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CLIMATE THEATRE: MOBILIZING AUDIENCES TOWARDS ACTIVISM

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May 2023

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Theatre
Sarah Lawrence College

ABSTRACT

With greenhouse gas emissions rising and the climate changing at rapid rates, we are nearing a precipice where if we do not cut our emissions environmental disaster will set in. Everyone on this planet will experience the devastating effects. As theatre artists, we must consider our role in the future of climate activism. How can we, as artists, morally continue to create while the world confronts a precipice where life as we know it could become hazardous? In order to ignite activism and reimagine the world we are in, we must critically examine the pieces we create and ask: How can we mold our work to be climate centric and inspire drastic change? This thesis looks to the Environmental Justice Movement and the means they use to mobilize communities in order to determine the course of action theatre practitioners can take with their work. We will look to Roadside Theater and Augusto Boal to determine ways partnership may be created between audience and performer. Finally, *Little Amal: In search of the waterfront* and Emily Johnson's body of work — with direct focus on *Being Future Being* — will be analyzed using three components proposed in this thesis. All this will determine methods theatre artists can use to ignite a desire within their audiences to imagine and actualize positive climate futures post-show.

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Introduction

With greenhouse gas emissions rising and the climate changing at rapid rates, we are nearing a precipice where if we do not cut our emissions environmental disaster will set in. Everyone on this planet will experience the devastating effects. As theatre artists, we must consider our role in the future of climate activism. How can we, as artists, morally continue to create while the world confronts a precipice where life as we know it could become hazardous? In *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theater*, author and associate professor of theatre at the University of Oregon, Theresa J. May, states “At a time when master narratives of empire have induced global ecological crisis, with implications for human and animal suffering of catastrophic proportion, the critical role of the performing arts as a site of counter-discourse, resistance, and reimagining can hardly be more apparent” (279). In order to create resistance and reimagine the world we are in, we must critically examine the pieces we create and ask: How can we mold our work to be climate centric and inspire drastic change? Three components must be identifiable in a climate theatre performance in order to ignite in audiences a desire to join in activism post-show. One, audiences must be active participants and incorporated into the performance. Two, the production should aim to take place in or incorporate a non-traditional theatre setting. Three, there must be a clear call for environmental action at the heart of the piece.

This thesis looks to the Environmental Justice Movement and the means they use to mobilize communities in order to determine the course of action theatre practitioners can take with their work. We will look to Roadside Theater and Augusto Boal to determine ways partnership may be created between audience and performer. Finally, *Little Amal: In search of the waterfront* and Emily Johnson’s body of work — with direct focus on *Being Future Being* —

will be analyzed using the three components stated above. All this will determine methods theatre artists can use to ignite a desire within their audiences to imagine and actualize positive climate futures post-show.

The State of Our World

As time and human industrialization pushes forward, our collective actions move the planet towards dire consequences that are irreversible. We only have a finite amount of time to prevent an unsustainable environment for humans and non-humans in the future to come.

According to Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, a diplomat and political strategist who led negotiations for the Paris Agreement of 2015, there are two dates that are important to note for the climate crisis: 2030 and 2050 (xxii). The dates refer to the amount of time we have to reverse global greenhouse gas emissions. When released, greenhouse gasses have the ability to trap heat in the atmosphere. When heat is confined to the atmosphere the after effects are heat waves, glaciers thawing, flooding of coastal cities, and warming oceans. Figueres and Rivett-Carnac state “The milestones of 2030 and 2050 are rooted in the latest science that tells us just how long we can go on doing little or nothing before disaster sets in” (xxiii). By 2030 (only seven years away), nations collectively need to cut their emissions by a minimum of 50% in order to prevent humanitarian disasters (xxii Figueres, Rivett-Carnac). Succeeding 2030, we globally would need to reach net zero by 2050 (United Nations). What does it mean to reach net zero? According to the United Nations official webpage on Net-zero commitments, “net zero means cutting greenhouse gas emissions to as close to zero as possible, with any remaining emissions re-absorbed from the atmosphere, by oceans and forests for instance”. The stakes for

healing the planet have been heightened. Figueres and Rivett-Carnac put it best by acknowledging that “this is the last time in history when we will be able to do this” (xxiii).

