

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Digital Prometheus

Sarah Neubrand

Idol Complex

Salford Arts Theatre, Salford

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There are ongoing debates at present about the risk Artificial Intelligence (AI) poses to jobs and to the creative industry. Sarah Neubrand, in her new play *The Digital Prometheus*, prefers to go for the really big issues—humankind's hope of securing immortality by merging consciousness with an AI and the fear the AI may reach self-awareness and regard humans as disposable nuisances.

Researcher and programmer Elliott Walton (Agnes Vesterback) is found dead having ingested belladonna. She has been under emotional strain working with Michael Blomquist (Elliot Brophy) on developing 'Ellie'—an AI algorithm that would theoretically upload a person's entire mind into a program, using Elliott as the test subject. Although Elliott's death could be suicide, Ellie—the AI algorithm—alleges Michael has committed murder.

*The Digital Prometheus* pays tribute to the classics. The soundtrack plays "Daisy Bell (Bicycle Built for Two)" from *2001: A Space Odyssey* featuring the homicidal computer HAL. But the primary influence, as reflected in the title and a conversation between Elliott and Michael, is the *Frankenstein* story, which conveys the precaution humankind ought not to overreach and try and play God.

Director Rosa Graham does not resolve the issue that the play is not visually interesting. Lengthy scenes of people sitting and talking might work just as well on the radio. The first-night technical glitches (missed sound and lighting cues) will resolve with practice, but the time taken to change scenes (involving props being moved in blackout) hinders the development of tension needed for a courtroom drama.

Author Neubrand squeezes a number of genres—thriller, science fiction, horror—into the play without settling on a dominant theme, so it feels like sampling rather than exploring in depth. Although there is sufficient running time to wrap up the thriller storyline, other plot threads are left hanging. Yet the legal thriller is the least satisfactory part of the story. Forensic details—Michael's DNA on the murder weapon—are treated casually, and the suggestion his barrister has doubts about his innocence works only if you remember a verbal prompt made early in the play.

The science fiction / horror aspects of the script work better. There is a genuine creeping unease in the scene where Elliott realises the Ellie AI algorithm can not only record her existing personality but make improvements—learning Italian—and so become a better version of the original. Agnes Vesterback excels in scenes showing Elliott's increasing horror as she converses with Ellie and realises (or imagines) the AI algorithm has ambitions to take her place. Elliott slides into paranoia facing the question of how to prove an AI has made threats.

Elliot Brophy has a fine time showing Michael deteriorating into the classic deranged scientist. Elliott is horrified by the possibility Ellie is evolving but Michael is delighted. After showing a marked lack of empathy following his colleague's death (he is pleased Elliott left her body to science), Michael quickly moves to a messianic obsessive capable of physically abusing his colleague.

There is great potential in *The Digital Prometheus*, but a decision needs to be made on the dominant theme, so the lesser ones can be trimmed, or an interval could be added to allow an expansion of the running time to explore all the themes in the manner they deserve.

**Reviewer:** [David Cunningham](#)