CLIMATE ACTION
AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

Report from the IETM Galway Satellite Meeting, 2-3 December 2020

by Natalia Skolczylas

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Introduction

Climate change has been high on the agenda for the past years and in 2020 it can be said we have experienced a shift in mindset. Humanity witnessed dramatic events, many resulting from the climate crisis. January 2020 saw Australia burning at an unprecedented rate. Other massive fires, hurricanes, floods and draughts dotting the planet. Skies cleared over the most polluted cities on Earth, while people sought cover from a deadly virus whose origin we now know to be directly related to damages humans inflicted on ecosystems. Climate change became more visible and tangible than ever. And so did the urgency to tackle it within the performing arts scene.

This report features some of the ideas, suggestions, tools and experiences given by experts in greening performing arts who gathered at the IETM digital meeting hosted in collaboration with Theatre Forum, Theatre and Dance NI, Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture and the National University of Ireland, Galway, in December 2020. It also includes inputs from activists and advocates from outside of the art scene, which provide the necessary depth and convey the urgency of the matter. In this report, we are gradually zooming in, starting with a broader look at the current political climate and activist perspectives, and moving towards different actions performing arts are involved in: systemic influence, adaptation, climate mitigation, as well as personal and artistic choices that reflect the urgency to act. Let us dive in.

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Is competence of care a female thing?

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Moderator:

Christine Fentz, Secret Hotel, Denmark

Speakers:

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, environmental activist and geographer for AFPAT (Association des femmes peules & peuples autochtones du Tchad), Chad

Ganga Shreedhar, Assistant Professor in Behavioural Science in London School of Economics' Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science, UK

Mary Robsinon, Adjunct Professor for Climate Justice at the Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

During the meeting, it seemed impossible to discuss the issue of climate change without acknowledging its broader human frame and intersectional aspect. Although the discussion was not meant to focus on gender issues, at the outset it became apparent that to understand the full impact of climate change, we should not dissociate it from gender inequalities nor from other discriminatory realities present in our contemporary societies.

Looking for perspectives and inspiration from outside of our sector, the conversation opened by by approaching the issue under the light of social justice, cultural practices and social behaviours.

As Christine Fentz, the moderator of the session, said in her opening words: "Everything is connected and as the west begins to recognise the interconnectedness of everything, then the 'how' we interact becomes even more vital'. The session first offered the floor to three experts on three different yet intertwined facets of climate change,; Mary Robinson, Adjunct Professor for Climate Justice at the Trinity College Dublin, Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, environmental activist and geographer from AFPAT (Association des femmes peules & peu-

ples autochtones du Tchad) and Ganga Shreedhar, Assistant Professor Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science at LSE - London School of Economics.

They were invited to explain the shift that is, in their view, needed in order to cope with the climate crisis. One of the main dimensions included in their perspective of the global climate crisis was the greater impact it has on the most vulnerable groups: people of colour, women, indigenous communities, citizens of poorer countries etc. Compassion as a condition for greater well being.

Mary Robinson stressed the importance of culture in creating awareness around the severity of the climate crisis, as well as the necessity to align the global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. In her podcast, Mothers of Invention (hosted together with Maeve Higgins and Thimali Kodikara), she has been using humoristic approaches to communicate the man-made character of the climate emergency and the need for feminist solutions to it.

In her speech, she outlined the main layers of injustice resulting from the ongoing climate changes and whom they mostly affect:

- **Smaller and poorer countries**, which barely contribute to the crisis, yet bear the brunt of it first.

- One finds here also a layer of **racial injustice,** as most affected ones are the communities of color.

- There is **gender injustice**, impacting the livelihoods of women who have to put the water and food on the tables in the face of droughts and unpredictable crop seasons.

- **Intergenerational injustice** implies the ways in which economic and ecological collapse will impact younger generations.

- Finally, there are the **developmental and environmental injustices.** Poorer countries declare readiness to adopt green solutions more often than the rich nations, yet they need financial and technological support from wealthier states to implement those. And as we keep on depleting the planet of its diversity and resources, we contribute to the growing injustice towards the ecosystem itself.

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With the growing need for intersectional action and systemic thinking, the pandemic showed how collective behaviours matter (be it isolation or marching together), how governmental response became crucial to success (with female-led countries as exemplary cases), and how including science in decision making saves lives. It also showed the need for compassion, and how healthy relations between humans, now hindered, are a necessary component to planetary recovery and thriving. This is where performing artists come to play - by evoking compassion and bringing people together.

