

# Editorial

# Editorial

By Sandra Buch, Solveig Gade, Lise Sofie Houe, Thomas Rosendal Nielsen, and Yvonne Schmidt

This issue of *Peripeti* is dedicated to sustainable performance and theatre practices in an environmental perspective. The urgency of rethinking and reimagining human activity – especially our use of planetarian resources as well as our modes of existing and coexisting with other human and non-human beings – has become increasingly obvious as the massive ecological catastrophes resulting from climate change and mass extinction have entered our horizons.

The answer to this has been coined ‘sustainability’, a word that at the same time poses a serious challenge for all sectors of society, including the theatre and performance field, and runs the risk of degenerating into just another buzzword, a medium for new kinds of tokenism and empty promises. Time has come to qualify this concept in relation to theatre and performance practices: institutionally, pedagogically, and aesthetically.

Centered in the discourse of the Anthropocene and the critique of modernist thinking, based on the rationale of dichotomies, John Robinson describes Sustainability “as a political act – not a scientific concept” focusing on the term as being both a discursive playing field, in which conflicting views can be debated, and the emergent property of a conversation about what kind of world we collectively want to live in now and in the future (Robinson 2004). The cultural dimension of sustainability echoes with being the harmony amongst differences (Gadotti 2009) and the noological sphere of human imagination and creativity (Kagan 2011). As for the critique of modernist thinking, Professor of Human Geography Mike Hulme even goes as far as to describe climate crisis, not as a crisis happening to the Modern world, but as a crisis *about* the Modern world. Following this thought, he uses a well-known rhetoric but flips the question and highlights: *We need not to ask what we can do for climate change, but what climate change can do for us* (Hulme 2009).

Translated into the field of theatre and performance, what can then come out of this crisis besides cutting down the negative carbon footprint and reusing old set designs? What kind of theatre and performance practices emerge beyond our endeavors to avoid the ecological catastrophes? What does sustainability look like in specific institutional and aesthetic circumstances? Do these new practices transcend or reproduce modernist dichotomies and tendencies towards linear development and thinking? Do they enhance and produce new possibilities for desirable ways of living together?

Questions of environmental sustainability are by no means new to theatre and performance scholarship. They may be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s with special issues such as *High Performance's* 1987 *Art Environment Ecology* and *Theater's* 1994 *Theater and Ecology* as well as monographs such as Bonnie Marranca's *Ecologies of Theatre: Essays at the Century Turning* (1996). During the '00s, the topic of ecology and theatre gained ever more traction, indicated by the increasing number of conferences and scholarly volumes dedicated to the theme as well as the forming of the organization *Earth Matters on Stage*, comprising of artists, scholars, and activists. Suffice it here to point to book titles such as Baz Kershaw's *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* (2007), Cless Downing's *Ecology and Environment in European Drama* (2010). Since around 2010, however, a veritable explosion of edited volumes, books and special issues on theatre and ecology has taken place. According to theatre scholar Lisa Woynarski, between 2010 and 2020, more than 25 titles on the topic of theatre and ecology has appeared in English (Woynarski,

2021: 18).<sup>1</sup> Titles include Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May's *Readings in Performance and Ecology* (2012), Carl Lavery's *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, the Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage* (2015) and *Performance and Ecology: What can Theatre do?* (2021), Theresa J. May's *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theatre* (2021), and Lisa Woynarski's *Ecodramaturgies: Theatre, Performance, and Climate Change* (2020).

Over the past decade, theatre practitioners and scholars alike have, informed by new materialist thinking, increasingly engaged with the *vibrancy* and agency of matter, as philosopher Jane Bennett has famously phrased it (Bennett, 2010). In reality, this has meant attempts to undo Modern binaries such as human/non-human, nature/culture, natural/unnatural and to acknowledge instead the *connectedness* and relationality of the human and the more-than-human. While the ecological interconnectedness between the human and the more-than-human has been explored on a thematic level by established and new playwrights, suffice it here to mention Caryl Churchill (*The Skriker*, 1994), Marius Von Meyenburg (*The Apes*, 2020), Pipsa Lonka (*Second Nature*, 2016, *Four Days of Closeness*, 2021), Alexandra Moltke and Nanna Tychsen (*Will The Fog Still Be Here Tomorrow?*, 2018), Marie Bjørn (*Jellyfish Blooms*, 2019), Amalie Olesen (*Microbia*, 2020), and Regina Rex (*The Building*, 2022), it has also been investigated on a material level by various performance and choreographic practices. A case in point is the durational performance installation *MASS-BLOOM explorations* by the Copenhagen-based Recoil Performance Group. In the installation, a dancer and thousands of mealworms lived side by side in a transparent dome of plastic. Together their movements formed a choreography of sorts, and during the exhibition period, the space was visibly altered by the worms' eating of and digestion of the white foam plastic that the dome was made of.

