

Reduce, Reuse, or Refuse? Pioneering Sustainability in the Theatre Scene in Latvia

KITIJA BALCARE

ABSTRACT

Taking into account that the performing arts could play a huge role in shaping the ecological awareness of society, it is important not only to look at the econarratives of performances but also to analyse the process of their production in terms of sustainability. Reduce, reuse, and recycle – these are essential components of environmentally responsible consumer behaviour. But what about the theatre scene? What are the main challenges for theatre professionals in terms of their ecological footprint? Despite the fact that theatre has been perceived as anti-ecological per se, the first signs of a shift in the mindset of theatre makers is already visible. There has been an increase in ecotheatre performances that not only use ecodramaturgy and represent crucial econarratives pertaining to environmental conservation but also apply aspects of sustainability in the production process of the performances. Such aspects are important in regard to the conviction that ecotheatre is becoming a form of environmental activism. During the recent pandemic (2020–22), several performances in Latvia were based on ecodramaturgy and contained features of ecotheatre. This paper aims to explore the latest sustainable practices and ecological aspects in the theatre scene in Latvia.

KEYWORDS

Ecotheatre, ecoscenography, sustainability in theatre, ecodramaturgy, ecocriticism, site-specific theatre, Latvian theatre.

Reduce, Reuse, or Refuse? Pioneering Sustainability in the Theatre Scene in Latvia

*Theatre does not represent the world but changes it.*¹

- Manifesto of the Gertrude Street Theatre

An introduction

The role of the performing arts in the era of climate change is growing along with environmental concerns. In the past few years, there has been increasing interest in ecotheatre in Latvia. Quite recently, considerable attention has been paid not only to ecodramaturgy but also to ecoscenography. Nature in theatre is moving from the scenery in the background to the performance in the foreground, questioning existing relationships between humans, non-humans, and the environment, and at the same time slowly changing the attitude to the theatre-making process.

This paper aims to explore the latest sustainability practices and ecological aspects in the theatre scene in Latvia in terms of bringing the ecotheatre phenomenon to the fore and to examine the development of ecoscenography over the past decade. This study is rooted in qualitative exploratory research based on several case studies.

This paper describes an ecocritical perspective of theatrical performances and introduces the phenomenon of ecotheatre, which combines ecodramaturgy with ecoscenography, including sustainable aspects of the performance production and implementation process. It aims to give a comprehensive account of local theatre companies in Latvia and their considerable number of ecotheatrical productions which opened up a discussion about the need for a systematic approach to the sustainability of theatre making. This article covers the site specificity of particular performances along with the scenographic and costume design solutions chosen by Latvian theatre makers that mark a shift from producing to reducing, reusing, and even refusing.

Overcoming the anti-ecological character of theatre

People consume the least when they are asleep. This was the message that weaved through *Resignation (Atkāpšanās, Survival Kit Festival, 2020)*, a four-hour processual performance-installation created by Latvian choreographer Kristīne Brīniņa that addressed the issue of overconsumption.² Taking place in the white box of an exhibition hall, the performance was a silent protest by sleeping performers on mountains of clothing. Brīniņa invited the audience to slow down, stop consuming, give the processes of nature a rest, and feel tired and even helpless

1 Manifesto of the Gertrude Street Theatre (2021). The private archive of Kitija Balcare.

2 This performance about the temporal bodily experience of life is the artist's personal answer to the current times. It expresses a desire to step down and not take part in events that promote aggression, instead calling on us to fall asleep together. Viewers were welcome to come and go throughout the performance. The work was nominated for the 2019/20 Latvian Dance Prize in the contemporary dance event category.

as they contemplate the inseparable bond between humans and nature.

What do theatre practitioners consume in the process of making a performance? The environmental challenges we as a twenty-first-century society encounter on a daily basis require us to ask such a question in terms of the performing arts. As environmental issues become more acute, the role of the performing arts in raising the ecological awareness of society is growing. Already in 1994, professor and ecotheatre pioneer Una Chaudhuri stated that the “ecological crisis is a crisis of values”, and therefore “ecological victory will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present. And in this the arts and humanities – including the theater – must play a role.”³

As ecocriticism explores the ways in which the relationship between humans and the environment is portrayed,⁴ this interdisciplinary approach is appropriate not only for literary studies but also other fields of cultural studies, including performance studies. Looking at performances from an ecocritical perspective, one might consider theatrical productions as a mode of ecological engagement outlining attitudes towards the non-human world. According to Canada-based scholar, Andrew McMurry, there are four modes of ecological engagement: the ecophobic mode, which takes no interest at all in the non-human world, or only incidental interest in it; the ecophatic mode, in which nature is a metaphor for human social experience and self-understanding; the ecoliterate mode, which represents the interplay between humans and non-humans; and the ecophilic mode, which passionately speaks about, for, or with the non-human world.⁵ In her article “Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies” (2007), theatre scholar Theresa J. May proposes a practical ecocritical tool for analysis with the “Some Green Questions to Ask a Play” questionnaire.⁶ However, May emphasizes that ecocritical analysis of dramatic texts alone does not tap the rich ecological implications of embodied artistic representation.⁷ Despite the growing number of contemporary plays that treat ecological issues explicitly, the absence of an ecological perspective in the theatre is caused by an “aesthetic and ideology (namely nineteenth-century humanism) that is .. programmatically anti-ecological”.⁸ Therefore, it is essential to not only look at the econarratives of performances rooted in ecodramaturgy, which help to answer the urgent ecological question of where we are⁹, or use an ecodirecting approach to classic dramaturgy,¹⁰ but also to analyse the performance-making process and the sustainable aspects of it.