Performing arts as a messenger of life with nature

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, representative of Bororo Pastoralis community, nomadic people living across borders between Chad, Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria and Central African Republic, talked about her people's deep relationship with and dependency on nature. She compared how irrelevant in this context are end of the month salaries, and how vital is a rainfall.

The complexity of problems her community faces is a result of several factors. First challenge came with the creation of the above-mentioned nation states in 1960 and the borders that cut through the lands Bororo people traditionally inhabited. It hindered their ability to move freely between places from season to season. Secondly, rain seasons now are much shorter and stronger than in the past, causing floods, loss of crops, and food insecurity. They are no longer regular and often end with droughts. This impacts livelihoods and social fabric of communities, as men run from the crisis and migrate to cities to make money, leaving women, children and elderly behind, forced to scramble to survive until financial support finally arrives.

There have been several fights between nomadic tribes over access to land these days, all across the continent, giving an opportunity to terror groups, such as Boko Haram, to terrorise poor farmers. In her community, only recently 100 people died in the course of a 2-day clash. Not dependent on hospitals, electricity and shops, people need nature in order to survive. Their seasonal migration depends on the observation of animals, cloud positions, and ant movements. For example, Lake Chad is not a good place to be around in the rain season. They also move across vast spaces of thousands of kilometers to allow ecosystems to regenerate. With rapidly changing seasons, they need to innovate and adapt in order to build resilience.

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim spoke of the growing awareness of the notion of nature protection and regeneration, the fragility of the ecosystem and the value of traditional culture in her community. In order to fully understand the ongoing impact on climate change, one must go beyond the natural or scientific phenomena and understand the underlying social and cultural dimensions of the issue.

The speaker gave the example of the carbon footprint of ruminant meat: the traditional way of breeding cattle in the Bororo nomadic culture achieves a negative carbon footprint. Therefore, one can say that the CO_2 emissions of ruminants are not a biological problem but a cultural one, related to the culture of industrialisation. The major shift in western eating habits, where vegetarianism has been growing in popularity, would support that idea, as vegetarianism can be considered as a cultural response to a cultural problem.

The Bororo derive their knowledge from the observation of different elements of nature such as bird migration, cloud positioning or even ants, which help to anticipate the seasons. Their way of life preserves 80% of the biodiversity of their environment.

For a community such as the Bororo, where the harmony with nature seems to be intrinsic to the nomadic way of life and whose livelihoods are completely reliant on cattle breeding, vegetarianism seems like an irrelevant adaptation solution. In the face of climate change, the Bororo have relied even more on their traditional knowledge, as the basis for building adaptation mechanisms to climate change.

Effects of climate change are a daily reality. Communities who depend on nature feel this strongly. We must do better in conveying the urgency for change, for the sake of us all.

The COVID-19 pandemic must be a signal that governments and corporate sectors are able to react in an effective and immediate manner when put under the pressure of urgency. The global coordination we saw in terms of health and safety measures during the pandemic, as well as the joint efforts to produce the COVID-19 vaccine must serve as an example of actions needs to fight climate change. Not acting is unacceptable.

The artistic community has the opportunity to create the much needed urgency around the topic of climate change as well as to vehiculate knowledge and create alternative cultural values, such as the value in the expertise of traditional indegenous cultures for the adaptation to climate change. **Performing artists can play a significant role in this process,** and ideas of how this can be done are described further below.

Can creative storytelling enable collective climate action?

Ganga Shreedhar, Assistant Professor in Behavioural Science in London School of Economics' Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science, addressed this question in her presentation.

With the massive public response to the pandemic, it has become obvious that climate change has yet to be perceived and treated as a crisis. How come the general public continues to listen to science and react in practice to the COVID-19 pandemic but does not change behaviours despite of devestating facts on a crisis of our climate?

We have established the issue concerns all humans its causes and consequences span across all scale. The main challenge remains: How do we communicate about the climate crisis in a way that would inspire behavioural change?

Indeed, the quantity of information that we are exposed to on a regular basis makes for a very competitive environment when it comes to grabbing people's attention. Amidst all the content, factual and scientific information which is out there, climate crisis does not naturally get the necessary attention because, as the speaker put it, 'human attention is a limited resource'.