At the same time as exploring the interconnectedness between the human and the-more-than-human, a great deal of theatre practitioners as well as academics have proposed an intersectional perspective that emphasises the capitalist, colonial, and hetero-patriarchal ideologies and societal structures in which the current ecological disasters are embedded. As performance and theatre scholar Lisa Woynarski poignantly phrases it: "Rather than collapse differences in an easy mantra about connectedness, my version of ecological thinking focuses on the ways in which these connections, and the effects of these connections, are violently unequal and disproportional." (Woynarski 2021, 8). Consequently, when engaging with sustainability in theatre and beyond, we need to position ourselves and make clear what we mean by sustainability. Sustainability for whom? When? And how?

### **This issue...**

The articles collected in this issue interrogate, specify, and challenge the concept of sustainability within a broad range of circumstances and geographical areas. We encounter theatre and performance practices that directly engage with ecologies between human and non-human agents, practices that emphasise the need to reuse, replenish, and respect resources in the course of theatre production, practices that insist on forms of sustainability that care and takes care of every-body.

In the peer-reviewed section, Solveig Gade investigates the practice of the Danish choreographer Nana Fransisca Schottländer in her work *Bodyscaping*. Drawing on new materialist thinking from

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1) For a thorough overview of the rise of scholarship on theatre and ecology, see Woynarski, 2021: 12-19. A detailed list of resources from before 2015 is also available at this website: <https://www.theater-historiography.org/2015/02/05/ecocriticism-in-theatre-and-performance-studies-a-working-critical-bibliography-1991-2014/> (accessed 30.11.2022).

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Jane Bennet and Donna Haraway to Anna Tsing and Maria Puig de Bellasca, Gade points to how this work as an example of contemporary eco-performance transcends anthropocentric paradigms of dramaturgy and affords a practice of care between human-to-human and human-to-more-than-human agents.

David Norman offers a portrait of the seminal work of performance artist (and much more) Jessie Kleeman who has been doing what we could now describe as eco-critical and new materialist practice long before these words entered the mainstream academic vocabulary. Norman focuses on Kleeman's early experimentations with analogue video and on her more recent eco-critical poetry, and he shows how Kleeman places embodied action at the centre of efforts to form more ethical relations.

Sarah Woods explores how systems thinking – taking her cue from amongst others Fritjof Capra and Donella Meadows – can offer us a more holistic methodology for creative work within art, art education, and activism. This thinking is founded in her own practice as educator, artist, and activist. Based on examples from each of these contexts, she highlights three basic patterns of systems thinking that could afford making art better: the semi-permeable membrane, leverage points, and side effects.

In their article, Kenneth Nsah, Lisette Malung and Noelle Ngunyam discuss the current status of integrating sustainable practices in the Cameroonian theatre and performance landscape. They provide an introduction to the historical and political conditions of producing theatre in Cameroon, and based on a survey sample they address the emerging inclusion of sustainability perspectives concerning both material aspects of theatre such as costume, props, makeup etc. and thematic aspects: theatre reflecting the sustainable management of the commons. They point to a slow but promising development and recommend further collaboration between the Cameroon practitioners to improve progress.

The specific challenge of sustainable costume praxis is addressed in detail by Sofia Pantouvaki, Ingvill Fosshheim and Susanna Suurla. They present a historiographical review of costume practice in relation to principles of circular economy, they analyse the current paradigm and propose future strategies towards more ecologically responsible artistic frameworks. The article contributes a solid understanding of the specific complexities of sustainable costume praxis and their suggested expanded R-framework (reduce, reuse, recycle, rethink, respect etc.) has relevance to all kinds of material performance practices.

In spite of incremental improvements within both performance practice and scholarship, disability is still to a large extent a blind spot to mainstream practices. Molly Joyce introduces the field of disability studies and reflects on how to develop sustainable performance practices in relation to disability arts. Based on four interviews, selected readings and autoethnographic observations, Joyce points out accessibility, community, care, and time as central focal points for improving the sustainability of performance practices involving artists with disabilities.

Along the same lines, Nina Muehlemann discusses the work of the US-based performing arts collective *Sins Invalid* that addresses ableism within the environmental justice movement. Based

on the perspectives and visions offered by the work of this collective, Muehlemann argues for a concept of sustainability that confronts systemic oppression and recognises and takes care of the vulnerabilities and needs of all “bodyminds”.

