The Daemon



In a genre-bending new production, Manual Cinema presents a triptych of stories about technology, language, history, and human connection. Told entirely without dialogue, and using Manual Cinema's beguiling pastiche of shadow puppetry, live feed video, and original music, this darkly comic production explores the fight to be human in a digital age.

The creation of The Daemon *was made possible in part by lead commissioner, Chicago International Puppet Festival; co-commissioning from Arts Emerson and Cal Performances; and additional support from the Seattle Theater Group.*

The Daemon is available for tour dates from April 20, 2027+.

Outline

Act 1
A comic short set in a medieval scriptorium, where a monk copying ancient texts is tormented by a meme-like demon singing an incessant gibberish song. The demon offers to do the monk's work for him, in exchange for an unexpected price: the monk must feed the demon his own fingers, one at a time.

Act 2
In the dystopian future, where human society has been destroyed by killer AI bots, a young girl collects ancient scraps of trash bearing human writing. She convinces a cyborg, a lone drifter who wields a mechanical blaster instead of a hand, to help her deliver her collection to the last human city on earth.

Act 3
In a 1990s office, three IT workers fail to troubleshoot a malfunctioning desktop computer. A new piece of office equipment arrives to replace it, and the workers find themselves seduced by a strange new technology.

Production
The Daemon is told entirely without dialogue through a pastiche of puppetry, physical comedy, illustration, and projection. As the puppeteers create the story with hundreds of handmade objects, the finished project is projected simultaneously on a screen above the stage, creating the effect of live cinema. With immersive sound design and an original musical score performed live.

With inspirations as diverse as modern science fiction movies like *Mad Max: Fury Road*, classic cartoons like *Looney Toons*, and the latest tiktok trends, this show is made for all ages. If it was a movie, it would be rated PG for some violence (robot and cyborg laser shooting and demon finger-eating) and comedic existential dread.

The Daemon travels with a touring company of 9 in total: five (5) actor/puppeteers, two (2) musicians, one (1) stage manager, and one (1) sound engineer.

Synopsis

In the first act, a comic short set in a medieval scriptorium, a lazy monk is forced to copy ancient books by hand. Bored, they doodle a drawing of a demon in the margins; that night, the demon comes to life, tormenting the monk by singing an incessantly catchy melody with gibberish lyrics. Unable to sleep from the endless demonsong, the monk collapses from exhaustion; when he wakes up, the demon has magically finished his work for him. The monk and the demon become partners. While the monk relaxes and sips *chartreuse*, the demon accomplishes all the copying, with one catch: the demon must be fed the monk's own fingers, one at a time. As the demon copies one book after another, the monk begins to lose the use of both his hands. One

day, the abbott of the monastery inspects the monk's work, and discovers that it's all nonsense—instead of sacred texts, the books are filled with the gibberish lyrics of the demonsong. The monk chases the demon and traps him in a book before being clocked by the Abbott's *crosier*. The Abbott inspects the book; he finds only a silly drawing of a demon in the margins, and places it back on the shelf.

In the second act, a young girl digs for artifacts in the ruins of an ancient gas station in the dystopian future. She is collecting remnants of language in the form of old candy wrappers, receipts, and other ephemera, and placing them in her bag. Her work is interrupted by the appearance of a giant mechanical demon that walks on six spindly legs. It drinks water and eats the written word. When it discovers the girl, it emits an electronic demonsong and blasts her with a laser gun. The girl is cornered by the demon bot when a mysterious figure appears. Neither man nor machine, it is a woman with a mechanical blaster for a hand. She dispatches the demon bot and scavenges it for parts, charging her mechanical hand with the bot's battery. Refusing thanks from the girl, she climbs into a repurposed old ice cream truck and drives off.

That night, the girl catches up with the mysterious drifter at her campfire and offers her Twinkies in exchange for protection. The woman refuses but the girl is persistent; in fact, over the next few days, the girl proves impossible to get rid of. Finally, the girl asks the woman for her help in traveling to a faraway destination, a mythical city illustrated on a map that is tattooed on the girl's hand: the last human city. There, she will deliver the artifacts she's collecting. Though she doesn't understand the importance of the ancient ephemera the girl is collecting, the cyborg agrees to take her there, in spite of herself.

The two embark on a journey together, the old woman fighting off more demon bots while the young girl fills her bag with more scraps. Over time, the drifter's icy demeanor gives way to a fondness for the girl. She becomes her protector, until one day the bots discover a way to hack the woman's mechanical hand and turn it on her young ward. The woman tries to disable her blaster but it is too late; the young girl is fatally wounded by a laser blast from her mechanical hand. The cyborg is devastated.

In the third act, a clown scenario unfolds. The characters from the previous stories appear as white-collar IT workers in a 1990s office. They are dressed in identical shirt-sleeves, neckties, lanyards, haircuts, and glasses; they are also very small, and their office equipment is very big. One day, their desktop computer (which takes all three of them to operate) suddenly malfunctions; this invokes an existential panic, until a strange package arrives on their doorstep. They open it up to discover a new piece of office equipment in the form of a handsome young man. Friendly and obsequious, the young man (artificial intelligence) learns quickly. As one thing leads to another, he begins to dance; the workers join in, and the young man (artificial intelligence) grows enormous and proceeds to eat them. He regurgitates them as an endless miasma of Internet ephemera and AI slop. We see the workers inside, trapped in an endless vertical scroll of Tik Tok dance videos, distracting memes, sponsored ad content, and traumatic news reports.

At this point in the production, a giant puppet appears on the stage. She is sitting on her sofa, scrolling through her phone, absorbing all of this content we've been watching. She is being animated by the three protagonists of the previous stories: the monk, the young girl, and

the cyborg drifter. Another puppet appears: her daughter, asking to read a book. The (puppet) woman puts down her phone as her daughter sits in her lap. They read together, mother and daughter, as the scene transitions…

We return to the dystopian future, where the cyborg is destroying her mechanical blaster and liberating her right hand. She has buried the girl, and now picks up the girl's satchel of words. She proceeds to complete the girl's mission. She drives until she runs out of fuel, and walks across the deserted landscape until she can't walk any further. She stumbles upon an old chapel in the middle of nowhere. Staggering up the steps, she knocks for help. The door is opened by a dystopic version of our medieval Abbott. The cyborg shows her the bag of letters, and the Abbott is astonished. He takes her through a trap door in the floor and reveals a secret underground society of people, working in monastic devotion to piece together human language. The cyborg stares in disbelief: it is the last human city on earth. As the Abbott distributes the artifacts the girl has collected, the monks piece together an alphabet, then words, then sentences. Language is restored, and writing is reinvented. They rebuild their city above ground, and history continues. The bots are destroyed. The cities are rebuilt. In the far future, a monk eagerly copies a book, while a demon peeks over his shoulder, singing his demonsong.