Taking into account the anti-ecological humanist tradition, Chaudhuri argues that “theatre cannot escape the liabilities of its status as a cultural institution producing cultural artifacts; but it can avoid misrecognizing that status as something natural”.¹¹ Therefore, it is crucial to use the space on the stage to decrease the gap between nature and culture in order to “become the site of a much-needed ecological consciousness”.¹²

Under the circumstances of the current environmental crisis, denying the anti-ecological character of theatre is not an effective approach to take. Instead, there is a need to develop not only ecodramaturgical performances but also new forms of production and new scenographic solutions oriented towards sustainability as well as new material thinking, including care ethics grounded in the idea that the capacity for care is a general human strength and interconnectedness,¹³ at the same time increasing ecological consciousness among all of the stakeholders – theatre practitioners, theatre theoreticians, audiences, policy makers, and society at large. However, current practices in Latvia indicates that conventional theatre venues are reacting only sporadically, while experimental stages are becoming pioneers in the field of ecotheatre in terms of both content

3 Chaudhuri 1994, 26.

4 Garrard 2004.

5 McMurry 2019, 18.

6 May 2007, 105.

7 May 2005, 85.

8 Chaudhuri 1994, 24.

9 May 2005, 100.

10 Cless 2011, 12.

11 Chaudhuri 1994, 28.

12 Ibid.

13 Care ethics is a feminist-oriented movement in philosophical ethics. According to American psychologist Caroline Gilligan, “humans are by nature empathic and responsive beings, hard-wired for cooperation”. <https://ethicsofcare.org/carol-gilligan/> (25.9.2022)

and form.

For Australian academic Tanja Beer, who is herself an ecological designer and community artist, an interest in sustainability comes from the scale of the environmental challenges facing society.¹⁴ She states: “While architecture, product design and fashion have long demonstrated how a sustainable ethic can lead to new practices and aesthetics, we are yet to fully grasp what a socially and environmentally conscious approach entails for the performing arts.”¹⁵

Sustainability can be seen in three dimensions: environmental, economic, and social. Margaret Robertson suggests that “sustainability as a discipline refers to humanity’s rapidly-evolving response to the urgent planetary challenges we all face, a response that includes emerging professional opportunities.”¹⁶ In this context, the focus is on environmental sustainability as responsible behaviour towards the environment and the consumption of resources, and on the avoidance of distractions that negatively impact the environment and biological diversity. Bearing in mind the issues of how ecological thinking is spurring new materials and processes in theatrical design¹⁷, and what kind of environmentally conscious trends contemporary postdramatic theatre in Latvia has revealed over the past decade, this paper highlights the current steps being taken by Latvian theatre makers towards becoming ecologically responsible in their professional work.



Mārupīte, director Valters Sīlis, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2012. Photo: Anna Vilnīte.

Ecotheatre: ecological content and sustainable form

The term ‘ecotheatre’ can be interpreted in two ways. First, I suggest that ecotheatre can be a performance whose dramatic material is based on econarratives about the relationship between humans and nature (meaning more-than-human) that question “where are we” instead of “who are we”,¹⁸ or a performance in which the environment becomes a shapeshifter that plays a significant, active role in the overall impact of the performance.¹⁹ For instance, a striking example of this kind of ecotheatre in Latvia was the *Mārupīte* (Dirty Deal Teatro, 2012) musical performance-hike by Latvian director Valters Sīlis and playwright Jānis Balodis, which was rooted in verbatim theatre and is considered by local theatre researchers to be the first consistent example in Latvia of ecological theatre, or ecotheatre, relating to the ecoliterate mode of ecological engagement.²⁰ The performance was based on documentary facts about chemical pollution in the Mārupīte River in Riga, the Latvian capital. The pollution was caused by a fire in 2011 in a warehouse where chemical and medical substances were kept. The resulting situation is considered the second-most serious ecological disaster in Latvia since the country regained independence from the

14 Beer 2021a, xiii.

15 Beer 2021b, 149.

16 Robertson 2014, 3.

17 Beer 2021b, 149.

18 May 2005, 100.

19 Hudson 2020, 1.

20 Adamaite 2015, 247.

Soviet Union in 1991. During the *Mārupīte* performance, the audience went on a hike along the river, unravelling the documentary events and searching for those responsible for one particular criminal act against nature.

The second interpretation of ecotheatre also includes aspects of sustainability in the process of making a performance, during the performance, and afterwards.²¹ It highlights the creative team's awareness of the ecological footprint or environmental impact they have in all phases of performance making and even afterwards. For example, *Mārupīte* took place in an urban environment without any additional set design, thus reducing the consumption of resources that would have been involved if the performance had taken place in a classic theatre hall. The performance programme included a list of resources used during the performance: eighteen D-size batteries, three litres of fuel, a significant amount of paper, several laminated photos, and one rubber slipper lost in the mud by the river during the performance. This list invited audience members to think about the performance's ecological footprint, acknowledging that one cannot escape using resources (even for a performance about pollution issues), only strive for less impact.

Theatre makers, including performance designers, must strive for ecologically neutral theatre. Ecologically viable theatre should not only focus on ecological issues in terms of content, drawing the audience's attention to them and making them reconsider their everyday practices and habits, but the theatre makers themselves should also work in a sustainable and socially responsible way.²² However, in characterizing the current status quo in the theatre scene in Latvia, Sīlis states: "When you make such productions, you are very aware of the limits of your spending. It is important to think about infrastructure, so that being more environmentally friendly is not an individual initiative but an everyday reality for society. At the moment, it is all based on people putting more time into it. As soon as you don't make time for it, it becomes complicated."²³

Over the past decade – from 2012 to 2022 – a shift has been observed in the thinking of theatre practitioners in Latvia from an anthropocentric paradigm to a more ecocentric and biocentric one; they are also becoming more aware of their impact on the environment, even though they are not always able to change the production process to adhere to sustainability guidelines. Since 2019 in Latvia, and especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in ecotheatrical performances that not only use local ecodramaturgical materials (often made in horizontal cooperation along with the creative team) as the basis for a performance but also incorporate sustainable practices in the creation of those performances, both consciously and, in some cases, because of the form chosen.