To understand the full scope of the question, it is useful to think about it from a cognitive perspective and look into how humans process information. The speaker mentioned that behavioural science has shown that the human brain has two different ways of processing information: one is 'analytical, rational, deliberate' and the other one is 'emotional, impulsive automatic'.

As most people already get their scientific information from non-scientific and narrative style sources, from mass media, anecdotes and even norms, one may conclude that the less obvious emotional and impulsive way to process scientific information might be the most effective after all. So we start to see how art, creative and cultural practices can potentially play a role in the issue at stake.

Therefore, the speaker not only believed that performing arts can change human behaviour. She also gave practical advice on how to craft impactful messages for the audiences. She was convinced performing arts can influence their audiences by showing that others are already transforming their lives, as people usually do not like to change when they're alone in it. Narratives can help to find better ways to communicate science because they are by definition a form of report that brings out the cause and effect relationships between events that impact a set of characters. They make complex relationships between entangled (eco)systems more understandable. They help us grasp the casualty, timelines and connections, and they grab our attention by speaking to our emotional information processing system. Narratives and stories of all kinds have always been one of the tools for learning and understanding the world for our species.

Scientists have been reluctant to narratives because they believe that they are difficult to verify and that there is a potential scope for false information. However, in the case of COVID-19, research has shown that narratives do have a very strong impact on people's policy preferences and behaviours [1].

There is an urgency of showing **connections between humans and nature.** Well-crafted narratives show the ongoing crises as complex and intersectional, and as a result, increase support for conservation and ecological attitudes, demands for meat taxes and wildlife trade bans. They make us not lose sight of the many issues that are at stake.

Ganga concluded: *There is a lot to gain from the change, it's not a pure sacrifice as it is labeled.* **The recovery after COVID could be built around green solutions and policies.** *We have to stress the scientific consensus around climate change and be careful with the counternarratives, as including them can wipe out the positive effect of evidence.*

Caveat? We need to stop preaching to converted, and show people that **change is already ongoing,** so that they know they would not be alone.

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[1] Cf. Shreedhar, G., Mourato, S. Linking Human Destruction of Nature to COVID-19 Increases Support for Wildlife Conservation Policies. Environ Resource Econ 76, 963–999 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10640-020-00444-x

System change and influence

Ben Twist, the director of Creative Carbon Scotland, working in Scotland and gradually across Europe, experiments with practices addressing the climate crisis taken from both the creative sector and activists. As he stressed:

Change is needed on all levels, without putting pressure on individuals and organisations to make sacrifices, to enable the current unsatisfactory structure to operate. There's an opportunity to make a better structure, and we should use it. Systemic change is hard because we don't know where and how to make it. Systems are made out of many interlocking parts, each with their own agendas, aims and trajectories, and are resilient, designed to withstand the pressure, and to resist the change instead of undergoing it. For the same reason, the right small change in the right place can resonate across the system. Performing arts is a system nested within a system, and so by changing, we have an influence on the wider system. (...) We have the opportunity to help society to think together, providing others with space and time to do so, with good material to think about and support to do the thinking. And what society needs right now is very good thinking.

Moderator:

Ben Twist, Creative Carbon Scotland, UK

Speakers:

Catriona Fallon, Green Arts Initiative in Ireland, Ireland

Gwendolenn Sharp, The Green Room, France

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Act rather than give advice

During her work as a CEO of Siamsa Tíre, National Folk Theatre Ireland, Catriona Fallon (who later co-founded the Green Arts Initiative of Ireland) oversaw reduction of the carbon footprint of the theatre by 30% over the period of 2 years. The initiative, called Greening Siamsa, looked into waste and water management, biodiversity, transport and travel, and procurement. It turned out to be a joint success of the team and the board, and it had an impact on the wider community, as it drew people together to the theatre to jointly reflect on the environmental concerns. Since then, the Green Arts initiative has worked on pilot projects with 7 venues, and that experience will hopefully make others follow the suit.

Taking advantage of the suddenly slowed-down pace during the pandemic, Catriona and her partners working on greening their venues, took time for visits and discussions with technical managers, who have critical knowledge about the theatres they work in, to gain a better understanding of possible changes. Same goes for directors of those theatres, normally too busy for a deep discussion on how to transform their buildings. Cartiona's tip is to electrify energy first, and then ensure that electricity comes from renewable sources.

Creative work is as important and potent as those infrastructural changes. Catriona mentioned Lisa Fingleton, an artist working from her farm in Ireland using humoristic drawings that illustrate the issue of "activists shouting from the mountains", unable to get far without coming down, without listening and reflecting on the way others see the climate emergency.

