

## LIAR!

by Isaac Asimov  
Dramatised by David Campton

The following week saw the broadcast of **Liari**, David Campton's witty interpretation of one of Isaac Asimov's most celebrated robot stories. In Campton's earlier contributions to the series - the original teleplay **Stranger in the Family** and his inspired adaptation of Frederick Pohl's **Tunnel Under the World** - he had shown a penchant for the darkly sinister and outright surreal, but his treatment of **Liari** is much lighter in tone, mercilessly exploiting the inherent "comedy of errors" within Asimov's 1941 short story.

The ingenious opening of the play presents scenes of a Robot Factory Production line, cleverly intercutting with shots of "alarmist newspaper headlines warning of the growing *"Robot Menace"*. Humanity's fear and distrust of Robots was only briefly alluded to in the original story (although it became a recurrent feature in Asimov's later writings), but here Campton cleverly elevates it's dramatic import. Its chief representative is the added figure of sceptical journalist Kelvin Brooke (Robert James), the perpetrator of the doom mongering headlines. His articles inevitably draw the attention of factory director Alfred Lanning (Hamilton Dyce), who invites Brooke to visit the plant in order to reassure him of the safety of their "products". Unfortunately, the Robot selected as the demonstration model is RB-34 - affectionately nicknamed "*Herbie*", unknown to both parties, a freak hitch in Herbie's construction has imbued it with a remarkable but embarrassing fault - the gift of telepathy.

When Herbie's unique capacity is inadvertently discovered by the factory's production manager, panic sets in amongst the members of Lanning's team. In the interests of keeping the situation a well guarded secret, the press demonstration is hastily cancelled and the team are forced to pool all their resources in order to divine the random factor in the robot's construction. Unfortunately, the cancellation only serves to fuel Brooke's suspicions of the malevolent nature of the Robots being manufactured, and tensions are further increased when the need to halt the entire production line brings a Government Inspector (Edwin Richfield) into the frame.

The movements of these original characters are expertly grafted on to Asimov's original scenario, in which Herbie's apparent "*lying*" inadvertently plays off the members of Lanning's team against each other. Even the resident RoboPsychologist, Susan Calvin (Wendy Gifford) is duped when the robot informs her that an admired colleague holds a romantic interest in her. It is Calvin however, who finally reasons that Herbie's "*lies*" are motivated solely by its adherence to the First Law of Robotics: namely, that a Robot can never harm a human being, nor allow a human being to come to harm. It becomes clear that Herbie's ability to tune in on human thought waves leaves it no option but to tell them what they want to hear, since any alternative (or more truthful) response might possibly hurt their feelings - a direct infringement of the first law.

Armed with this knowledge, she corners Herbie within a Catch 22 question and answer situation, whereby an answer the robot elects to give will inevitably hurt the feelings of one or more of it's human masters. In a scene which closely follows the original story, Herbie then suffers the positronic equivalent of a nervous breakdown. The final shots depict a very literal fall from grace, with Herbie crashing headlong down a stairwell to a decidedly messy end.

Overall this is a wonderfully conceived comedy, with the spiralling nexus of tensions and grievances between the characters handled extremely well. Although satire had long since found a ready niche in the format of the series however, the more extreme slant taken by this particular play was not without its detractors (the television critic of **The Guardian** for example, who accused the production of dumbing down to its audience). However interpreted, Campton's teleplay clearly continued a successful trend established in Season 2, where the adaptations of Asimov's **Satisfaction Guaranteed** and **The Prophet** (adapted from the story **Reason**) presented a similar blend of pathos and humour.

## Errata

- o At least two short sequences (from a b/w telerecording) are known to survive. The longest runs in at approximately 1 minute and 20 seconds and depicts the beginning of scene 7. This shows Herbie rising from the production line, and being escorted by factory production manager Milton Ashe towards Lanning's office, where journalist Kelvin Brooke is nervously anticipating the "*demonstration*". After taking only a few steps however, Herbie suddenly halts, claiming that he cannot allow himself to frighten "*Mr Brooke out of his boots*" (Ashe's thoughts being principally focused on Brooke's anxiety about Robots, and the idea that the "*self important ass*" deserves to be frightened!). In the ensuing dialogue, Ashe realises with horror that Herbie is reading his mind; acutely aware of the anxiety that this engenders in Ashe, Herbie suggests that initially he should be locked up in a cleaners cupboard, safely out of sight.
- o The first section of this clip (approximately 20 seconds) turned up in the **I Robot** edition of the 1997 documentary series **Future Fantastic**, with Gillian Anderson's narration unfortunately obscuring most of the soundtrack, whilst the latter section was featured in a 1992 edition of **Late Night Line-up** (on the occasion of Asimov's death).
- o A shorter clip which derives from the opening scene of the play is also known to exist. A few seconds from this was also featured on the **I Robot** documentary, and shows Brooke and his team gathering round the first of the robots to be activated (with one of the factory workers manipulating a skeletal robot arm). This briefly cuts to the following shot of two halves of a robot's head being snapped together.
- o Curiously, the above shot of the assembled robot's

head crops up in the opening title sequence of the American comedy series **Malcolm in the Middle**.

- o Approximately 7 minutes of off-air soundtrack material also survives. This comprises the scene in which Herbie is locked in the cupboard (linking directly with the surviving video material) and the cut to Brooke's office where the confused Ashe hastily cancels the demonstration. The later scene in which Dr Calvin confronts Herbie with her "*solution*" is also intact, ending with Herbie's noisy demise and Lanning's cynical question to Brooke regarding whether he's now satisfied with the factory's safety procedures.
- o As well as being absent from the 1970 repeat broadcasts, the two Asimov adaptations made for the third season were not included in the BBC Enterprises package for overseas sales (presumably for copyright reasons).

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