In the essay section (comprising the non peer-reviewed articles) we are very happy to open with a republication of the late Ulla Ryum’s seminal article on non-aristotelian dramaturgies with a compelling new introduction by Joan Rang.

Kaia Lundenes’ plaidoyer for the importance of feminine values in the contemporary practice of dramaturgy continues this line of thinking against the dominance of unsustainable “masculinist” approaches to art.

Bronwyn Preece’s and Rosemary Candelario’s contribution is just as much a piece of eco-critical textual-visual performance practice in itself as it is a document of such a practice. Their montage of text and images asks the question “what are we birthing” and reflects on the devaluation of the concept of sustainability and the necessity of creative resistance to the delusion of hope.

Ayesha Jordan’s autoethnographic essay gives us another example of exactly that, as she introduces us to the principles of permaculture and how they can be applied to performance and immersive experiences in her practice research project Gather (g)Round. Her narrative gathers around observations on how sustainable practices can be transcended towards regenerative practices.

In the same vein, Christine Fentz, artistic leader of Secret Hotel and host and organiser of the artistic residency *Earthwise* and the interdisciplinary biannual symposium *Earthbound*, situates herself and her artistic practice in relation to her “co-living with other beings” in the landscape of Mols Bjerge.

From these contemplations on artistic practices we move on to more institutional perspectives, first with Kristoffer Spenders discussion on Det Multinorske Ensemble based on an interview with former head of the programme, Erik Brøyn. Det Multinorske Ensemble was an initiative to create a full acting school programme for students with cultural diverse backgrounds created by the Norwegian theatre Det Norske Teater in 2012, and Spender and Brøyn argue for a praxis of diversity that breaks with the binary thinking of centre versus periphery.

Ida Schmidt Larsen also focus on the necessity of more inclusive forms of theatre in her field study of Glad Teater and their work with creating a professional work environment for people with ability variations.

The challenges of reducing carbon footprint are addressed in the final two essays in this section. Marie Wos and Rasmus Ölme discuss the dilemmas concerning sustainability when developing internationally oriented educational programmes at the Danish National School of Performing Arts. Evaluating their experiences so far they emphasise the need to bear in mind the multiple and often conflicting contexts or contextual demands in which to act and think sustainable.

Solveig Gade has interviewed Christian Gade Bjerrum from the association Bæredygtig Scenekunst NU (Sustainable Performing Arts NOW) who – together with Jacob Teglggaard – has started this

organisation in order to help theatres share knowledge and increase speed in the green transition. Bjerrum emphasise the challenges and urgency, but also the fact that we already have a lot of knowledge about what to do – what we perhaps need the most is the incentives to speed up the effort.

In the criticism section, we bring three performance reviews: Janicke Branth reviews *Den Store Brand (The Great Fire)* (2022) at Teater Svalegangen – Simon Bobergs production of Roland Schimmelpfennig’s catastrophic allegory on the Global North’s lack of solidarity towards the Global South.

Janek Szatkowski reviews *Museum for Fremtiden (Museum for the Future)* (2022) at Sort/Hvid and Kunsthall Aarhus – Christian Lollike’s and Anders Thruu Djurslev’s performative installation that posits a reflection on a post-anthropocentric future (see also Djurslev’s article on the project in *Peripeti*, 35, 2022).

Erik Exe Christoffersen reviews the final ensemble performance by the Odin Theatre: *Theben på den gule febers tid (Thebes at the Time of the Yellow Fever)* (2022).

Erik Exe Christoffersen also offers a book review of *Højt til himlen – Visioner fra Vandkanten og andre kulturkaravaner gennem årene* (2022) by Johs Thorst, Elisabeth Groot and Gitte Kielberg.

Finally, we mourn and remember our colleague and friend Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen who was a co-editor of this issue until we lost him to cancer in the early days of this year, 2022. Stig Jarl has written an obituary. Kim’s enthusiasm, knowledge and broad horizon was vital to the initial outline of the present issue, and his short article in *Peripeti* vol. 32 on “The Role of Dystopian Art in the Climate Crisis” was one of the impulses that set it off. Kim’s insistent optimism in that article still resounds: “In the reality drama of climate threat, we are all actors whether we realize it or not—for good or ill. And as I have shown, the arts might play a role as a driving force in our response. Those of us who live in democracies must press our representatives to take the foreboding climate collapse seriously and address it aggressively. But there are many ways to join with others in moving beyond paralyzing fear to effective action and enduring hope. How this drama culminates is up to all of us” (Skjoldager-Nielsen 2018, p. 34).

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