"It's about a readiness to change. We cannot change 180 degrees all at once. We will start with five or ten degrees, but the artists can talk about this process of change very well. Not only with the messages they include in their work, but also in terms of the process of creating the work," states Latvian director and playwright Krista Burāne, whose latest productions are consistently linked to several environmental issues – deforestation, biodiversity loss, and pollution – and have become forms of environmental activism.²⁴ An illustration of her work is the *2020 Steps (2020 soļi, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2020)* audiowalk, which participants experience alone as they walk 2020 steps – one for each year of "our era" – in nature along a route of their own choosing. As they walk, they listen to various facts selected by Burāne about species lost over the past centuries, while in the background they hear the real sounds of nature and experience an invitation to strengthen their personal ecological consciousness by becoming more aware of their surroundings. For example, Burāne asks participants to locate something more-than-human in nature and try to find at least three similarities between it and humans, thus awakening an ecocentric perspective in the participants (and activating the ecophilic mode of ecological engagement).

21 Beer 2021a, xxii.

22 Beer 2021b, 149.

23 Balcare Krodery.lv 10.11.2021.

24 Ibid.

Ecoscenography: putting sustainability on stage

Tanja Beer not only proposed the term 'ecoscenography', but, as a practitioner, she has also begun to explore its manifestation in terms of materialities.²⁵ She has defined three stages of ecoscenography, pointing out that all of them are equally fundamental to the aesthetic consideration of a work: first is co-creation, which relates to the pre-production phase; the second is celebration, which relates to production; and the third stage is circulation, or post-production.²⁶

The pioneering British nonprofit organization Julie's Bicycle, which mobilizes the arts and culture to act on the climate and ecological crisis, was founded in 2007. It was one of the first to put on the agenda the issue of sustainability on stage, first of all paying attention to the music industry. In 2013, Julie's Bicycle launched the *Sustainable Production Guide*, including chapters related to production management, lighting, sound and AV, set design, scenic art and construction, wardrobe and stage fabrics, cast, and communication and marketing.²⁷

The principles of reduce, reuse, and recycle are not only part of the circular economy but also of an environmentally responsible way of life. This approach is also increasingly being embraced in the world of theatre. Currently, theatre makers and sustainability experts in the United Kingdom are actively collaborating on a common standard for sustainable theatre making under the *Theatre Green Book* initiative, which is a free resource for anyone in the United Kingdom's theatre sector, but can also be adapted to the wider theatre scene abroad.²⁸ The initiative's first volume, the *Sustainable Production* handbook, was published in 2021 with the aim of making more sustainable shows. A beta version of the second volume, *Sustainable Buildings*, has also been developed in order to make theatre buildings more sustainable, while the third volume, *Sustainable Operations*, is aimed at making all other theatre operations more sustainable.²⁹ The manual also has a shortened version, which is specifically adapted for small-scale theatre companies and small-format productions, bearing in mind their limited possibilities in terms of time and resources. It should be stressed that the *Theatre Green Book* has been written with direct input from small-scale theatre companies, which strive to produce excellent performances with minimal resources.

The manual, which is structured around detailed topics on various production issues and adheres to the principle of "do more with less", offers users three levels at which to assess their own performance: baseline, intermediate, and advanced.³⁰ In order to ensure the application of sustainability principles at all phases of performance making, it is suggested that theatres have a sustainability ambassador on their team to monitor how principles such as "use more reused components and recycled materials", "if it must be new, think about where it comes from", "reduce harmful chemicals", "reduce travel and deliveries", "make sure everything gets used again" have been put into action. *Theatre Green Book* coordinator Paddy Dillon emphasizes that the aim is not to play the system to the fullest, but to work through the principles and allow the creative team to come to an honest understanding of how responsibly a particular performance has been made.³¹

Latvian director Krista Burāne has expressed a similar idea: "You have to look for ways in which you can be as consciously eco-neutral as possible in your actions. Then there are the successful cases that I am proud of, because I managed to plant two trees during my show. You have to look for balance all the time. It's something that comes alongside the artistic message."³² Nevertheless, in order to make a change, individual responsibility should be accompanied by a systematic approach. According to a survey of theatres in Latvia, it turns out that sustainability principles are put into action mostly by independent, experimental, or project-based small-scale theatres, whereas sustainable actions at other repertory dramatic theatres

25 Brejze & Collins 2021, 147.

26 Beer 2021a, xxii.

27 <https://juliesbicycle.com/resource/sustainable-production-guide/> (23.4.2022)

28 <https://theatregreenbook.com/> (23.4.2022)

29 <https://theatregreenbook.com/> (23.4.2022)

30 <https://theatregreenbook.com/> (23.4.2022)

31 <https://theatregreenbook.com/> (23.4.2022)

32 Balcare [Kroders.lv](https://kroders.lv) 10.11.2021.

and mainstream theatre venues are mostly rooted in the individual attitude of a particular director or scenography designer and do not follow common principles. For large-venue productions, the expanded scenography includes the set, scenery, props, costumes, analogue and digital sound, image production, and lighting, all of which requires close collaboration between the theatre makers, artists, workshops, and industry for the entire lifecycle of the production, because ecological design decisions are interconnected.³³ Currently, sustainable choices, such as reusing scenography elements, are mainly unplanned and depend more on cost-efficiency than environmental justification. There are neither systematic requirements for sustainable choices nor sustainability guidelines for large-scale performances at mainstream theatre venues; such choices are left up to individuals taking part in the theatre-making processes.