With this urgency in mind, how can theatre artists ethically continue to create while the world confronts a precipice where life as we know it could become even more hazardous? How can we mold our work to be climate centric and inspire drastic change? In *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theater*, Theresa J. May muses “...merely overlaying green themes on narratives and forms that still sow the seeds and structures of oppression is not enough. Theater artists must continue to ask, ‘What is the history of the land we are representing on a stage?’” (5). Setting a piece within the Anthropocene or shrouding the text with environmental themes is considered eco-theater (May, 202). An eco-theater approach to environmental performances is no longer an effective way to further theatrical conversations when it comes to the climate. We now have a limited time to enact change and attempt to rectify the suppression white dominant narratives have caused. There must be a sense of urgency and acknowledgement of injustices that have occurred during the history of land being represented.

We can no longer create fictional dystopian worlds that represent a society living during a planet’s demise. We are in it now. Scott Sharplin, a theatre artist and activist who has arranged climate action through Extinction Rebellion, remarked:

Most people modelling new societies tend to think in terms of science fiction, but [Science Fiction] reinforces the idea that our solutions are a long way off. I circle back around to realism, the present, the here and now, because it's got both of those elements in it, the crisis and the solution. They're both happening simultaneously (Christie 127-128).

As theatre artists, we must begin building futures we wish to see in the present so they can become actualized instead of dreamed about. If we continue building fictional worlds, the environmental crisis we are in will seem fabricated which could contribute to continued climate

change denial. As a result, environmental injustices will continue to occur throughout the world and those greatly effected will continue to experience the immediate results of the changing climate. Communities of color experience varying levels of injustice caused by the changing climate and racism. When discussing the popularity of dystopian imaginations, May references Indigenous philosopher and environmental justice scholar, Kyle Powys Whyte who states:

Sometimes I see settler environmental movements as seeking to avoid some dystopian environmental future or planetary apocalypse. These visions are replete with species extinctions, irreversible loss of ecosystems, and severe rationing [...] Yet for many Indigenous people in North America, we are already living in what our ancestors would have understood as dystopian or post-apocalyptic times (May, 242).

If we continue to build fictional worlds, we cannot rebuild the one we are in. The dystopia is now. The dying is now.

February 2, 2023 saw one of the United State's largest environmental disasters in recent years (DeFelice). A Norfolk Southern locomotive train made up of one hundred and fifty railcars crossed over the border of Pennsylvania heading into Ohio (Kim; Sullivan). Over eighty percent of the railcars were carrying frozen vegetables, cement, and steel, which are materials that could otherwise be categorized as non-hazardous (Sullivan). As the train was passing through East Palestine, Ohio, thirty six of the cars derailed due to a malfunction with the railcar axle (The Associated Press). Unbeknownst to the 4,800 residents of the village, twenty of the railcars carried hazardous materials.

Officials became concerned when vinyl chloride was discovered as a material in five train cars. The substance is man made and used to make PVC, a type of plastic for pipes (Sullivan). Once the vinyl chloride seeps into the environment (air, water, earth), the cancerous material poses many health risks such as dizziness, headaches, and liver damage (Kim). Officials feared a fatal explosion due to vinyl chloride being combustible and the rising temperatures inside the

railcars. An executive decision was made to slowly release the vinyl chloride to prevent such an explosion. Residents of East Palestine were evacuated due to the concern of safety. Authorities released the vinyl chloride into a trench and burned it to create a controlled explosion (Sullivan).

Once the fire was put out and air quality was judged to be safe, on February 8 residents were informed they could return to their homes (Kim). However, locals have been describing concerns such as headaches, burning sensations in their eyes, strange odors, and dead fish floating in the creeks (Friedman et al.). A small business owner named Maggie Guglielmo stated “I now wear an N95 mask when I go in, but I can still smell the stuff. And I also wear goggles, but it’s still irritating my eyes” (Janse et al.). In spite of resident’s concerns, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have not encountered air levels they would deem concerning while monitoring the air quality (Kim). Even though 3,500 fish have died in the area of East Palestine, authorities state that the city water is safe to drink, but have been encouraging residents with well water to use bottled water until they are able to test their private sources (Sullivan). Concerned residents have been urging the younger generation to leave for good and find a safer community to live in (Friedman et al.).

