

- [Home](#)

Theater and the Net: A Roundup of Projects & Possibilities

by [Brian Bell](#)

in [National Conference](#)



(This post is part of the [2014 TCG National Conference: Crossing Borders {Survive! Thrive} blog salon](#) curated by Caridad Svich.)

I was sitting in a café in Berlin last summer with my cousin [Renick Bell](#), an experimental electronic musician who lives in Tokyo. He was in town for a conference, presenting a paper on a computer program he had written that translates live computer coding into a visual element, in an effort to make laptop-music more accessible to a broader audience. Renick was telling me about the difficulties he faces finding venues and audiences for his work. Whether he is working with club managers in Tokyo or academic presentations in Europe or Australia, finding the right configuration of projection screens, DJ setup and audience orientation is always a struggle. Although the content that he and I produce could not be more distant from one another we often find ourselves facing very similar logistical concerns. I have been lucky enough to meet up with Renick a number of times in the last few years when he had performances in Europe or when I made some work in Japan in 2012. And every time we sit down and talk about what we do, I am keenly aware of the technology gap that exists in the theater.

At the time we met up last summer I was already in a sort of digital headspace because I was attending the

Theater and Internet conference at the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin. The conference was co-produced by Nachtkritik.de, an online portal for theater reviews and cultural journalism about theater in German-speaking Europe. The purpose of the conference was to question how Internet culture influences the theater and to search for a new definition of artistic practice in the digital age. I attended lectures and panel discussions about the role of the Internet in theater, the importance of online reviews to the broader critical conversation, and the implications of the Internet generation on the future of theater audiences.

So there I was, head full of new input about the possibilities of using the Internet as a tool in the theater, when Renick asked me:

“Have you ever made a play with Skype? Like where the audience is in another room or another city or country, and they witness the event projected live via skype? Or considered teaching a theater workshop digitally to students on another continent? Ever thought about making theater in a club with the soundtrack improvised live by an electronic musician? Or what impact that would have on the storytelling?”

(Honestly I had not thought of any of those things)

“Umm . . . nope. But I will consider them now.”

What was so interesting to me about Renick’s questions was that they were so different from those that were being asked by the theater professionals at the Theater and Internet conference. Up until then my main point of reference for current innovative theater models that were challenging the status quo had been Punchdrunk and their huge immersive projects like *Sleep No More*. But despite its innovative approach, *Sleep No More* is in many ways a traditional piece of theater: one buys a ticket and interfaces with a piece of literature (in one form or another) as an audience member. The existing theater conventions are in place.

Similarly, most of the events I had been attending at the conference were dealing with ways the theater institutions were observing Internet trends (mostly in marketing) and attempting to incorporate them into the normal day-to-day operation of their theaters. Renick’s questions were provocative to me because they were calling those day-to-day operations into question.

The impulse I received from him sparked a lot of new questions in me: How can we use the internet as a theatrical tool? What does live storytelling look like in the digital age? How can we use the connectivity of the internet to reach new audiences and connect with artists around the world? What are the impediments to incorporating digital technology into our practice? Are theater artists in other countries grappling with the same issues? And if so, how are they solving them?

That same week I had the pleasure of meeting [Amitesh Grover](#), a theater artist from Delhi in India. He was in town for the International Forum of the *Theatertreffen* festival and he gave a presentation about his theater work in India. It was as if the questions Renick had asked were being answered by Amitesh. He told us about a piece he had created together with Michael Weber (Switzerland) called “Gnomonicity” where the backdrop for the show was a live-feed from an actual CCTV camera somewhere else in the world. The backdrops would change throughout the performance, so that at certain points the scenery would be a street corner in London or a café in Bern, Switzerland. Amitesh told us about the (il-)legality of the project, how he had spent hours hacking the CCTV cameras all around the world, and the singular weirdness of spending so much time observing people in other countries while he created the piece. There was one man who evidently drank his coffee every day in the café in Bern at exactly the same time, same table, and had no idea he was being projected onto a stage as a backdrop for a play in India.

Another of Amitesh’s projects, called “Social Gaming”, involved setting up laptops in public squares in multiple countries and organizing a sort of intercontinental scavenger hunt. One group of participants

ould be asked to buy some street food with the change in their pocket and then describe the way it tastes (without giving away what it is) via text message to the participants in another city. They were then required to buy something that tasted similar in their city and then pass it on to the next group. After an array of these simple exercises, all of the groups came together for a mutual Skype conference and chatted about the experience.

