

## **THE FUTURISTS (jibbe Willems / ENGLISH)**

As a playwright, I love to write science-fiction for the stage. It is a way to re-invent the world and explore ultimate consequences of and for humanity and human behavior. I've written about fifteen plays with sci-fi themes or in sci-fi worlds – about changing technology; visions about and after the endtime; how to rebuild a world without a patriarchy; about a housekeepingrobot longing for freedom; about colonizing Planet B; about the last male Astronaut who is about to be shot into darkness by the matriarchy; a play about (and with) AI; about a woman physically getting lost in a digital world; about a couple being digitally monitored to check if they live good enough to have a child but are not sure what a good life is. And more.

Sci-fi, in my writing, is as much a way of exploring human ideas and relationships as a way of enjoying strange new worlds, imagination and wonder. It is about technology, space, postapocalyptic or utopian societies, of course – but more than that, it is always about people and the theme's we struggle with today. In my lecture I'd like to talk about the human perspective in sci-fi for the stage. Or more precisely; about the human optimism about the future.

## Dystopia or Utopia

In the eighteenth century, poems praised grain mills and blast furnaces. Rudyard Kipling wrote an ode to the steamship in the nineteenth century. In the Soviet Union, the engineers of the soul sang of human ingenuity and the wonders of industry.

The Flemish philosopher Maarten Boudry believes that the future used to be better. We lived in a civilization that believed in progress and saw paradise in the future.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the American novel *Looking Backward* appeared, describing the year 2000. A utopia. No one has to work, everything is free, hunger doesn't exist. The author foresees no trenches, poison gas, or blitzkrieg. He doesn't mention collapsing world economies or crumbling World Trade Centers. In his vision of our time, we live in a century without financial crises, refugees, or pandemics. The optimism sparkles off the pages.

Even two World Wars couldn't destroy that optimism. The belief in a better tomorrow remained strong. Disney opened *Tomorrowland*, filled with futuristic science and technology; *Star Trek* portrayed humanity at the top of Maslow's pyramid; in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, friendly aliens visit Earth, and human kind has evolved far enough to be welcomed into the intergalactic community—evidenced by the fact that this close encounter is prepared by scientists, not soldiers.

That utopian tradition faded around the 1970s, along with society's carefree belief in progress. History was once a time of a better future. Have we lost the ability to dream of that better future? Maarten Boudry argues that we, artists and writers, are failing because we focus mainly on the dangers and shortcomings of capitalism, consumerism, and technology.

We no longer fantasize about progress, says cultural theorist Dan Hassler-Forest, because we've become afraid of what's happening with everything we've already invented. Our problems can no longer be solved by the latest gadgets, technologies, or ideas. In fact, they're caused by them.

In *Alien Earth*, the world is ruled by five corporations that prioritize profit over human lives. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Andrew Tate's tradwife fantasy comes to life. The latest season of *Black Mirror* opens with an episode in which a woman can only survive her tumor by subscribing to synthetic brain tissue. When she can no longer afford the service package, she unknowingly begins to spout advertisements. A brilliant episode, but a grim vision of the future, based on today's subscription models.

Of course, it's not all black and white. When the horse and carriage were introduced, Parisians feared their city would drown in horse manure. *Brave New World* warned of authoritarian regimes. *Metropolis* saw the dangers of hypercapitalism and artificial intelligence a century ago.

The futures created by art often consist of dystopias. Strangely enough, scientific progress now inspires more fear than hope. Science fiction says more about our own time than about the future. Sci-fi author Philip K. Dick called this *dysrecognition*, when we go beyond the reality we live in to understand our own world and imagine possible alternatives.

And Afrofuturistic author and activist adrienne maree brown believes all activism and organizing is science fiction, because trying to create a world that we've never experienced and never seen is a science-fictional activity. She calls it *visionary fiction*.

So, can sciencefiction shape how we see and shape the future?

Maarten Boudry argues that we need progress-oriented thinking, and I find that a beautiful idea to follow. Suppose we, as artists, have the responsibility to dream of a better future: can we then build mental space for that future? Can we prepare for a rapidly changing world? Or even shape those changes on our own terms? In other words, can our imagination create concrete possibilities? Can science fiction be a transformative art form?

That's the starting point for *De Futuristen*. A loose collective of theater makers, playwrights, musicians, and actors who specialize in creating theater about current events and science on short notice.

## **The Order of the Day**

The Futurists met in 2010, when we started *De Orde van de Dag*. In this concept, we created a full-length performance every last Sunday of the month, based on that month's news. Sketches, dialogues, songs, reflections, and poems in which we aimed to add beauty, poetry, depth, humor, confusion and explanation to the reports from newspapers and newscasts.

It was a way to reflect on the here-and-now through art and imagination, on regional and geopolitical developments, sometimes within and sometimes beyond the delusion of the day.

