manifesto for a speculative theatre

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preamble

audience

This manifesto addresses itself to two groups of people—playwrights, and writers of science fiction and fantasy.

People who can call themselves both are its intended result.

claim

Theatre enriches science fiction and fantasy. Science fiction and fantasy enrich theatre.

Very little speculative theatre exists; very much should.

speculative

For the purpose of this manifesto, I distinguish the type of work I am calling for, "speculative theatre," from the already existing vein of theatrical works which merely incorporate science-fictional or fantastical elements (e.g. the angels in *Angels in America*, the ghost in *Hamlet*.) As well, I use "speculative" and "science fiction and fantasy" interchangeably for convenience.

The majority of plays which utilize SFF elements do so only as an outgrowth of character, theme, plot, adapted myth, etcetera.

In a "speculative" play, as I define it, character, theme, and plot spring from the SFF world (or the SFF *element*, though it often implicates the entire world.) In a "speculative" play, the world extends beyond characters, story, and even author.

Both types of play create a world or redefine our own, but speculative plays use the invented world as the foundation, and then speculate, while non-speculative plays use their SFF element to point back to characters, plot, theme, or the real world.

examples

Angels in America by Tony Kushner does not ask, *What if angels were real?* It does not pursue this as a fundamental question, but rather uses biblical imagery to better capture the truth of living through the AIDs epidemic (to put it somewhat reductively.)

In contrast, *Mr. Burns* by Anne Washburn *does* ask *How would society change without electricity?* This question is foundational to the play. The play starts with a "post-electric" world and extrapolates, *speculates*, from there.

pidgin

I don't care about purity tests. The above definition is only to clarify why many works which may be considered SFF are not within the realm of the "speculative theatre" I call for.

That said, 1. Those non-speculative SFF plays are still wonderful and achieve many of the benefits described below.

2. Speculative-ness is gradient, not binary, and relative to each individual's perspective.

3. Speculative theatre must be a pidgin language between two distinct languages, mediating dialogue, with no distinct boundaries, no grammar authority. I am less

interested in someone who can speak "perfect" speculative-theatre-ese, and more interested in someone who can hold fruitful discussions, regardless of a strong theatre accent or momentary lapses of untranslated SFF.

what theatre brings to science fiction and fantasy

canon

Canon (not as in important works, but as in "the material accepted as officially part of the story in the fictional universe of that story" [Wikipedia]) is antithetical to speculative fiction. A genre based on exploring alternative realities histories magics and myths should not delight in constructing a singular canon which exalts one writer or corporation as the ultimate authority.

By its nature, theatre defies canon. What is canonical when each new cast will come up with their own backstory for their characters? What is a location's canonical appearance when different set designers apply wildly different styles? Theatre can amplify the speculative elements of a story, allowing all the creative voices that contribute to a show to add their imaginative force to the work, to ask their own questions and find their own answers.

immersion

Becoming immersed in a world is one of the major attractions of science fiction and fantasy. The novel, demanding that readers spend hours or days engaging with it, is well-suited to immersion, but so is theatre. While theatre demands less time of its audience, within that time it engages them on a visceral level. In the second and third acts of *Mr. Burns*, which take place in theaters, the audience can imagine themselves as *genuinely sitting inside the play's world*.

The possibilities this opens for SFF should be instantly apparent, and include audience participation, black box set-ups, and integration of the play world with the theater experience (e.g. the guard characters in Alyssa Cokinis's *Happy Pills* also serving as authoritarian ushers.) While a novel achieves immersion by slowly developing a deep familiarity with the world, theatre sacrifices this level of familiarity for the sake of an instant, bodily immersion that is impossible on the page.

slang

Invented vernaculars to fit invented worlds are, even when done well, often seen as an accessory in SFF. But theatre's intense focus on speech, its pressure to convey information through dialogue, rewards the speculative playwright who gives real, thoughtful consideration to the dialects and languages of their world.

As well, the fact that actual humans will produce this invented speech demands that abstract descriptions of accents be realized in specific, concrete choices, and, crucially, that invented slang not sound embarrassing. Clunky invented slang that may slip past an editor will fall dead off an actor's tongue, while effective slang will feel so natural in the actor's mouth that they will be able to easily deploy it even in improv exercises. Languages are massively decentralized, endlessly dynamic entities, so the

collaborative discourse of theatre approximates the actual process of language development much better than just one person possibly could.

The question of how individuals, society, and language interact is one that both theatre and SFF have a stake in addressing, and at the crossroads of these two traditions the speculative playwright can pursue this question in ways impossible anywhere else.

what science fiction and fantasy bring to theatre

shared

Collaboration is one of the unmovable pillars on which theatre rests, and speculative theatre leans on it especially hard. Because speculative works focus so much on creating expansive worlds that feel explorable, "shared worlds," in which multiple authors write stories set in the same invented universe, are common in SFF.