As a case study, I have paid particular attention to the independent small-scale theatre company Gertrude Street Theatre (Ģertrūdes ielas teātris) because in 2021 it wrote a manifesto of sustainability principles for all artists working there. In it, the theatre states its mission of finding ways to use the resources available in a context where they are shrinking rather than expanding; of creating a system that is less polluting, both materially and informatively; and of producing performances that serve as a field for exchanging new experiences and ideas, not consumer products.³⁴

As Andrejs Jarovojš, the artistic director of Gertrude Street Theatre, points out: “It is important to take into account the ecological situation in the world and to ask whether theatre stimulates change by the way it works. (...) When creating performances, we consciously choose to invest in people rather than scenery, so we allocate as few resources as possible to material expenses – sets and costumes are made from ready-made, reusable, or already used materials/objects, avoiding as much as possible the creation of special constructions that can only be used in one performance.”³⁵

The longevity and transportability of performances is also important. The Gertrude Street Theatre manifesto requires that every new work be performed at least ten times and in at least two locations outside Riga, where the theatre company is based. Moreover, the set must not exceed twenty cubic metres and must fit in a single minivan that can be driven with a B category driver’s licence, which facilitates the mobility of the performance and reduces the time and other resources required for construction and disassembling – and thus the ecological footprint.³⁶ The *Theatre Green Book* also recommends creating sets that are easily disassembled by avoiding strong bonding that prevents the elements from being reused or rebuilt into other elements.³⁷

Considering that “scenographies always emerge with the geographies, peoples, and histories that intermingle during the act of performance”,³⁸ using local materials and transforming previously used materials in ecodramaturgical contexts is important in order to raise ecological consciousness.

The *Wood Paths* (*Malkas ceļi*, Gertrude Street Theatre, 2020) performance by Jarovojš and set designer Rūdolfs Bekičš uses real wood and products made of it (paper, pallets, etc.) in order to question the materiality of wood, inviting viewers to be eyewitnesses to the process of transformation made by two performers.³⁹ The performance takes the audience on an internal journey questioning the relationship between humans and nature, as is typical with the ecoliterate mode of ecological engagement.

33 Brejze, Collins 2021, 147.

34 Manifesto of the Gertrude Street Theatre (2021). The private archive of Kitija Balcare.

35 Balcare [Krodens.lv](https://krodens.lv) 07.2.2022.

36 Manifesto of the Gertrude Street Theatre (2021). The private archive of Kitija Balcare.

37 <https://theatregreenbook.com/> (23.4.2022)

38 Hann 2021, 193.

39 <https://git.lv/lv/shows/view/101> (23.4.2022)



Wood Paths, director Andrejs Jarovajs, Gertrude Street Theatre, 2020.
Photo: Elmārs Sedols.

Instead of a decrease in classic sets, there is a slow trend of refusing to use a broad spectrum of scenographic elements produced specially for one show and replacing them with natural resources. Latvia-based set designer Pamela Butāne says: “I can’t say that we are producing fewer classic sets, but we are starting to use more very minimalist sets and natural elements: wood, sand, clay. Nature is important to us, and we want it on stage.” *The End of the World and Other Nonsense* (*Pasaules gals un citas blēņas*, Valmiera Summer Theatre Festival, 2021), a performance by director Krista Burāne in collaboration with Butāne, took place at a school in Valmiera, a town in northern Latvia.⁴⁰ It used various objects found on site to make the scenery for stories written by school children about possible ends of the world. In addition to instilling a sense of ecological responsibility in society via such a performance, Burāne brings to attention the fact that 95% of the set already existed on site and adds: “If your conditions are a big hall, then you work in a big hall and consciously try to minimize the resources used.”⁴¹



End of the World and Other Non-Sense, director Krista Burāne, Valmiera Summer

40 <http://kristaburane.com/#pasaules-gals-un-citas-blenas-end-of-the-world-and-other-nonsense-2021> (23.4.2022)

41 Balcare Krodery.lv 10.11.2021.

Director Inga Tropa-Fišere's digital performance for children *Mission: Earth (Misija: Zeme*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2020) was made during the Covid-19 pandemic, performed on the Zoom platform, and compared the closure of public spaces to living in a space station.⁴² Due to the lockdown, the performance makers could only use what they had left in their warehouse from previous performances. Thus, they made an assemblage to tell a sci-fi story for school-age children about the last two people in the universe one hundred years from now. The performance addressed the issue of overconsumption that has led to the collapse of the existing system on Earth and aimed to stimulate individual responsibility.

Moving towards ecoscenography, one must creatively transform materials in order to surprise the audience several times. As Rachel Hann states: "While in previous cultures of production this might be dismissed as derivative or 'lazy', the continual reuse of locally sourced materials acts as a reminder that scenographies transform feelings of stuff. Make room to celebrate local materialities that afford recognition (from audiences) and reuse (for carbon footprints)."⁴³

Theatre companies are also using social media, for example, to search for necessary props for performances. Such calls on Facebook are used not only by small-scale productions but also by repertory theatres, too; for instance, the Valmiera Drama Theatre sought used Soviet-era dolls for one particular performance. In another example, Dirty Deal Teatro asked people to donate analogue telephones for *Frankenstein Complex (Frankenšteina kompleks*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2022) by director Valters Sīlis, which questions the relationship between playwrights and artificial intelligence.⁴⁴ This postdramatic performance with minimal set design also uses a mix of actors from Latvia and the neighbouring country of Lithuania in one performance staged for both countries.

Sustainable design aims to minimize a performance's negative impact on the environment, starting from the moment it begins to be produced, during consumption, and even afterwards, in terms of reusing or recycling the materials. In Latvia, small-scale theatres are demonstrating readiness to change and are at the same time becoming local opinion leaders in the field.

