**Uncanny Valley**  
by Thomas Gibbons  
*Especially for Grades 7-12*

Barter Stage II – spring, 2017

(NOTE: standards included for seeing a performance of *Uncanny Valley* as well as completing the study guide.)

**Virginia SOLs**

**English** – 7.1, 7.7, 7.9, 8.2, 8.7, 8.9, 9.1, 9.6, 9.8, 10.1, 10.6, 10.8, 11.1, 11.6, 11.8, 12.1, 12.6  
**Theatre Arts** – 7.6, 7.20, 8.5, 8.18, 8.22, TI.10, TI.11, TI.13, TI.17, TII.9, TII.12, TII.15, TIII.12, TIV.12, TIV.13

**Tennessee/North Carolina Common Core State Standards**

**English Language Arts – Writing:** 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.7, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.7, 9-10.1, 9-10.2, 9-10.3, 9-10.7, 11-12.1, 11-12.7

**Tennessee State Standards**

**Theatre** – 4.6, 4.7, 5.6, 5.7  
**Theatre 6-8** – 6.2, 7.1  
**Theatre 9-12** – 7.1, 7.2

**North Carolina Essential Standards**

**Theatre Arts** – 7.A.1, 7.CU.2, 8.A.1, 8.CU.2, B.A.1, B.CU.2, I.A.1, I.CU.2, P.A.1, A.A.1

**Setting**

Claire’s office in the not-so-distant future
Characters

Claire – a neuroscientist, 70 years old
Julian – an artificial human in his mid-thirties

Synopsis

Claire, a neuroscientist, is part of a team putting together a “nonbiological” human – an artificial life form named Julian. When we first meet Julian, he is just a head, and Claire is teaching him the nuances of language and expression. But as Julian is built piece-by-piece, he and Claire become friends. She is able to confide in Julian, revealing her husband Howard’s devastating illness and well as their estrangement from their daughter Becky. Julian is finally complete, and it is then that Claire divulges his real purpose – he has been built as a repository for a dying man’s unique consciousness. Julian is a 34-year-old version of 76-year-old Julian Barber, a wealthy man who desperately desires to stay alive, even if that means living inside an artificial life form. Once this transference is complete, the new Julian has to deal with his embittered relationship with his son, Paul, as well as facing what it means to be human.
Biography of the Playwright – Thomas Gibbons

Thomas Gibbons is playwright-in-residence at InterAct Theatre in Philadelphia, which has produced eight of his plays: Pretending to America, 6221, Axis Sally, Black Russian, Bee-luther-hatchee, Permanent Collection, A House With No Walls, and Silverhill. His plays have been seen at the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center, off-off-Broadway at Blue Heron Theatre, Mixed Blood Theatre, Northlight Theatre, Actors Express, Florida Stage, Unicorn Theatre, Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Arizona Theatre Company, Center Stage, New Repertory Theatre, Aurora Theatre, Roundhouse Theatre and many others. He is the recipient of seven playwriting fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a Roger L. Stevens Award from the Fund for New American Plays, a Barrie and Bernice Stavis Playwriting Award, an NAACP Theatre Award, two Barrymore Awards for outstanding new play, and a Pew Fellowship in the Arts. Permanent Collection was the pilot selection of the National New Play Network’s Continued Life of New Plays Fund, and A House With No Walls was a subsequent selection.

Vocabulary Words

inanimate
abyss
phrenologist
parameters
defenestration
idiomatic
algorithms
inflection
recursive
unsettle
verisimilitude
antiquities
tactile
polymer
filament
embodiment
prototype
primitive
nostalgia
lexicon
evolved
proprietary
flippant
entity
ambiguous
metaphor
transformative
sentient
unobtrusive
transcend
virulent
apparition
incandescent
semantic
repository
protocol
substrate
analogy
existential
phalanx
facsimile

Define the words in the list above and then use each one correctly in a sentence.
A Brief History

Barter Theatre was founded during the Great Depression by Robert Porterfield, an enterprising young actor. He and his fellow actors found themselves out of work and hungry in New York City. Porterfield contrasted that to the abundance of food, but lack of live theatre, around his home region in Southwest Virginia. He returned to Washington County with an extraordinary proposition: bartering produce from the farms and gardens of the area to gain admission to see a play.

Barter Theatre opened its doors on June 10, 1933 proclaiming, “With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good laugh.” The price of admission was 40 cents or the equivalent in produce, the concept of trading “ham for Hamlet” caught on quickly. At the end of the first season, the Barter Company cleared $4.35 in cash, two barrels of jelly and enjoyed a collective weight gain of over 300 pounds.

Playwrights including Noel Coward, Tennessee Williams and Thornton Wilder accepted Virginia ham as payment for royalties. An exception was George Bernard Shaw, a vegetarian, who bartered the rights to his plays for spinach.

Today, Barter Theatre has a reputation as a theatre where many actors performed before going on to achieve fame and fortune. The most recognized of these alumni include Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Ernest Borgnine, Hume Cronyn, Ned Beatty, Gary Collins, Larry Linville and Frances Fisher. The list also included James Burrows, creator of Cheers, Barry Corbin, and the late Jim Varney.

Robert Porterfield passed away in 1971. His successor, Rex Partington, had been at Barter in the 1950s as an actor and in the 1970s as stage manager. Rex returned as chief administrator from 1972 until his retirement in 1992. In March 2006, he passed away.

Richard Rose was named the producing artistic director in October 1992. In that time, attendance has grown from 42,000 annual patrons to more than 163,000 annual patrons. Significant capital improvements have also been made. Including maintenance to both theatres, and in 2006, the addition of The Barter Café at Stage II and dramatic improvements to Porterfield Square.

