

Uncertain Possibilities







by [Alexis Clements](#)



"Let's say anything is possible and everything is happening." This is a line from the newest play by Katie Pearl and Lisa D'Amour, a pair that has been creating performances together for 14 years now. This new work, *Terrible Things*, follows a largely autobiographical story about Katie Pearl's life, with a particular focus on the thwarting of her childhood dream of being a ballerina, along with a history of her lovers. The metaphor that binds the anecdotes in the show, as well as the idea that the play explores in general, is possibility. Specifically, the notion, borrowed from quantum physics, that because we cannot presently measure the location of a single electron at a given time, that electron can be described as being in all of its possible locations at any specific time. In other words, it's everywhere that it can be simultaneously. This theory is related to theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg's famous [Uncertainty Principle](#).

A lot of artists, particularly performance artists, have delved into the Uncertainty Principle and its implications in their work—most famously in Michael Frayn's play [Copenhagen](#). The principle not only evokes the realm of possibility, it also touches on the completeness of human ignorance, it gives rise to metaphysical questions in many people, and it also taps into what I think is a basic human fascination with really smart people and the theories of theirs that we would like to feel we can understand. And science is sexy. Its popular appeal waxes and wanes, but people who can figure things out have long been way hotter than blonds blinking through tired sex tapes.

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In this play, Pearl and D'Amour, along with their collaborator Emily Johnson, who provides the choreography, seem to want us to embrace the possibilities that our imagination offers us—possibilities that may or may not come true in life. For instance, at one point in the play Pearl describes an argument with her father in which he feels theater does not constitute the real world and Pearl responds by asking him if he could imagine his librarian wife becoming not only a celebrity of sorts, but also a librarian action figure, which, if you listen to a lot of NPR, you'll know actually happened in the "real world." They want us to "what if" a bit, not only about Pearl's life, but also about our own role as audience members—what if we got up on stage and made the show our own, about where we are in the universe—what if the theater took off into space, and about the choices we've made in our own lives.

This kind of engagement of the audience in the ideas of the play is characteristic of pretty much all of Pearl and D'Amour's work, much of which has taken place outside of traditional theater spaces and often involves site-specific texts. It's one of the enduring successes of most of their work as well—this ability to literally and figuratively take their audiences along with them. In fact, there's a moment towards the end of the show when Pearl is off-stage, continuing to speak, and describes retrieving a ladder to place in the center of the stage so that we, the audience, might climb it and join her on the roof of PS122. As she spoke, there entered a very palpable expectation in the audience that this might actually happen, and I gather, from the expressions on people's faces that for many of us, despite the cold, it seemed like an interesting thing to do. (After all, what is up there on the roof of PS122, it's been surrounded by scaffolding for so long? And who doesn't like being on any roof in New York?) This last 30 minutes or so of the show gave me a feeling similar to being in an IMAX theater or on one of those space rides at science museums where 10 or 20 people huddle into a machine that rocks and jumps as you view images of hurtling through galaxies. In other words, I felt briefly transported. And that seems to be the intention of the work entirely—to take note of those moments where we feel separated from ourselves, to entertain a reality we weren't entirely sure we would ever entertain.



Terrible Things achieves this transportive effect, in part, because it has one of the strongest and clearest aesthetics of any play I've seen at PS122. I could easily imagine the design (both set and costume) on the slick stages of BAM, where visual impact in a production is often paramount. It has a surprisingly mid-century feel, something like the illustrations of [Charley Harper](#)—all black, white, grays and primary colors. It evokes all those heavily designed and simplified images of science that have been in vogue for

some time now in the crafty set and in design work in general. Wrestlers dressed in bright blue singlets orbit the stage, grappling with one another, while a grid of marshmallows morphs into wide curving illustrations. Dancers in gray and red move deliberately through the space while Pearl, often literally lifted onto blocks or plastic heels, speaks. To the eye it reads like a stark version of Disney's 1959 classic *Donald In Mathmagic Land*, which just seems extremely appropriate for this performance.

Happily, just as *Terrible Things* asks us to wonder freely, it resists whimsy. The story is based on reality, and like the electron's bounded atomic reality, the subject of the work is bounded by Pearl's own experience. She is everywhere simultaneously that she can be, but where she can be is within her own life or her own head. This grounding in fact seems to keep the show from losing track of itself, but also makes it hard to watch the show and not wonder what possibility means outside the circumscribed world of an atom or Pearl's life.

I ran into someone I know leaving the theater after the show, and after our conversation I couldn't help but think that it's generally people who have achieved certain dreams of theirs, who have lived lives of possibility, so to speak, that can really say something like "Let's say anything is possible and everything is happening." It's an optimist's outlook, which I don't mean as a slight, though I know some might interpret it that way. It makes me think a little bit of the speakers at a recent event I attended related to the TED Conference, where speakers who have attained a certain amount of success in their fields share stories of achieving unlikely outcomes. All of it is very exciting and hopeful, and imagination is, I believe, the key to solving any problem, but it's also one of the things that I think contemporary society has the hardest time cultivating in children, despite so much lip-service being paid to improving education. After listening to Pearl and the speakers at the TED event, I can't help wonder about those people whose possibilities are dramatically limited, or who believe that they are for any number of reasons.

This, of course, is a larger question that grew out of seeing *Terrible Things* and is not meant as a critique of the show. I point it out to express the fact that ideas grow out of good works of art. It's the way in which I think art and science relate the most—they create more questions than they answer. And what's crucial about the idea of an electron obtaining multiple outcomes is that those outcomes are in fact dramatically limited, bounded by the space of an atom. The electron cannot be everywhere in the universe doing all things, only those things that an electron does within its atom. And that's a provocative paradox, I think, when you consider artists' attraction to the Uncertainty Principle's promise of possibility.

(photo credit: Justin Bernhaut)