As Catriona said, what reduced her climate anxiety *was* **doing things rather than giving advice to others** - *people feel overwhelmed, powerless, judged and lectured if you give them instructions. I began to collaborate with others locally, engage with decision-makers at local and national level, started to listen to other people, understand them better and find shared solutions. It's much more productive this way.*

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Music industry calls for a wide, systemic change

Gwendolenn Sharp, founder of the French organisation The Green Room, spoke about specific challenges faced by the music sector. Her organisation works with musicians and technicians on *planning together solutions for low carbon touring and customised programmes that support environmental and social goals of artists.* Green Room acts as a facilitator between stakeholders, and their plan is to work not only with individual partners (festivals, concert halls, bands), but with the industry at large. This collaboration will ensure changes are implemented on all levels instead of just being *conversations within small groups who establish some rules that don't apply to the majority.* These won't be cookie-cutter solutions either - sensibility and respect for the local context is also important.

About 10 years ago, music festivals were pioneers in tackling the environmental issues, yet, *those are mostly scattered actions based on personal motivations, rather than a systemic approach.* It is mostly production managers who attend workshops organised by the Green Room, who grow tired of seeing plastic bottles backstage and waste left by the audience, not board members or directors of these events. Boards look more eagerly into labels or certifications, or greener festival awards.

The music sector in France lacks guidelines and structure for change, unlike the sport sector, which has a set of more clear instructions and a framework of support. On a local and regional level, there is *EcoEvent Network* in Nantes, which supports event organisers and venues across sectors with 360 degree approach, from mobility to food, access, digital impact, energy management, funded by the city.

Gwendolenn also mentioned a carbon transition think-tank The Shift Project, which recently published a report on the state of the French cultural sector. The document showed that there is a need for education on sustainability, reduction of environmental impact of cultural buildings and a sectoral approach towards

digital sobriety. As the speaker concluded, going digital offers a way to sustain the creative sector and allow it to thrive, especially in times of pandemic, but it comes at its own environmental costs.

Finally, what might not be very obvious to many, 80 to 90% of the environmental impact of festivals comes from the travel of audiences, often flying from far away to see their favourite acts. This shows the pressing need to work with transportation organisations and regional authorities to enable travelling in a more responsible way, especially to events happening in remote locations, where people often arrive by car. As Ben Twist added, there is also the need to look into the models of international festivals and audiences they aim to attract. If they focus on bringing visitors from far-away places, rather than local spectators, it points at a much bigger issue of why and for whom these events are created to begin with.

Going Carbon Positive and working with lo-tech

There's a lot of work to be done before we can even think of the performing arts becoming "carbon positive". Many artists in France do not want to take a stance on climate change publicly because of the expected backlash from their audiences. But some agree to give space on the stage to local climate activists and organisations before their shows, so that they can

talk about their work addressing the environmental crisis.

Catriona suggested a more bottom-up approach in transition: *it is better to build working groups engaging employees of the venue to come up with solutions that address their particular challenges. They will have solutions that nobody else would have come up with.*

Ben Twist talked about the approach of Creative Carbon Scotland to reaching out to new cultural entities. The organisation stopped *onboarding new institutions and focused on working with those who were already interested in the transition. And once you have some success, others want to join, because people like to be part of something that works and has energy.*

There are already examples of music festivals that focus on sustainability, for instance Boom festival in Portugal and Shambala in the UK. Boom has its own circular system that allows it to keep water for future editions. Another case was that of Organic Orchestra Company from France, which created a green theatre piece *Oniri 2070* in collaboration with lo-tech engineers. They resolved to use only 1kW of energy per performance, and they produced that amount while going to the show by bike. Gwen warmly recommends turning for expertise to lo-tech people, with whom she co-creates solutions for musicians on tours.