Site specificity and renewability as strategies for ecotheatre

As one potential solution to anti-ecological theatre and a way to address ecological concerns, Chaudhuri mentions site-specific theatre with the staging of classic, contemporary, or new works "that directly engage the actual ecological problems of particular environments".⁴⁵ Such an approach leads to a new materialist-ecological theatre practice that goes beyond the universalization of nature and therefore also metaphorization of nature.⁴⁶ Even if ecocriticism can help to discover new lines of storytelling on environmental issues, as ecological linguistics professor Arran Stibbe has pointed out, the most vivid stories related to nature are possible when one is physically present in nature.⁴⁷ The approach of making performances physically in nature was certainly the case in Latvia during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic not only raised the issue of isolation but also traced back links to nature, with theatre makers presenting several site-specific performances related to ecological awareness.

42 <https://dirtydealteatro.lv/lv/izrazu-saraksts/izrades/misija-zeme> (23.4.2022)

43 Hann 2021, 193.

44 <https://dirtydealteatro.lv/lv/izrazu-saraksts/izrades/frankensteina-komplekss> (23.4.2022)

45 Chaudhuri 1994, 24.

46 Ibid.

47 Stibbe 2019, 82.



Trees Have Stopped Talking Since Then by director Krista Burane.

Environmental theatre and site-specific theatre play an important role in ecodramaturgy because they break down the division between actors and viewers in classic theatre spaces, thus encouraging a new level of reciprocity and participation. These forms are particularly important for ecotheatre productions, which, instead of imitating nature, often seek to use the outdoors, such as a specific place or route in nature. In such conditions, natural objects become bioperformative, thus enabling the interconnectedness of the human and more-than-human. According to ecodramaturgy scholar Lisa Woynarski, “bioperformativity addresses the way in which the more-than-human performs”.⁴⁸ For example, trees are no longer simply metaphors or symbols, but they become actual actants in econarratives. Woynarski points out that trees are able to create both biophysical and symbolic effects in high-level works of art aimed at raising ecological awareness.⁴⁹ This is the case in Krista Burāne’s performance-walk *Trees Have Stopped Talking Since Then* (*No tā laika koki vairs nerunā*, Homo Novus Festival, 2020),⁵⁰ which took place in an urban environment in Riga, where the green trees became both the set and the actors – the witnesses to time – as the econarrative took the audience more than one hundred years back in time, to when Georgs Kufalts (Georg Kuphaldt), the first city gardener of Riga, planted the trees. Such an approach of not imitating nature but instead revealing its bioperformative character also strengthens the audience’s connection to the natural environment in which it finds itself during an outdoor performance. It helps to deepen the viewer’s ecological identity by placing the story in a real context. At the same time, site-specific performances are a way of avoiding huge set designs.

Although a performance in the natural environment reduces the potential consumption of resources that would be needed indoors, one must bear in mind certain aspects of site-specific theatre. For example, how does one get to the venue?⁵¹ Is it possible on foot, bicycle, or public transport, or maybe ride-sharing can be arranged? For example, the *Forest* performance-walk (*Mežs*, Latvian National Theatre, 2020) took place in Mežaparks, an urban park that is accessible by public transport.

48 Woynarski 2015, 171–2.

49 Woynarski 2020, 72–3.

50 <http://kristaburane.com/#no-ta-laika-koki-vairs-neruna-trees-have-stopped-talking-since-then-2020> (23.4.2022)

51 <https://theatregreenbook.com/> (23.4.2022)



Forest, director Valters Silis, the National Theatre of Latvia, 2020. Photo: Edgars Lazdiņš.

What is the site like from the point of view of nature conservation?⁵² Is it possible to leave it in at least the same condition as before the event, or in an even better condition? Theatre makers must also take into account the expected weather conditions and how they will affect the performance, as well as the lighting at the site at the selected time, etc.⁵³

Following Chaudhuri's conviction that the "imaginative and representational work of making art has an enormous role to play in making this unprecedented crisis visible, audible, and felt", we can also conclude that, in comparison to performances taking place in a forest, park, riverside, meadow, bog, or elsewhere in nature, postmodern indoor performances could be even more effective in approaching the concept of 'ecothatre'.⁵⁴ Regarding lighting, the ancient Greeks used sunlight strategically, positioning their roofless open-air stages on hills so that the sun was behind the audience and even using mirrors to reflect the sun's rays; clouds, for their part, served as dimmers. The Greeks analysed the sun's path during the hours and months of prevalent theatre use and the possibility of glare due to low solar altitude.⁵⁵ When theatre moved indoors, tallow candles and torches were used. These were replaced later on in the seventeenth century by oil lamps, and in the late eighteenth century by gas lighting, until electrical lights and finally LED lights were developed for theatres. Lately, bicycle-driven productions have appeared in which human beings are themselves the energy resources. Such was the case in *Lungs (Atmen)*, Berlin Schaubühne Theatre, 2013), a performance by Katie Mitchell in which actors provided light by continuously pedalling a bicycle, thus amplifying or diminishing the intensity of the lighting.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the *vox:lumen* (Harbourfront Centre Theatre, 2015) performance by Toronto-based choreographer William Yong not only used renewable sources of energy (solar panels outside the venue) but also had the dancers and the audience produce the lighting on a human-powered generator, thus highlighting the idea that "the necessity of illumination structures every human interaction".⁵⁷

The Sydney Theatre Company, for its part, is one of the leading examples of environmental leadership in the field of theatre with its *Greening the Wharf* (2011) project. Almost 2000 solar panels on the heritage-listed Wharf building's roof provide solar power for use across

52 <https://theatregreenbook.com/> (23.4.2022)

53 <https://theatregreenbook.com/> (23.4.2022)

54 Chaudhuri 2014, ix.

55 Bo et al. 2015, 112.

56 <https://www.schaubuehne.de/en/produktionen/atmen.html> (23.4.2022)

57 <https://www.ianpgarrett.com/portfolio/vox-lumen/> (23.4.2022)

the company to power not only lights but also ventilation and air conditioning, production machinery, office spaces, rehearsal rooms, and the theatres.⁵⁸