Barter represents three distinct venues of live theatre: Barter Theatre Main Stage, Barter Theatre Stage II and The Barter Players. Barter Theatre, with over 500 seats, features traditional theatre in a luxurious setting. Barter Stage II, across the street from Barter Main Stage and beyond Porterfield Square, offers seating for 167 around a thrust stage in an intimate setting and is perfect for more adventurous productions. The Barter Players is a talented ensemble of actors, producing plays for young audiences throughout the year.

History is always in the making at Barter Theatre, building on legends of the past; Barter looks forward to the challenge of growth in the future.
Questions/Activities

1. “The ‘uncanny valley’ is a characteristic dip in emotional response that happens when we encounter an entity that is almost, but not quite, human. It was first hypothesized in 1970 by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori, who identified that as robots became more human-like, people would find them to be more acceptable and appealing than their mechanical counterparts. But this only held true to up a point. When they were close to, but not quite, human, people developed a sense of unease and discomfort. If human-likeness increased beyond this point, and they became very close to human, the emotional response returned to being positive. It is this distinctive dip in the relationship between human-likeness and emotional response that is called the uncanny valley.” Stephanie Lay, The Guardian

Where does the uncanny valley exist for you? How comfortable would you be if you discovered your best friend was actually an artificial life form? Would you ever consider loading your DNA into an artificial life form in order to avoid death? Discuss. Using the internet, research the psychological reasons for the uncanny valley. Present your findings to the class.

2. The Adventures of Pinocchio, by Carlo Collodi, is the tale of a woodcarver named Geppetto who carves a puppet out of wood (Pinocchio). Pinocchio miraculously comes to life, but remains wooden. It is Geppetto and Pinocchio’s greatest wish that Pinocchio someday become a real boy.

Read The Adventures of Pinocchio, then write a paper comparing and contrasting that story with Uncanny Valley. How do Geppetto and Claire compare? Julian and Pinocchio?
3. In the play, Claire is a neuroscientist. Neuroscience is defined as “any or all of the sciences, such as neurochemistry and experimental psychology, which deal with the structure or function of the nervous system and brain.”

Above are five of the world’s most famous neuroscientists. Pick one, and using the internet, research his/her contribution to the field of neuroscience. Present your findings to the class.

Write it!

Select your favorite character from the play, pick an important day in their life that influences this play then write a journal entry about that day as that character. For example, you might pick the character of Julian and write about the day you got your legs, or you might pick the character of Paul and write about the day you discovered your “father” was placed inside and artificial person. Be as specific as possible and write as that character would.
4. In the play, Julian observes that the people who come in at night appear uneducated because of their poor grammar. This leads to a discussion with Claire about the opportunities available to those less educated. Claire responds by saying: “We receive greater or lesser amounts of education, according to our talents, our interests… and yes, our circumstances. But the purposes that shape our lives… those are freely chosen.” Do you agree with Claire’s statement? How do you define “purpose?” How does it affect your role as a student? Discuss.

Write a critique of Barter’s production of Uncanny Valley. Be sure to include what you liked, didn’t like and what you would have done differently.
5. Before Julian has his DNA put into the artificial life form, he is interviewed extensively about his memories of the past. In these interviews, he does not reveal that he physically abused to his son Paul. Therefore, when he becomes “alive” again, he has no memory of it. What memories from your past would you choose to erase? Does this mean the event never happened, if you have no memory of it? How do the memories of the past shape our present and future? Discuss.

Extra Credit - PERSUADE ME!

As Julian Barber, write a letter persuading Claire’s company to build an artificial, younger version of yourself in which to place your memories, history, and finally, your DNA, upon your death.

DEBATE!

Have students form two groups to debate the benefits and pitfalls of having a society where artificial life forms are the norm.
Word Search

Find the following words in the puzzle below:
uncanny valley, Barter Theatre, artificial life, Claire, Julian, DNA, neuroscience, Thomas Gibbons, parameters, prototype, glockenspiel, algorithm, polymer, Eve, nostalgia, lexicon, evolution, Paul, Turing test, Howard

J W T Y A A N O I T U L O V E
G N O S T A L G I A E L F S R
L Y B E E E E M G K X U V N U T
O J E V T T F P O A P O E C A
C P G L S I G X P R B Y L T E
K Z O B L M O N Q B I A K X H
E F I L L A I C I F I T R A T
N D Z E Y K V G B R K R H J R
S R J X B M S Y E F U M A M E
P A E I V A E Y N E O T E L T
I W Z C M E L R J N E B S J R
E O D O S R E T E M A R A P A
L H H N A I L U J J J C Y B B
X T C N E U R O S C I E N C E
P R O T O T Y P E D N A V U J
True and False

Write T if the statement is True and F if the statement is False.

1. ____ Julian was Claire’s first artificial life form project.
2. ____ When we first see Julian, he in only a head.
3. ____ Claire is a neuroscientist.
4. ____ Claire is building Julian to replace her husband.
5. ____ Claire has a daughter named Becky.
6. ____ Julian Barber was a very wealthy man.
7. ____ Claire is married to a man named Paul.
8. ____ Howard is experiencing memory loss.
9. ____ Paul accuses Julian of physical abuse.
10. ____ Claire agrees to testify for Julian.

Suggested Further Reading/Links:

Other plays by Thomas Gibbons

Bee-luther-hatchee
A House With No Walls
Permanent Collection

Books about artificial intelligence/life:

Artificial Intelligence: What Everyone Needs to Know by Jerry Kaplan
Introduction to Artificial Life by Christof Adami
Artificial Life: A Report from the Frontier Where Computers Meets Biology by Steven Levy

For more information about artificial life, check out the International Society for Artificial Life’s link below:

http://alife.org/