



Massive Thoughts: The Theater of the Future by Meiyin Wang

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Delivered on the panel: Massive Thoughts from Four Big Thinkers at the convening, From Scarcity to Abundance: Capturing the Moment of the New Work Sector at Arena Stage, January 26-29, 2011.

In the future?this will all be under water.

Old definitions will be drowned out?new and buoyant ones will float.

The term, the idea, of theater will encompass the full spectrum of performance and its possibilities. It will include dances without people, actors without words, visual art installations, object theater, high technology and gaming, choose-your-own adventures, one-on-one interactions, flash mobs, high sensory interactions, rock concerts, radio shows, Broadway spectaculars, stories told in living rooms and fire-lit caves, full and all-consuming environments that will engulf you, one-minute gestures that will change you.

The work will be idiosyncratic, expansive, and could not be replicated in any other experience, or medium. It will not replicate reality but instead turn it on its head to tell us deeper truths.

There will be no titles of playwrights, directors, actors, designers, managers, producers. There will be theater makers. That will be all that is allowed on a name card. ?Theater maker.? People you meet will include a writer/designer. A director/electrician. A sculptor/actor. A film editor/musician. A cook/dramaturg. A plumber/poet.

I think about the work of Richard Maxwell, Young Jean Lee, and Guillermo Calderon in Chile, who are at first glance writers/ directors. To me they are instead theatre makers?creating total experiences of theater that cannot be recreated anywhere else, in any other setting.

The notion of authorship, sole authorship, will change rapidly. Theater will be made in duos?like Big Dance Theater?s Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar, in trios?like Alec Duffy, Rick Burkhart, and Dave Malloy in *Three Pianos*, in ensembles and collectives, like the Rude Mechs, Universes and SITI Company?where you will be not be able to see the edges of creation, generation, and execution. Theater will be performed and generated by machines. New York director Annie Dorsen takes the famous television debate between the philosopher Michel Foucault and linguist and activist Noam Chomsky from the seventies as inspiration and material for a dialogue between two specially developed chatbots: every evening, these computer programs designed to mimic human conversations perform a new?as it were, improvised?live text.

Theater will be performed by audiences?as in Rotozaza?s*Etiquette*?where two participants sit across from each other at a café table, listening to instructions over headphones, moving around objects and participating in the enactment of a narrative. Or, as in Gob Squad?s *Kitchen*, where the collective attempt to recreate Andy Warhol?s underground movies, where by the end, the four performers are replaced by four audience members on stage, participating in this quirky meditation of the unknowability of the past and optimism for the future.

Theater will be made by and for audiences. They can create and choose their own narratives?like in *Sleep No More*, coming to New York in March, where 300 audience members roam a 93- room installation of The Scottish Play?where they can chase after characters, follow plot lines, roam in Lady M?s closet, inches from Lady M herself, and open drawers and read.

But more significantly?we are at a sea change in terms of what might be perceived as us the theater versus them the audience.

I quote Ben Cameron, from the Doris Duke Charitable Trust, who spoke so beautifully at Under The Radar this January?who compared the religious reformation in the 15th century and our current Arts Reformation??which is dramatically shaped by new technologies and a massive redistribution of knowledge. With the means for cultural and artistic production and distribution having been democratized. There is a term, pro-am, amateurs who are doing work professionally?a group expanding our aesthetic vocabulary, even as they assault our traditional notions of cultural authority and undermine the assumed ability of traditional arts organizations to set the cultural agenda.?

With increasing interactivity and participation from audiences who are no longer satisfied to be on just the receiving end, content changes. Form changes. Authorship changes.

Continue reading [Meiyin Wang's future theater manifesto](#) at the American Voices New Play Institute at Arena Stage's HowlRound blog.

Meiyin Wang is associate producer of Under the Radar Festival and Symposium in New York, where she has worked under the mentorship of producer Mark Russell since 2006. In her three years at UTR, a program of Arts Presenters and produced by the Public Theater, she has managed 47 productions, applied for artist visas from 11 embassies, and hosted more than 550 artistic directors and presenters from 19 countries. Born and raised in Singapore, Meiyin served as resident playwright and associate artistic director of Singapore Rep before earning her directing MFA from Columbia under Anne Bogart. Meiyin has directed or developed work at Women's Project, Classic Stage Company, chashama, Theatre Row, HERE, Ohio Theatre, Joe's Pub and other nontraditional sites. She is co-artistic director of the performance collective Quality Meats.

Photo by Flordelino Lagundino