

Desk Set

A SYNOPSIS

The research librarians of the Manhattan Television Corporation, the Federal Broadcasting Network, are convinced that they will soon be replaced by an electronic computer called EMERAC. The group is made up of Bunny Watson, who is the head researcher, her colleague Peg Costello, and two young apprentices. A mysterious method engineer, Richard Sumner, becomes a daily presence in the office. He observes how the research department works and studies how to incorporate EMERAC, which he lovingly calls Emmy, in the office. Bunny, with her encyclopaedic knowledge, turns out to be a good rival for the computer and Richard becomes interested in her. The relationship between the two shows signs of a romantic attraction, although Bunny has been seeing her boss, Mike Cutler, for seven years without receiving a proposal. One morning the researchers find EMERAC in the office. The General Manager comes in to show it to the other managers and define it the “modern miracle”. It turns out that EMERAC will help the researchers in their routine tasks to give them more time to concentrate on other research. So, they will not lose their job, but, thanks to a merger, new employees will arrive in the office. In the meantime, another computer responsible for payroll has fired all the employees included the General Manager by mistake. EMERAC is a very big machine and sometimes goes crazy, but Richard is always able to fix it with a hair pin. Bunny is now happy to work with it and Richard uses Emmy to propose to Bunny.

PRODUCTION: USA 1957
 DIRECTOR: Walter Lang
 STARRING: Spencer Tracy (Richard Sumner), Katherine Hepburn (Bunny Watson), Gig Young (Mike Cutler), Joan Blondell (Peg Costello)




BEFORE VIEWING

1 Answer the questions.

1. The title of the film is *Desk Set*. How do you imagine EMERAC? What type of computer do you think it is?
2. The name EMERAC was modelled on the names of two real computers of the time. Can you guess their names?
3. Do you think that the employees' fear to lose their job because of technology is still an issue today?

FILM CLIP

2  Watch the clip and answer the questions.

1. What is the purpose of EMERAC according to Mr Sumner?
2. Which book has already been stored in EMERAC?
3. What devices are used to create electronic impulses?
4. Can EMERAC make mistakes? When?
5. What has Bunny been doing with EMERAC in the past two weeks?
6. How many minutes did it take to answer the question on the spruce bud worm in a traditional way?

3  Watch the clip again and answer the questions.

1. What type of computer is EMERAC? Refer to size and architecture.
2. What are its input and output devices?
3. What type of code is used for the input cards?
4. EMERAC seems to be a large database or server. What language is used to interrogate it? What language would you use today?
5. What about its operating system? What type is it?
6. Is it real time or batch? Why?

AFTER VIEWING

4 Read the text and complete it with these sentences or parts of sentences.

- a. Apparently IBM wanted EMERAC
- b. EMERAC is shown to be accurate
- c. Of all the computer films that feature evil machines
- d. Software on disk was a long way down
- e. When Grace Hopper invented the first code compiler in 1952

EMERAC

1., malevolent hackers, and corrupt corporations, none is as terrifying as “Desk Set.” The threat created by EMERAC, the “electronic brain,” was all too real and is still becoming clearer every day.

2., she bridged reality and theory in computer languages. The door was now open for application software, complex operating systems and computer users who didn’t have to be the same people who built the machines. As dramatised in “Desk Set,” when a business bought, technicians came to the work site and built the machine there.

3., the road so computer analysts and programmers, the

true “hackers,” came on site and wrote the programme directly onto the machine using ones and zeros.

4., except for the keyboard interaction. At the time, computers – still without operating systems or application software – were fed punch cards and then printed out the results. “Desk Set” is also one of the few – and probably the only – office comedy filmed in Cinemascope, a process usually reserved for westerns and swords-and-sandals epics.

5. – which IBM built for the movie – to be shown in the most impressive way possible.

Adapted from: <http://www.williamahearn.com/deskset.html>