Amitesh, Internet-Theater “questions traditional hierarchies of theatre and opens itself up to collaboration and co-making, across disciplines and continents” His presentation really got my gears turning as far as what was possible with the Internet and performance. It also raised some even more complex issues: questions about privacy & access in the case of the CCTV set, but also aesthetic questions like what does theater look like in the 21st century? Does a Skype-facilitated inter-city, inter-continental scavenger hunt qualify as theatre? Why or why not?

To add yet another layer of complexity, that week I received an email from my colleague Tom Arvetis in Chicago with two very important links: one to the [Future of Storytelling](#) website (a group of folks who are engaging deeply with these same questions) and one to the [Conspiracy for Good](#) website, which seems to be the next logical step in putting the audience at the center of the storytelling. Conspiracy for Good is a social network, part fundraising platform for third world causes, part staged happening, part working hub. The founder (*Heroes* creator Tim Kring) refers to it as “Social Benefit Storytelling” or an “Augmented reality drama”. The production value resembles that of a Hollywood film, its backed by Nokia and has every type of digital integration imaginable (Cell phones, tablets, apps, etc.). It’s a hybrid model that takes the best aspects of live performance, online connectivity, and epic storytelling and integrates them into a thrilling user experience.

So the question I keep asking myself one year later is: what do all of these diverse new storytelling forms have to do with my own practice? Conspiracy for Good is an enormous undertaking as are the Punchdrunk productions for that matter. I’m not suggesting that theaters should necessarily try to compete at that level, but both productions as well as Amitesh’s digital experiments in India have one thing in common that should be a clear sign to all of us dramatic storytellers: they treat their ticket-buyers as *users* rather than as *audience members*. This is a fundamental shift in the way one thinks about creating dramatic content. The next generation is interested in being a part of the story, they want a direct user experience, instead of a passive audience experience.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m a huge believer in classical theatre. Of play-plays. Of well-crafted evenings of theatre, ripe with the technique and virtuosity that is singular to our art form. I live for that, and it is what I spend the majority of my time doing. And at the same time I cannot help but think that these hybrid forms—where the internet, digital technology and social networking fuse together to create an immersive user experience—will play a big role in the future of our art form.

Which takes me back to my conversation with Renick one year ago, and the questions that have been following me since then. As the theater season winds down for the summer I am starting to unpack some of those big ideas to try and see what implications they might have for our current theater practice.

Perhaps we should start to think of season planning in terms of user-oriented experiences as well as audience-oriented experiences. Perhaps we should be more proactive about using technology to connect artists and productions not just nationally, but globally.

How can we use the Internet as a theatrical tool? What does live storytelling look like in the digital age? How can we use the connectivity of the Internet to reach new audiences and collaborate with artists around the world? What are the impediments to incorporating digital technology into our practice?

The sooner we start experimenting with digital technology as a connective and performative tool, the sooner we can start answering some of these questions.

Brian Bell is a Berlin-based director and actor. From 2006-2012 he lived in Chicago where he was the artistic director of Cabaret Vagabond and an ensemble member at Adventure Stage. Brian is a Goethe Institute directing fellow, and an alumnus of the International Forum in Berlin. He recently devised and performed in Projekt G: A Theatrical Investigation of Happiness, in Tokyo & Fukushima, as well as co-directing KING, a devised piece based on the works of Stephen King with Peng!Palast in Switzerland. As of the 2013/14 season he is the assistant to the artistic director at the Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar.

2 Comments

TCG Circle

 Login ▾

Sort by Newest ▾

Share  Favorite 

Join the discussion...

**Marissa Chibas** · 3 months ago

Great article Brian. I am currently investigating incorporating digital technology in to my work and have been in the theater for over three decades. I also love "play plays" but am interested in breaking some of those traditional models you mentioned. After attending Miranda Wrights digital technology panel at TCG San Diego and hearing what some of the artists are grappling with, mostly issues of content and how the technology supports theater making in a meaningful way, I thought it would be great to make an effort towards creating more intergenerational collaborations. I think we could use each other's experience and expertise to answer some of these questions. So, that's what I am doing with my next project. Thanks for the food for thought.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**Brian Bell**  Marissa Chibas · 10 days ago

