art world mystery provide much of the bulk of DeSchryver's earnest drama, set in the first decade of the 21st century, with YouTube still an obscure novelty and integrated research databases still coming online. There's talk of trimmed canvases, forged labels, international auction records and coded notebooks intercut with details of archaic artistic techniques, century-old market trends in fine-art fakery and the realities, both ugly and mundane, of day-to-day survival for art dealers and art owners in the nations of Nazi-occupied Europe. That Agatha's husband and grandfather both had war-centered stories of survival — and of loss — complicates both her decision-making process and the reassessment she'll have to make as the revelations pile up.

Steven Carpenter's handsomely straightforward production unfolds on a living room set (by Joseph B. Musumeci Jr.) that speaks quietly of its inhabitants' consequence and connections, underscoring the material realities that are as much at stake here as the ethical ones. Shellshocked Agatha, as that jaded broker colleague keeps pointing out, has lived her life in a comfortably privileged bubble — one that, for all the play's upheaval and incident, has only just been popped as the final curtain comes down. As in "Human Museum," new information introduced into a seemingly stable system has upended things so thoroughly that those involved are left with more questions than answers — and for Agatha, as for Rorschach's robots, the asking will prove the telling thing.

"Human Museum" from Rorschach Theatre, through May 5 at 1020 Connecticut Ave. NW. About 90 minutes without intermission. www.rorschachtheatre.com.

"An Unbuilt Life" from Washington Stage Guild, through May 5 at 900 Massachusetts Ave. NW. About two hours with intermission. www.stageguild.org.