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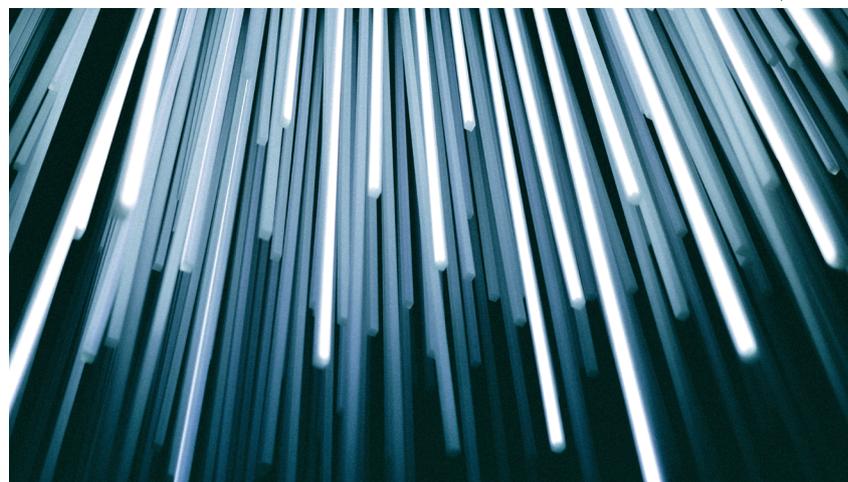
Workshops

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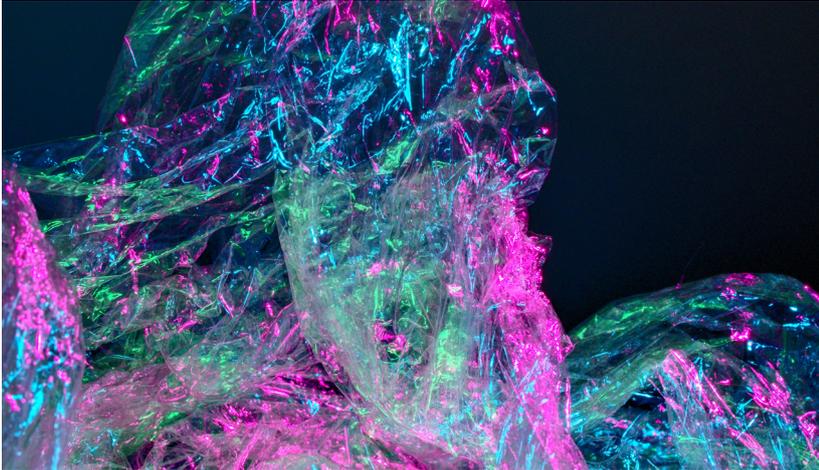
Moderators:

Mitigation workshop: Barna Petrányi, Pro Progressione, Hungary

Adaptation workshop: Tom Creed, theatre and opera director, Ireland

Artistic influence workshop: Christine Fentz, Secret Hotel, Denmark

## CAN ARTS HELP MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE?

What kinds of good practices and examples can the creative sector implement to speed up and improve its green transformation? Barna Petrányi from Pro Progressione, an organisation based in Budapest, moderated an exchange in which participants shared their own experiences and perspectives. Starting with presenting their own Green Guide Commitment towards environmental consciousness, an internal working document that explains the steps taken to ensure that the organisation acts in a more green and sustainable way (travel, accommodation, vegetarian food at events), Barna then encouraged others to share their own guidelines.

Production guided by sustainability

Jon Morgan from Theaters Trust in the UK, talked about the organisation's mission to advise theatres on sustainability of their buildings and production, with the latter being still rather unexplored. By guiding processes that include everyone involved in the production of a show, they get to understand better which steps can be taken to avoid waste, allow for reuse of sets or material they're made of, etc.

Environmental mindset also requires a change of attitude among directors who often won't settle for anything less than the most amazing design ever, which makes it hard for designers to come up with more ecological projects. More than that, designers are hired based on their previous work, perpetuating the situation - they are encouraged to work on more spectacular, but also less sustainable ideas and sets if they want to build impressive portfolios

and continue working with the biggest institutions.

Another example of a good practice comes from the National Theatre of Scotland, which built into its contracts a target for reused materials in their new sets.

It is also important for an organisation to **prioritise its steps towards becoming more sustainable,** and to start with things that are easy to achieve and change, only then focus on decisions that take more investment and time, and finally, contribute to actions that require a more systemic change.

Kay Packwood from Northern Broadsides suggested doing your finances with more environmentally focused banking groups. Another existing practice that could work in the performing arts context is a creation of a marketplace for sets, where theater companies which can't afford to store or

recycle their sets (the cheapest solution is to destroy them) could offer them to other organisations - they could be borrowed, reused, or exchanged.