Looking at the current situation in Latvia, there is a trend of developing ecodramaturgical performances that take place in nature, using site-specific forms and in several cases also performance-hikes. This helps to overcome a long-existing tradition of looking at nature in a metaphorical way. For example, in *From the Ceikste to the Aiviekste (No Ceikstes līdz Aiviekstei, Lubāna Community Theatre, 2020)* by theatre maker Jānis Balodis, having the audience take part in such an applied theatre performance-walk along a river and focusing on the agency of water gave participants the opportunity to look at nature in its material sense. The performance not only used the form of a walk without additional lighting solutions but also aligned the time of the performance with the sunset, thus employing nature-staged dramaturgy – Balodis planned the final scene of the performance to occur before sunset, linking this approach back to the history of theatre in ancient Greece. This allows for a deeper emotional connection with the final scene, in which the audience is left face-to-face with a landscape transformed by humans.

This calls to attention still-underused nature-staged dramaturgy using natural light, sounds, weather, seasons, and colours. Furthermore, in terms of ecoscenography, it is important “not only what scenography does but what it feels like”. According to Beer, ecoscenography means “to care beyond strictly human needs” in such a way that it leads to conditions for humans to thrive in a climate-changed world.⁵⁹ This also closely resonates with the *Theatre Green Book*, which highlights that the outdoor site in which a performance takes place should be left even better, for instance, cleaner, than it was before the performance.⁶⁰

Ecoscenography could also serve as a regenerative approach in the theatre-making process. Burāne created the performance-walk *Trees Have Stopped Talking Since Then* as an expressive protest to the cutting down of trees in Riga. Each performance ended with the real planting of a tree in Riga, not only bringing to attention the environmental problem in the urban space but actually taking action and turning passive participation into direct environmental activism – thus, the performance became an example of activism with a regenerative character.

Stage designer Pamela Butāne says: “Thinking about how to make performances more ecological, we can also come up with new forms.” She gives the example of the *Urban Safari (Urbānais safari, Valmiera Summer Theatre Festival, 2021)* audiowalk for families by Ance Muižniece and herself.⁶¹ The audioperformance offered four routes – X, Y, Z, Ž – which addressed different kinds of generations and dramaturgically illustrated four different viewpoints of the same situation and relationships between family members. It involved a lot of walking in the city and its outskirts, and only a mobile device with internet connection was needed; the city itself provided the scenery, without any direct involvement from a set designer. The task of the set designer was to plan a route that would echo the narrative of the audioperformance’s dramaturgy.

Drama was also combined with technology in *Plastic Hooligans (Plastmasas huligāni, PERFORācija, 2019)*, Butāne’s performance-workshop for children, which questioned the issues of plastic pollution and overconsumption and let the young audience members themselves experience the process of recycling plastic. Each participant had to bring along some empty plastic bottles they had collected in order to give them a second life during the workshop.

58 <https://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/about/sustainability> (23.4.2022)

59 Beer 2021, 193–4.

60 <https://theatregreenbook.com/> (23.4.2022)

61 <https://www.vdt.lv/lv/izrade/urbanais-safari> (23.4.2022)



Plastic Hooligans, director Pamela Butāne, PERFORācija, 2019. Photo: Monta Tīgere.

“Why have we made it easier to be harmful to the environment and not the other way around?” Director Valters Sīlis rhetorically asks.⁶² He is considered the first in Latvia’s theatre scene to have developed econarratives and works on large-scale productions for conventional theatre stages as well as with small-form performances on experimental stages. The fact that often the same directors, stage designers, and costume designers work simultaneously in small-scale theatres and larger repertory dramatic theatres means that slight shifts in the performance-making process can lead to gradual changes also in dramatic theatres. Sīlis, who is known for the first ecotheatrical performance in Latvia (*Mārupīte* at the Dirty Deal Teatro independent theatre company), is an example of this. Working also at the Latvian National Theatre, during the pandemic he created the ecoliterate performance-walk *Forest (Mežs)*, National Theatre of Latvia, 2020), which took the audience to a city park and thus challenged the classic repertory of theatre and broke the usual habits of this theatre’s audience. Dirty Deal Teatro has several verbal agreements among its team members related to sustainability, including consuming as little energy as possible, using the ventilation system only during performances and rehearsals, turning the heat in the building down when no rehearsals or performances are taking place, etc. Sīlis also tries to apply similar principles, such as using minimal lighting during rehearsals when he works on the large stage at the Latvian National Theatre.

From reuse of costumes towards costume thinking

Similarly, as Chaudhuri emphasizes the anti-ecological humanist tradition in theatre, professor Sofia Pantouvaki, who is a stage designer herself, concludes that costume design is also human-centred “due to its integral connection to the performing body” and has usually been researched from the historical or cultural perspective, and not the material perspective.⁶³ “The most important task for costume designers today is perhaps to learn to think in a new way,” she points out. Pantouvaki has proposed the term ‘costume thinking’, which could be used as “a methodology for future artistic research and practice” to ensure that “artistic interventions can communicate environmentally conscious ideas through the practice of costume”.⁶⁴ Beer, however, insists that the criteria related to fulfilling the needs of a play have to be “reimagined

62 Balcare Krodery.lv 10.11.2021.

63 Pantouvaki et al. 2021, 200.

64 op. cit., 214.

to the health and wellbeing of all enclosed”, turning design into a biophilic activity.⁶⁵ According to such an approach, a costume designer must make decisions based on the capacity of nature and the responsible treatment of resources.

If there is a need for newly created costumes, the *Theatre Green Book* recommends that they be made of natural, certified materials by local producers, and that they should be easy to clean, etc.⁶⁶ The easiest option is to reuse existing resources. For instance, in the *Resignation* performance-installation by Kristīne Brīniņa, a group of people slept on a floor covered in all kinds of worn clothes. Designer Epp Kubu and her assistant Ilze Kauliņa filled the room with second-hand clothing gathered, first of all, from the creative team, but also from a second-hand shop. However, even if one uses already-worn clothing, it is crucial to not stop the lifecycle of the clothing in some warehouse but to put it back into use, echoing the principle of the circular economy.