It's an incredibly good exercise for a theatre maker. You can't hesitate too long, you have to make quick decisions and immediately accept the consequences. This pushes you out of your comfort zone, leads you to create work you might not normally start (or at least wouldn't finish), teaches you to silence your inner critic (at least temporarily), and sparks new ideas. It generates a huge amount of energy, partly due to the tension, because you have to present your work to an audience at the end of the day. Within one day, you cram the entire creative process of a performance: the trigger, the birth of an idea, the drafts, the despair, the breakthrough, the scene, the feedback, the rewrite, the rehearsal, the premiere, and the audience's reaction. I recommend every maker to undertake this bizarre process once in a while. Especially if it's not in your nature.

This original *Order of the Day* no longer exists in that form—time gets hold of everything—but it has led to several spin-offs. A new *Order of the Day* with a young team that responds to the news from the perspective of Generation Z. An *Order of the Day* in Flanders with a more international approach. And then there are the *-ists*, where we combine news, science, philosophy, and research into phenomena.

For example, we created *The Extremists*, in which we made six performances in six days about people with extreme ideals, such as Ulrike Meinhof, Anders Breivik, and Jesus Christ. Not to generate sympathy, but in an attempt to understand their thinking. Because ignoring and denying ideas that offend us is not a way forward. The only way to make better choices in the future is to examine how the recent past went off the rails.

With *The Idealists*, we made a sincere attempt each evening to make the world better and more beautiful. With *The Capitalists*, we created eight performances and eight recommendations for a new capitalist system. And we also created *The Futurists*.

## **The Futurists**

The Futurists performed at an island festival in the North Sea. In a large Red Dome on the beach, where twice a day the tide flowed in. Our set was made with large blocks of sand that eroded by the seawater. We looked toward the future from a temporary position - as one always looks toward the future.

A scientist spoke about ways to make algorithms more inclusive and how to protect computers from human error by seeking greater diversity among programmers. A fashion designer introduced us to empathetic, responsive clothing made from algae and mushrooms. An ecologist discussed growing food on the moon and on Mars. A geo-engineer proposed solutions to the climate crisis, such as making the atmosphere sun-reflective by shooting sulfur into the sky. A biomedical scientist spoke about genetic modification that could turn us all into superhumans, and about the exo-cortex — an emulated external brain that could allow us to live forever as digital copies of ourselves. A philosopher of technology explored love between humans and robots, the boundary between the physical and virtual worlds, and quantum computers that might give us the answer to the ultimate question about Life, the Universe, and Everything.

With these visions, dreams, and hopeful sketches of a better future through science and technology, we created scenes, songs, monologues, poems, and arias.

A dialogue between a new Adam and Eve, for example, and their chance to build a new Garden of Eden. A therapy session between a human and their clothing in search of mutual intimacy. A song in which we broke free from gravity. A poem about being uploaded to the cloud as a modern ascension. A sketch about a sex robot's desire for children. An aria about how facts must yield to dreams.

It was often quite challenging not to fall into the playwrights trap, to seek conflict and set up drama and to avoid focusing on the dangers and shortcomings of capitalism, consumerism, and technology. But it was also a joyful challenge and experience to create theater from a place of positivism, optimism, and belief in progress.

We made ten shows in ten days. Inspired by technological developments, we sketched the world as we hoped it would be in a hundred years. We found solutions to today's problems but also saw what our new challenges might be. Once back in the present, we could chart a new course to realize our utopia and protect ourselves from apocalypse. On the tenth day, we presented our New Futurist Manifesto — not to glorify war and violence, as Marinetti once did, but to dream of a better future.

## **The Future**

The Futurists is still going strong. Several times a year, we collaborate with the University of Utrecht to create a show in just one day, bringing together scientists, philosophers, thinkers, and cultural creators. Through this, we aim to reimagine and shape the future, and explore its possibilities.

Because we feel the urgency to think about the future. We see what's going wrong, we're curious as well as anxious about the world to come, and above all, we realize that the future needs new ideas. We want to make demands of the future—both we and our audience; ordinary citizens. We want to decide what our future will look like. We want to explore how we can make our lives more pleasant, safer, and more connected. To bring order to the chaos.

With the Futurists, we've created performances about the future of death, money, work, love, intimacy and connection. About the idea of individual freedom versus the collective. About the engineered human through Big Data and AI. About religion and the future of purpose, meaning and fulfillment. About the climate crisis as a business model. About intimacy through artificial touch. And much more.

## **Manifesto**

At the island festival, with the tide lapping at our ankles, we formulated a new Futurist Manifesto. I would like to share some of our findings from that manifesto with you:

- GRANT US THE WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HAVING AND BEING
- LET US SEIZE POWER FROM THE CLAWS OF UNCONSCIOUS SYSTEMS
- WE NEED AN ALGORITHM FOR HEADWINDS
- WE WILL DESIGN OUR OWN UNREAL WORLD
- WE MAY RECALCULATE LOVE EVERY DAY
- BESIDE EVERY PROGRAMMER SHOULD BE AN ARTIST
- HUMANITY HAS A RIGHT TO AN OPEN FUTURE

For only when we have the faith to see things that do not yet exist, those things can come into being. When we envision a world that has not yet taken shape, we help shape that world. And we intend to keep doing so.

Now and in the future.

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