There is a cultural gap though between various countries and their approaches to advancing the green agenda on higher levels. For example, in the UK or in Australia, everyone funded by the Arts Council needs to have an environmental policy plan. Hungarian grant-makers are not prioritising such aspects. They focus on the cheapest solutions and do not encourage train travel over cheaper planes. At the same time, as Bek Berger of the New Theatre Institute in Latvia explained, countries considered to be at a lower socio-economic level have a more sustainable attitude because of various limitations: space, resources, material, but also because of their unique connection to nature, eagerness to work outdoor or reuse.

Can you travel closer, and by land?

One of the obstacles to advancing and practicing sustainability in some places is the lack of properly functioning train networks. As Bek shared, Latvia has a functioning internal train network, however it is not currently connected to their nearest neighbours - Lithuania and Estonia - who also rely on buses and ferries to connect to their nearest neighbours - Poland and Finland. Slow Travellers rely on buses, which are uncomfortable for the long journey. There is, nevertheless, a need for structural support for cultural mobilities with consideration of prices of "slow travel" tickets and additional accommodation costs on those long journeys, as Victor Mayot stressed. In Barna's view, in countries with shrinking economies, such as Hungary, that issue is sliding down the priority list.

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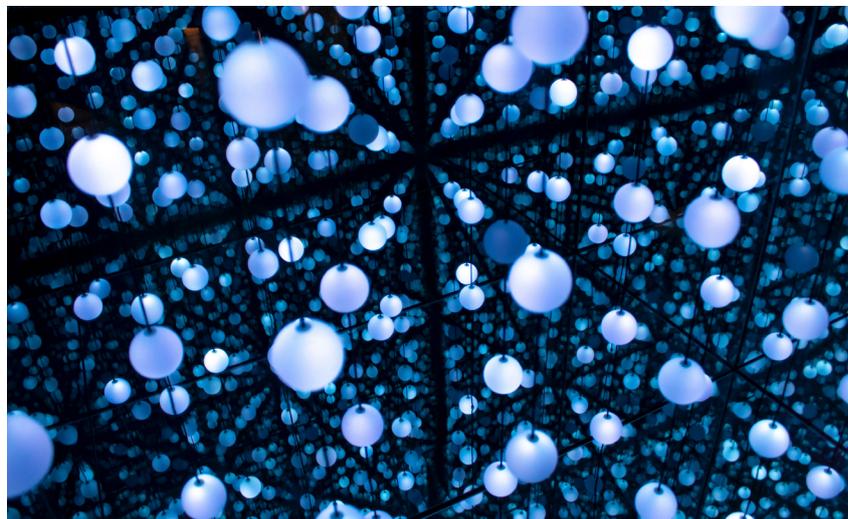
Colder buildings and colder light bulbs

Nevertheless, a continuous update and review of guidelines is necessary - some blanket decisions may prove to be challenging for art organisations, and there are always important exceptions to be made in any policies, as Chrissie Poulter underlined. As an example, banning straws can negatively impact disabled people.

Florent Mehmeti from Teatri Oda in Kosovo gave an example of the governmental policy adding tax on warm lights. Despite good intentions, there was no alternative policy provided for performing arts venues, and as a result, theatres in Kosovo are now scrambling for solutions. It created a large and unreliable black market, where you can find lower quality light bulbs, and you can't even get an invoice for them.

Similarly, it is difficult to upgrade the heating or electricity systems, partly because of the outdated architecture of venues and the lack of political will, which hikes up the costs significantly. Jon Morgan from Theatres Trust asked if it is acceptable to suggest to audiences a slightly lower temperature during the shows, and encourage them to wear jumpers instead? Jenni Nikinmaa, an artist from Helsinki, mentioned how writing plays with more intervals works better for colder spaces, encouraging people to move more, and similarly immersive theatre makes audiences stay in motion.

All of this does not take away the need to pressure the states and international organisations for action. Catriona Fallon celebrated the big commitment of Ireland's Arts and Culture Recovery Task Force, which addresses the environmental impact of arts, cultural and event activities as one of its priorities post-COVID.

Finally, Culture Declares Emergency mentioned by Pippa Bailey is a poignant example of the cultural sector reckoning with its own faults and drawing a big, ambitious vision for itself, as a driver for positive, green change - by renewing, transforming and allowing people to learn.

ADAPTATION

The working group led by Tom Creed, theatre and opera director based in Dublin, delved into case studies and inspiring examples of adaptation to the new reality, and how performing arts can take advantage of new opportunities that present themselves in that process.