Another approach demonstrated by Latvian performance designers is the use of natural materials collected near the site where the performance will take place. For the performance-walk, *From the Ceikste to the Aiviekste*, which took place in Lubāna, a rural area of Latvia, upcycling costume designer Anna Aizsilniece created costumes from locally found natural materials, such as birch twigs, dry canes, grass, and stones. Such costumes made of local resources are biocompostable – they come from nature and can be returned to it. But this poses a challenge when long-lasting costumes are needed; if a performance is played through one summer, the costumes have to be reconstructed again the following season due to their fragility. However, it takes human resources to make them anew instead of making them from fabrics and keeping them in a warehouse without knowing whether they will be used for another season or even another performance.



From Ceikste to the Aiviekste, dramatist Jānis Balodis and community theatre of Lubāna, 2020. Publicity photo.

Currently, most of the costume practices driven by sustainable thinking are based on the practice of recycling, upcycling, using natural and biodegradable materials, and experimenting with non-conventional costume materials such as ice, smoke, and porcelain as wearables that influence not only physical but also emotional responses.⁶⁷ Considering that a costume is the physical layer between the body and the rest of the world, material ecologies are important in order to experience “a change in how we join with the material non-human world”.⁶⁸ In such an approach,

65 Beer 2021a, 193.

66 <https://theatregreenbook.com/> (23.4.2022)

67 Pantouvaki et al. 2021, 202.

68 Pantouvaki et al. 2021, 213.

the material of a costume becomes “co-actant and collaborator for the creation of meaning.”⁶⁹

As another example of ecoscenography and costumes, I examined the *Biology of Love* (*Mīlestības bioloģija*, Fieldworks group exhibition, 2021) installation by Latvian performance artist Linda Boļšakova, which represented the ecophatic mode of ecological engagement.⁷⁰ The performance costume was made of non-violent silk dyed with nettle and stained with rust in collaboration with artist Sandra Kosorotova, while the belt was made from foraged and processed nettle fibres as well as foraged plastic bags. The installation design used plants and nettles gathered in meadows and encased in frames of broken glass and rusted fixtures. The soundscape by Maksims Šenteļevs included butterfly wing recordings processed with a granular synthesizer, sounds of abandoned locations, and other intuitive environmental sounds. This performance explored the interrelationships between internal and external environmental processes, where butterflies in the room were not only insects but also our inner feeling of butterflies in the stomach, which are inhabitants of our emotional landscapes. The performance encouraged viewers to become aware of the butterfly effect, in which a tiny change in one place can create a huge change elsewhere. Raising the issue of lifecycle and pointing out that a small gesture can change the world, Boļšakova added another layer of responsibility to the performance production.

An approach that activates the agency of a costume designer helps to develop not only new modes of artistic expression and new narratives and representations but also “new meaning-making processes that engage ecological patterns in the context of performance and beyond.”⁷¹ For instance, the costumes by costume designer Claire Bracewell for the Greek National Opera Alternative Stage production of Antonio Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* (2019, online 2021) were made of disposed goods, including plastic bags, bottles, plastic straws, and plastic gloves, offering them a second life.⁷² The Latvian ecophilic performance *Championship of Mushroom Picking* (*Sēņošanas čempionāts*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2021) by young director Ilze Bloka portrayed the world of mycelia via choreography.⁷³ In it, dancers dressed in free-style clothing called attention to plastic pollution by putting on their heads plastic bags bearing the names of all the main grocery stores. This solution elicited physical empathy from the audience towards the dancers, for whom it was difficult to breathe, awakening a message about nature suffocating. This approach helps to strengthen parallels between breathing people and breathing nature, which is filled with garbage and where irresponsible actions on the part of humans is causing nature to be asphyxiated.



Championship of Mushroom Picking 2021, director Ilze Bloka, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2021.

69 Pantouvaki et al. 2021, 204.

70 <https://lindabolsakova.com/biology-of-love/> (23.4.2022)

71 Pantouvaki et al. 2021, 204.

72 <https://www.nationalopera.gr/en/alternative-stage/es-children-s-performances/item/2750-tesseract-epoxes> (23.4.2022)

73 <https://dirtydealteatro.lv/lv/izrazu-saraksts/izrades/senosanas-cempionats-2021> (23.4.2022)

“The socio-cultural troubleshooting capacity of costume is then able to challenge unsustainable material traditions in established costume practice, as well as human-centric attitudes towards material engagement,” writes Pantouvaki, asserting that costume design could be used as a critical tool for new performance narratives.⁷⁴ Orienting performance design towards ecomaterialism is essential, considering that “materiality and environments are mutually dependent in making beings, things and places, and recognising humans as part of nature’s system, rather than a separate entity.”⁷⁵ Costume materiality is therefore one of the ways to develop econarratives in performance while caring about the sustainability of the performance itself.

The scenography and costume designers who have developed ideas for the Latvian cases of ecotheatre have used several approaches – from reusing and upcycling to creating new costumes and sets in a nature-friendly, even nonviolent, way – reflecting features of biophilic design, developing new ecomateriality, and at the same time also shaping econarratives. Such ecomateriality offers a new way to read performance, observing new relationships between humans and the more-than-human.

Discussion

The previous sections have shown that there is a need for developing not only ecodramaturgical performances but also new production forms and new scenographic solutions oriented towards sustainability and new material thinking, including care ethics, while at the same time increasing ecological consciousness in all of the stakeholders: theatre practitioners, theatre theoreticians, audiences, policy makers, and society at large. Keeping in mind the environmental crisis, instead of denying the anti-ecological character of theatre, there is potential for ecotheatre to become a form of environmental activism that deepens the ecological identity of not only audiences but also of theatre makers.