So, speculative theatre will not only encourage collaboration within the production of a single play, typical of theatre, but also *across* the development of different plays, typical of SFF. The open, intriguing spaces of speculative genres, not form-fitted to one narrative but designed as platforms for endless histories, invite a new kind of interaction between plays and playwrights.

alien

Realist plays take the real world for granted, presenting it without comment under the assumption that we are all equally familiar with the "real world." But whose world is it? Is the "real world" truly universal?

To challenge this false universality it is necessary to alienate the audience, to make the artificiality or bias unignorable, a trend which various playwrights and artists have practiced for centuries, though usually without resorting to spaceships and dragons. That said, spaceships and dragons provide a unique strategy for alienation. The speculative playwright can alienate the audience while still utilizing psychological realism and presenting the events of the play through an objective view—in fact, if presenting an objective view is ever possible, it may be so only by first leaving our world entirely. The speculative playwright can alienate the audience with their worldbuilding alone.

If the stage is New York, everyone in the audience has a different level of alienation or personal familiarity with this setting.

If the stage is Mars, *truly Mars*, not Mars as metaphor for a familiar location, everyone in the audience, whether New Yorker or Porteño or Jakartan, is an alien.

now

Theatre is an immediate artform. Real people in real time move and talk in the same room as the audience. This immediacy encourages and empowers plays that address the catastrophes of the present audience, the present time. This is a special strength of theatre, but if plays are limited to only current or past settings, there is a ceiling on this immediacy.

Science fiction, in particular, breaks through the ceiling. For many of us (perhaps for young people most of all) the future is more immediate than the present. The ever-worsening climate crisis alone exemplifies this. This is not to say we don't have time, this

is to say our time is fast. For many, today is too late, and tomorrow is the only reality that still has stakes.

Theatre needs a vocabulary for talking about the future without merely appropriating it as metaphor for present circumstances—a vocabulary for staging the future as a true and certain reality. Science fiction is that vocabulary.

actions

1. The speculative playwright must have no fear. They must not fear they know too little about theatre to write a play, or too little about SFF to write fantasy. They must write.

2. Members of the speculative theatre must not be overly critical of an SFF writer's failure to properly structure a play, or a playwright's unwitting use of worn-out sci-fi clichés. Children are prone to making mistakes when telling stories, but also capable of imaginative leaps which adults struggle to take. The speculative theatre is a theatre of children, and we should delight in our leaps, and help each other up when we fall.

3. The speculative playwright should work to learn more about speculative fiction than *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, and more about theatre than Shakespeare and *Rent*. They must make an effort to grow more familiar with whichever tradition is more foreign to them at the outset. This process should be ongoing, meaning no one ever has enough authority to stop growing, nor too little to start creating.

The goal of speculative theatre is not for one group to establish an exclave within the other—the goal is to establish a fluid community which bridges the two traditions and constitutes a third one in itself.

4. Speculative works require a uniquely high level of exposition, and theatre places unique restraints on how information is conveyed, and how much. This apparent incompatibility may be one of the reasons speculative theatre *is* so rare. The speculative playwright must rise to this challenge and take advantage of it to innovate both SFF and theatre.

The SFF writer creating speculative theatre must economize their worldbuilding, decide what can be left ambiguous, what details can be left to dramaturgs and directors, and what is absolutely essential.

The speculative theatregoer must embrace a learning curve steeper than they would find in most plays, on a concrete level (many plays demand high thematic or psychological engagement, but SFF demands a high level of sheer knowledge acquisition and retention.)

Both theatre and SFF must accommodate one another. There can be no fixed ideal of exposition—the grade of a play's learning curve must be negotiated in every production, between every audience and playwright.

5. A final challenge to speculative theatre is the sheer scarcity of speculative plays. This scarcity can be daunting; it would seem that theatre is unwilling to accept speculative stories, SFF unwilling to accept plays. The speculative playwright must have the courage

to throw themselves into a void, to be a foreigner in a new land *and* appear foreign to their own land.

But once in the void they will be free from the peculiar anxieties and taboos of their own tradition. Playwrights do not care about distinctions between "science fiction" and "science fantasy." SFF writers do not think in terms of "producible" and "unproducible."

The speculative playwright is free to experiment.

The speculative playwright must experiment.

a small library of speculative theatre

Welcome to Thebes by Moira Buffini
Rossum's Universal Robots by Karel Čapek
Happy Pills by Alyssa Cokinis
Peace in Our Time by Noël Coward
Pilgrims by Diane Ney
R.U.R.-8? by Suzanne Palmer
Mr. Burns by Anne Washburn

postscript

This is not The Manifesto, this is a manifesto. I am writing as an individual. I speak about writers because I am a writer, although a speculative theatre needs artists and collaborators of all kinds. As well, though I identify strongly with both theatre and speculative fiction, prose SFF is the more familiar tradition for me by far.

A conversation needs multitudes of speakers. Let's talk.

Francis Bass
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