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Smarter, greener (non)traveling

Stéphane Noël, director of Materialise Hong Kong, works with artists who rely on touring. Their resolution is to plan tours that last at least for two weeks, and to travel with the minimum personnel necessary - the rest is hired on the spot. If artists create works easy to replicate or install, it reduces the need for specific expertise. They also decided to invest additional time to produce cues and instructions for technicians who will work on their pieces abroad, without the whole team having to travel to assemble them. Sometimes the work can be installed without any travel at all. Extended stays and residencies, organisation of shows and workshops that prolong the tour, or use of spaces found in any city as a set - a train station, a factory, a hotel - allows for more responsible planning.

A shining example of creative adaptation came from Riga, where New Theatre Institute of Latvia organises International Festival of Contemporary Theatre, Homo Novus. The event regularly commissions international works and invites artists from abroad. In 2020, forced to adapt to travel restrictions, it changed its format and proposed to have the international works presented by local artists. This was preceded by workshops between international and Latvian artists as a means of explaining and transferring them. Ása, the Secretary General of IETM, talked about unique challenges and benefits the pandemic offered to the network: an opportunity to rethink its role in supporting the transition and offering solutions and new ideas to its members. IETM has just embarked on Perform Europe, a new EU-funded project aimed at rethinking touring practices in a more sustainable and inclusive way.

Paul Bargetto, artistic director of Teatr Trans-Atlantyk and Eldorado Teatr in Warsaw, mentioned a speculative idea for a solution to big teams traveling and transporting massive, complex sets, such as those used in opera. How about inviting audiences to come see them in your country instead? It would require looking into the actual offsets it generates, but it might produce some benefits, mixed audiences being one example. Ben Twist in his preliminary notes to the meeting focused on the opposite - having artists tour, instead of audiences, as a more sustainable practice. The pandemic brought many creative cases, such as the Irish Festival in a Van, where art was brought to citizens, "just as ice creams".

Finally, Cristina Carlini from Marche Teatro in Italy called for solidarity and cooperation between managers and programmers, who have to travel to different places and fight with each other for best shows and premieres, instead of sharing lineups and making sure artists travel and perform for audiences across the country. That would also make frequent travels to festivals abroad and hunting for acts a shared responsibility among programmers, cutting the amount of trips. Pro Helvetica, a funding body from Switzerland, does not afford grants to works that would only be shown in one place.

The promise of the digital

As in other groups, the question of the digital was also present here. Silvia Demofonti from Ute Classen talked about innovative approaches to recording and viewing works online, with the use of headsets and 3D experiences, both visual and sonic. Producing digital works opens up the question of the live quality of such recordings, of whether it can be replicated, and if not, is it necessary? What is the value of these new experiences? How do we direct the gaze of the public in such a setting? What audiences does this include (people with disabilities or unable to afford the ticket in the opera), and which does it exclude (those with poor internet access or insufficient digital skills)? How to create performances that can work as hybrids, and can be rehearsed online? Can video games provide interesting solutions designing engaging, first-person experiences for the audiences? Finally, can performing arts participate in shaping new technologies, rather than passively adopting them?

ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

How can artists enhance the power of art to bring about change?

There was a general consensus regarding the ability of art to enable change. Chloé de Buyl-Pisco, (The Oxytocin Project) talked about her research related to the production of Oxytocin in the human brain, a hormone that is strongly associated with empathy, in the experience of arts practices. Empathy is one of the most effective drivers for collective action. Participants didn't spend so much time thinking about whether artistic influence was effective but rather about how to make a true artistic influence with the artistic creative process at the centre.

Jukka Hyde Hytti (Theatre Info Finland) identified artistic practices as a manifestation of care and artists were defined as the ones who 'care' about issues but also about communities and the world at large.

As usual, when it comes to activism and social issues, there is a fear of instrumentalising art in the service of a cause. Therefore, the risk of instrumentalisation appeared to be a legitimate question at first, especially regarding ecology which is a cause that still needs a lot of advocacy work. Nevertheless, Ben Twist (Creative Carbon Scotland) defended that 'the worry of instrumentalising art is less important than we think because ecology is already a central topic in many interesting artistic practices'. Artists who don't want to be doing it should not be asked to and shouldn't be approached for that purpose. On top of that, there will always be a natural artistic influence that will ultimately influence other artists in their subjects.