Hey Marissa! Thanks so much for your response, and apologies that I am just now getting back to you. Its exciting to hear that you all are grappling with some of the same issues. And yes, we could definitely learn from each other's experience. I would love to talk with you more about your current projects. All the best! -Brian

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

 Subscribe Add Disqus to your site Privacy

• Sponsors



-



-



-

-  [I AM THEATRE Videos](#)

- [I AM THEATRE: Emily Mann](#)
- [I AM THEATRE: Larissa FastHorse](#)

- [I AM THEATRE: Stephen Oremus](#)
- [I AM THEATRE: Moises Kaufman](#)
- [I AM THEATRE: Kate Burton](#)
- [I AM THEATRE: Khanisha Foster](#)
- [I AM THEATRE: Luis Valdez](#)
- [I AM THEATRE: Jennifer Bielstein](#)
- [I AM THEATRE: Marcus Gardley](#)
- [I AM THEATRE: Charlie Frasier](#)
- [Advertise on the TCG Circle](#)

- **Search Blog Posts**

To search, type and hit enter

- **Circle Salons**

- [A-ha! Salons](#)
- [An Ideal Theater salon](#)
- [Artistry & Artistic Innovation Salons](#)
- [Audience Engagement & Community Development Salons](#)
- [Diversity & Inclusion Salons](#)
- [Fox Fellowship Salons](#)
- [Global Citizenship Salons](#)
- [Theatre & Technology Salons](#)

- **Categories**

- [Activism](#)
- [Advocacy](#)
- [American Theatre magazine](#)
- [Artistry & Artistic Innovation](#)
- [Arts and the Armed Forces](#)
- [Audience & Community Engagement](#)
- [Critics & Reviews](#)
- [Diversity & Inclusion](#)
- [Do It Yourself](#)
- [Edgerton New Plays](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Fall Forum](#)
- [Financial Adaptation](#)
- [Fox Fellowships](#)
- [Generation Without Borders](#)
- [Global Citizenship](#)
- [Global Connections](#)
- [I AM THEATRE](#)
- [In Memorium](#)
- [In the Trenches](#)
- [Interviews](#)

- [Leadership U](#)
- [Meet the Members](#)
- [MetLife/TCG A-ha! Think It Do It](#)
- [National Conference](#)
- [New Generations](#)
- [New Models](#)
- [Playwrights](#)
- [Social Media](#)
- [TCG Books](#)
- [Tech & the Arts](#)
- [Teleconferences](#)
- [The Haps](#)
- [Theatre for Young Audiences](#)
- [Tools & Research](#)
- [Uncategorized](#)
- [Watch & Listen](#)
- [Weekly Update](#)
- [What If](#)

• Archives

Select Month ▾

• Recent Posts

- [The Rapture of an Idea](#)
- [Including Alterity](#)
- [Maintaining the Momentum](#)
- [TCG to Distribute Chance Magazine](#)
- [Why Should We Support Grassroots Theater](#)
- [Emotional Bandwidth](#)
- [Storefront Church](#)
- [Spirits Of Another Sort Workshop Journal #4 – An Assumption Of Competence](#)
- [What do you *really* want?](#)
- [Creating points of \(R\)Entry](#)
- [Envisioning Change: An Introduction](#)
- [On Gender Parity in Theatre and What Might Be Broken, Part II: Fighting for a Female Sentence](#)

• Calendar

July 2014

M T W T F S S

[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) 4 5 6

[7](#) [8](#) [9](#) [10](#) [11](#) 12 13

[14](#) [15](#) [16](#) [17](#) [18](#) 19 20

[21](#) [22](#) 23 [24](#) 25 26 27

[28](#) 29 [30](#) [31](#)

[« Jun](#) [Aug »](#)

- **TCG's Mission**

To strengthen, nurture and promote the professional not-for-profit American theatre.

[Read More](#)

TCG Websites

[Theatre Communications Group](#)

[American Theatre magazine](#)

[ARTSEARCH](#)

- **Be Our Buddy**

[Follow Us on Facebook](#)

[Follow Us on Twitter](#)

[Contact Us](#)

More TCG Blogs

[A-ha Blog](#)

[Teresa's Travel Blog](#)

- **Official Stuff**

[Comment Board Policy/ Rules of Conduct](#)

[About the TCG Circle](#)

[Advertise With Us](#)

2010, Theatre Communications Group All Rights Reserved