

Theatre vs. Google  
By William Missouri Downs

A colleague who was directing a college production of *Waiting for Godot* told me that during rehearsals the sophomore playing Estragon turned to her and said, "If my character is 'waiting' wouldn't he check his text messages?" When I teach *Introduction to Theatre*, I take "Twitter breaks" so the itchy-fingered freshman can reconnect. When I write plays, I worry about any line that might cause the slightest offense, for as an Artistic Director warned me, "All it takes is one disgruntled patron with an I-phone to start an internet-fueled boycott." No doubt the digital age has changed the theatre, but the big problem is algorithms.

How could *Romeo and Juliet* take place in a world of dating apps? No algorithm would match a Montague with a Capulet. But more, Romeo and Mercutio would never have considered the possibility of going to a party at the Capulets in the first place because in the so-called "information age" algorithms would make them unaware that the Capulets were having a party. William Inge's play *Bus Stop* wouldn't happen either because Carl, the character of the bus driver, would've checked his Weather app before setting out, thus avoiding the snowstorm that traps the characters. And a quick check of 23andMe.com would've saved Oedipus a lot of messy self-realization.

Further, many of us are now being trapped in algorithm-generated identities that reaffirm our own correctness and make us forget the common denominators that give us deep empathy for people unlike ourselves. In his book *Solitude* Michael Harris writes, "We've turned into navigation zombies. Without thinking, you follow what Google Maps tells you to do." (Pg. 119) This causes our "wayfinding skills to atrophy." As a result, "you won't be exposed to things you don't know, things you haven't loved yet. Personal growth becomes stunted, and the idea of what you "like" grotesquely caricatured." (Pg. 107)

We live in a time of self-driving theatre. As with self-driving cars, self-driving theatre is never lost, it always knows what is around the corner because everything is well-charted territory. As an example, here is a list of the most popular plays currently being produced by high schools in the US (according to Playbill):

- *Almost, Maine*
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

- You Can't Take It With You
- Noises Off
- Twelve Angry Men (People)
- Alice in Wonderland
- The Crucible
- Our Town
- A Christmas Carol
- Neil Simon's Fools

What do they have in common? Yes, they're all good plays, but they're old (only one was written in the 21st century). They have something else in common; they're all well-charted territory. Self-driving audiences know exactly what to expect before they enter the theatre. Is this any different from the following shows on Broadway?

- Aladdin
- Beautiful: The Carole King Musical
- Beetlejuice
- Frozen
- Harry Potter and the Cursed Child
- The Lion King
- Moulin Rouge!
- The Phantom of the Opera
- Pretty Woman
- Tootsie

In my opinion, few of us are fish out of water anymore. The problem with this is that at its core creativity is about entering uncharted territory. If you've never been lost, you've never been creative.

Soon we will have Google Theatre. With Google Theatre the audience will use a kiosk in the lobby to dial up their preferred race, sexuality, and gender preference. They will also select their political identity. The actors will then change the story to accommodate the audience's needs. It's already happening in literature. Check out "Wattpad," a platform where writers and readers create user-generated stories that accommodate the reader's personal preferences.

I've always thought that theatre should be a transformative experience, but it cannot transform if it's designed merely to flatter the audience. If you are doing theatre in which the

audience agrees with the playwright and looks and acts just like the actors, then you are doing Google theatre. I write this from experience, I've done far too much Google Theatre in my life.

Here is my prediction of the top ten plays that Google Theatre will produce in 10 years:

- Adele, Aladdin and The Tower of Doom
- Our House, The Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young Musical
- Twelve Angry Beyoncé's
- Almost Frozen
- The Bride of Harry Potter
- The Lion King's Cursed Child
- Ariana Grande at the Moulin Rouge!
- Fences, the Musical
- A Christmas Carol II
- Neil Simon's Fools