On another note, it was mentioned that, whereas artistic creation in cities seems to be more naturally isolated and self-centered, in rural areas, it appears to be more porous with more social and ecological influences present in the creative process. In rural areas, it can seem natural to put the interests of the community at the centre of the artistic creation, since the artist directly depends on it for having an audience and therefore a practice, as pointed out by Catherine Paskell (Dirty Protest).

Furthermore, Zane Estere Gruntmane, (Pigeon Bridge) and Christine Fenz (Secret Hotel) pointed out that human action is also what creates culture. Prioritising ecological interests in one's work operations and implementing changes at that level is already a form of cultural influence. One doesn't necessarily have to tackle the topic of ecology in their work. Actions are also a way of rethinking social practices, models and values.

Anger, archetypes and power models

Ben Twist quoted the allegory of capitulation in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* [2] , incarnated by a young soldier whose anger does not last long enough to bring about change and to fight injustice. The idea that one needs well channeled and consistent anger in order to effectively question authority and to provoke a change in paradigms was introduced by Mary Robinson in the opening keynote session and further discussed in the artistic influence working group.

Art practices are an effective way of reviving and channeling this anger and of building alternative discourses in our currently polarised societies. Órla Mc Govern Performer, writer and storyteller living in the West of Ireland, mentioned that especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, engaging in outdoors, socially distant artistic practices has been a way for building a middle and common ground discourse, while still giving a space for anger but advancing its impact on our culture.

Artistic creation does not remain at the level of emotions and enables some sort of transformation of these emotions into artistic and cultural movements, actions, change and model/system refuting. The group identified an issue with the model that contemporary societies use to perceive the world and our current ecology. Alison Andrews (A Quiet Word) pointed out that our current system is based on a model of privilege and power where for one to have power, others need to give theirs up. She noticed that the industrialised world thrives on a culture of abuse to nature and human resources.

Christine Fentz reiterated this point by expressing that in her practice and animist outlook, the equality of all organic matters seems self-evident and necessarily questions our current hierarchical and extractivist approach to the environment.

Archetypes are one of the many effective ways in which art exerts an influence by zooming in on our cultural values and pointing out the limitations of our models. Órla Mc Govern pointed out that perhaps the arts could reshape our archetypes with a less human centered system and add an ecological dimension to our models. The arts have the capacity to rethink the notion of what is fundamental and they should be seen as an essential part of it as well as an opportunity for exerting influence. As Ben Twist put it *We mustn't imagine small. If we imagine small in the beginning of a play we never go to a big end. You have to take big steps from the beginning and imagine really large things because we have a really long way to go.*

[2] Cf. Brecht, B., Mother Courage and Her Children (1939), Part II, Scene 4

Is there redemption in performing arts?

Conclusions inspired by the IETM Satellite Galway

by Natalia Skolczylas, the meeting reporter

Finding and implementing the right solutions to the Planetary Emergency will require a broad coalition of actors and actions, tackling a mind-boggling range of challenges and problems. I believe that, as we are facing the unknown, we can look for support in the creative, emotive and visionary qualities of performing arts, and their expert use of awe and catharsis.

For one, I think that humanity desperately needs to find back the sense of wonder for the ingenuity of nature it seems to have lost. We need to turn away from hierarchical thinking that allowed us to assume a "ruling" position over the Earth. By abandoning the ideas and concepts underlying the colonial approach towards nature and a great portion of our fellow humans (or terrestrials, as Bruno Latour would like to call us), we open for ourselves the possibility to heal and fundamentally change our relationship to life. Can we imagine such a dramatic shift without captivating stories, as those that led us to where we are right now? How will we now talk about progress, growth, and mastery over the other living and non-living beings? Could arts and culture inspire people to undertake actions that deeply change the way we perceive our role, and place, in those complex systems we need to protect and nurture in order to survive? Can performing arts restore the awe we seem to have lost for the biodiverse, truly wondrous ecosystems around us?

Secondly, tracing back the political and uniting role of the catharsis, the performative arts of now have to be capable of showing us the ways forward, often by directing our attention back to old wisdoms and traditions that developed an intimate and respectful relationship with nature. From my vantage point, these experiences could help us get together, despite differences, and imagine new ways of being on this planet. They should be boldly political and brave, using creative, imaginative practices to look for ways to survive, but also ways to grieve together the unprecedented loss of biodiversity, the landscapes, the ways of life that cease to exist.

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