Secondly, an analysis shows that small-scale theatre companies in Latvia are more open to change and are already integrating sustainability guidelines in their work, at the same time demonstrating opinion leadership for the theatre sector, thus inspiring systematic change in Latvia’s theatre scene. It can be concluded that a sustainable attitude towards performance production mainly depends on the personal convictions of individual theatre makers, seeing as there are no common systematic guidelines in place.

Thirdly, various site-specific theatre strategies – such as audiowalk, performance-walk, performance-workshop – were not common forms of performance for the Latvian theatre scene before the Covid-19 pandemic. The challenges dictated by the pandemic caused theatre practitioners to look for alternative safe stages and, therefore, turn to the site-specific form, with performances literally taking place in nature. The situation also required them to address issues of sustainability in the production of such performances, changing choices of materials, costumes, and lighting to become more sustainable than productions in classic theatre halls.

In conclusion, this paper has shown that sustainable choices by local theatre makers in Latvia’s theatre scene are generally sporadic and often depend on the chosen ecodramaturgical material, form of performance, the director’s personal conviction, site specificity, and other production aspects.

With the European Green Deal being in the spotlight for various fields, the performing arts also need to change their point of view towards environmental challenges and look for a way to act systematically and aim for a sustainable approach in the life cycle of performance. This does not necessarily mean refusing everything in terms of scenographic solutions; instead, it requires being aware of how to make existing choices and used resources as environmentally neutral as possible in any given situation, as well as going beyond human-centredness and looking for a new coexistence between the human and more-than-human.

Summing up, it can be concluded that any action carried out by humans for the purposes of theatre inevitably has an impact on the environment and leaves an ecological footprint, starting from a rubber slipper lost in the mud of a river during a performance and ending with the behaviour of a viewer and his or her choices, which are preferably based within the attitude of reduce-reuse-recycle and, finally, refuse.

74 Pantouvaki et al. 2021, 214.

75 Beer 2016, 163.

* The paper "Reduce, Reuse, or Refuse? Pioneering Sustainability in the Theatre Scene in Latvia" by Kitija Balcare is supported by the State Culture Capital Foundation of Latvia.

AUTHOR

Kitija Balcare, Mg.Sc.Hum., is a Latvian theatre critic and environmental journalist. She is currently a PhD student at the University of Latvia researching the relationship between performing arts and ecology in the context of environmental activism. Her main research interests include ecocriticism, posthumanism, and performance studies.

REFERENCES

Adamaite, Undīne. 2015. "Mārupītes Trešais tēva dēls." In Silvija Radzobe (ed.). *Latvijas jaunā režija*. Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 239–69.

Beer, Tanja. 2021a. *Ecoscenography: An Introduction to Ecological Design for Performance*.

Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Beer, Tanja. 2021b. "Ecoscenography." *Theatre and Performance Design* 7:3-4, 149–51.

Beer, Tanja. 2016. "Ecomaterialism in Scenography." *Theatre and Performance Design* 2:1–2, 161–72.

Bo, Elena, Arianna Astolfi, Anna Pellegrino, David Pelegrin-Garcia, Giuseppe Puglisi, Louena Shtrepi, and Monika Rychtáriková. 2015. "The modern use of ancient theatres related to acoustic and lighting requirements: Stage design guidelines for the Greek theatre of Syracuse." *Energy and Buildings* 95, 106–15.

Brejzek, Thea, and Jane Collins. 2021. "Editors' Introduction." *Theatre and Performance Design* 7:3-4, 147–8.

Chaudhuri, Una, and Shonni Enelow. 2014. *Research Theatre, Climate Change, and the Ecocide Project: A Casebook*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chaudhuri, Una. 1994. "There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater." *Theater* 25:1, 23–31.

Cless, Downing. 2010. *Ecology and Environment in European Drama*. London and New York: Routledge.

Garrard, Greg. 2004. *Ecocriticism*. London and New York: Routledge.

Hann, Rachel. 2021. "Afterword: How to Celebrate." In Tanja Beer (ed.). *Ecoscenography*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 191–4.

Hammond, Will, and Dan Steward. 2008. *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*. London: Oberon Books.

Heim, Wallace. 2016. "Theatre, Conflict and Nature." *Green Letters* 20, 290–303.

Hudson, Julie. 2020. *The Environment on Stage: Scenery or Shapeshifter?* London and New York: Routledge.

Lavery, Carl. 2018. *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?* London and New York: Routledge.

May, Theresa J. 2005. "Greening the Theatre: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 7:1, 84–103.

May, Theresa J. 2007. "Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies." *Theatre Topics* 17:2, 95–110.

May, Theresa J. 2021. *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theater*. London and New York: Routledge.

McMurry, Andrew. 2019. "Ecocriticism and Discourse". In Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and Vidya Sarveswaran (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*. London and New York: Routledge, 15–25.

Pantouvaki, Sofia, Ingvill Fossheim, and Susanna Suurle. 2021. "Thinking with Costume and Material: A Critical Approach to (New) Costume Ecologies." *Theatre and Performance Design* 7:3-4, 199–219.

Robertson, Margaret. 2014. *Sustainability: Principles and Practice*. London: Routledge.

Stibbe, Arran. 2019. "Discovering the Weatherworld: Combining Ecolinguistics, Ecocriticism and Lived Experience." In Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and Vidya Sarveswaran (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*. London and New York: Routledge, 71–83.

Wojnarski, Lisa. 2020. *Ecodramaturgies: Theatre, Performance and Climate Change*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wojnarski, Lisa. 2015. *Towards an Ecological Performance Aesthetic for the Bio-Urban: A Non-Anthropocentric Theory*. London: University of London.