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A whole lot of Watsons

Dragon's 'curious case' is intelligent drama

by [Karla Kane](#) / Palo Alto Weekly

In Dragon Productions Theatre Company's "The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence," actor Tasi Alabastro has the task of playing not one, not two, but four characters, all named Watson. Some of these Watsons are human, some historical, some fictional and some robotic. All of them are compelling, thanks to Alabastro's strong performances, smart writing by Madeleine George and the overall quality of the Dragon's production.

The play skips around in time and place. There are scenes set in the near-present, when computer scientist Eliza (Stephanie Crowley) is divorced from her husband Frank (Gary Mosher) and perfecting her magnum opus, a humanoid artificial-intelligence system (yep, it's Alabastro) even better than the computerized Watson system she previously worked on for IBM. There are scenes set in the fictional Victorian world of Arthur Conan Doyle's "Sherlock Holmes" series, where Holmes' BFF Watson takes on a case to help Eliza (Alabastro's not the only one playing multiple roles with the same name) figure out what's going on with her somewhat-menacing husband Frank (you guessed it: Mosher again). What he's up to, it turns out, has some ties to what future-Eliza is building. There are scenes set in the 1930s, when Thomas Watson, loyal assistant to Alexander Graham Bell, recounts the invention of the telephone. Back in the present, there is also charming IT "Dweeb Team" employee Watson, who becomes romantically involved with Eliza after being hired by Frank to spy on her. And that ostensibly flesh-and-blood Watson sports an awful lot of similarities to the artificial one she's created.

So, the show has lots of brainy fun with its clever cross-references and switches in identities, and a loose but overarching theme of the importance of human connection. It's often funny, but with heart. Eliza, so skilled at making technological connections, with a genuine desire to use her inventions for good, is terrified of connecting on a real, human emotional level. Bell's famous first telephone conversation - "Mr. Watson, come here. I want you" -- is echoed again and again, as different characters need different Watsons in different ways. That first call, too, is harkened back to through the unanswered ringtones of Frank and Watson trying to reach Eliza. Modern Watson's spying on Eliza is echoed by Dr. Watson, dressed in the iconic Holmesian deerstalker cap, attempting to tail Victorian Frank. Deftly directed by Doll Piccotto, it's all enough to make audiences' heads spin, but in a very satisfying way.

Alabastro, who was also fantastic in dual roles at the Dragon in "Three Days of Rain" earlier this year, is quickly becoming



Stephanie Crowley (left) designs a humanoid AI system (Tasi Alabastro, right), one of many Watsons played by Alabastro at Dragon Theatre's latest. Photo by Scott Ragle.



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one of my favorite local actors. Each of his Watsons is distinct (I especially enjoyed his elderly, blustery-but-wise Thomas Watson) but each retains an appealing sweetness, the helpfulness that's apparently inherent in every Watson. And though Alabastro's a standout, Crowley and Mosher, too, are very strong in their roles, with Crowley moving back and forth between strong-but-damaged modern woman and maltreated English wife, plus a brief but memorable time as a nervous 1930s radio host. Mosher's modern Frank comes off at first as a macho conservative jerk but shows some humanity later on. His Sherlockian Frank is chilling and intense.

The set, designed by Emilia Wysocka-Treder, works very well across all the time periods, with hardly any changes needed between scenes, apart from a bed appearing from within a fireplace. Costumes, by Kathleen Qiu, help the audiences tell the characters apart, and the actors manage to change between them quite briskly.

The play doesn't give any easy answers about what makes a true human connection, how advanced artificial intelligence should get or even how much of the action is taking place in the mind of one of its characters. That's a good thing. "The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence" is the latest in a long line of smart, well-crafted and twisty productions at the Dragon, a type of show I almost always enjoy greatly and which the scrappy little theater does very well indeed.

What: "The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence."

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City.

When: Through Oct. 7; Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m.

Cost: \$27-\$35.

Info: Go to [Dragon Theatre](#).

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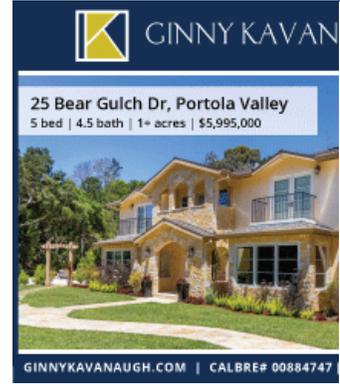
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