How could the transportation of hazardous materials go unnoticed? Since the majority of the railcars were carrying non-hazardous materials Norfolk Southern was not legally required to alert Ohio officials of the hazardous shipment. Ohio’s governor, Mike Dewine, is pushing Congress to change the law on hazardous cargo notifications. In a statement Dewine said “We should know when we have trains carrying hazardous material that are going through the state of Ohio” (Sullivan). In an address after the derailment, the administrator for the EPA stated that the agency had no plans to deem the area of East Palestine a Superfund site (Friedman et al.). Superfund sites are areas contaminated by unsafe waste that was dumped or poorly managed

(“What is Superfund? | US EPA”). Within the United States, there are thousands of Superfund sites that dwell around communities (“Population Surrounding 1,877 Superfund Sites | US EPA”). The first example of a Superfund site within the United States instigating legislation is Love Canal.

During the turn of the twentieth century, construction began on Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York. Development of the canal was deserted. After, the Hooker Electrochemical Company used the abandoned site to dump twenty-one thousand tons of hazardous chemicals from 1942 to 1953. Although Love Canal was covered over in 1953, it did not fix or prevent the soil from being contaminated. Eventually, homes and an elementary school were built near the site. Although there were many complaints from residents, the EPA and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation did not begin inspecting the groundwater and indoor air until 1977. The reports made by the governmental agencies were sent to President Jimmy Carter who called an emergency declaration that would fund cleanup work and relocate residents. Due to the gravity of the contamination, federal legislation called Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (often referred to as the Superfund law) was created in order to manage hazardous waste being dumped throughout the country. Love Canal was the first Superfund site to be put on National Priorities List by the EPA (“Superfund Site Profile | LOVE CANAL NIAGRA FALLS, NY | Cleanup Activities”). Ultimately, the mistreatment of lands deemed as Superfund sites means they are uninhabitable. Concerns over our environmental impact are of great concern, not only as it pertains to the pollutants we exhaust but also to circumstantial natural disasters as well. Similar to Love Canal, the Norfolk Southern train crash in East Palestine, Ohio has started to change the lives of residents near the crash site and will drastically change the natural landscape even though it is

currently not considered to be a Superfund site. As land becomes uninhabitable and the repercussions of the changing climate continue to become prominent, artists creating environmentally driven theatre will need to find a way to elicit from their audiences a desire to forge climate and social change in their lives and the world that surrounding them.

Environmental Justice Movement in Theatre

The actions that need to be taken by theatre practitioners in the coming years must be socially and politically driven. Environmentalism is not the political ideology to frame environmentally conscious performances. Although it is a movement and political action that focuses on the protection of the environment, environmentalisms' past is riddled with racism, classism, and a limited agenda of activism (Mazotti 1-2; Pezzullo and Sandler 2). There have been instances where environmentalists suggest solutions that disregard the humanity of people who live with lower incomes and their right to live.

In "Lifeboat Ethics" environmental economist Garrett Hardin claims...that people tend to overpopulate when they have enough food to eat. This explains the twentieth century's enormous population growth, which threatens environmental ruin. Hardin's solution is to deprive poor people in overpopulated Third World countries of food by refusing to send them food, refusing to allow them to move to countries where food is plentiful, and refusing to transfer agricultural technologies to them so they can grow their own food (Pezzullo and Sandler, 59).

Economists and scientists like Hardin look to data and figures in order to decide the course of action we can use to "fix" the climate issue. Additionally, some environmentalists suggest the taxation of gasoline to increase the prices so civilians are less likely to use their cars resulting in an increase of public transportation. However, in many areas of the United States, residents have no other options but to use cars; the efficiency of public transport is not accessible for many people living in the country. Increasing gas prices as a means to lower the amount of

private car use only hurts those who live with lower incomes (Pezzullo and Sandler, 59).

Ultimately, Environmentalism focuses on the effects the changing climate has on the planet but many of the professionals in the field forget to think about the impact it has on people. Based on the lack of concern economists and scientists have towards humanity in relation to the climate crisis, the best framework for environmentally conscious performances should aim to include the people as leaders in the issues.

The Environmental Justice Movement focuses on addressing the inequities of environmental protection primarily within communities of color (“Environmental Justice | US EPA”). When discussing the history of environmental justice, Esme G. Murdock discusses the relation of the movement with communities:

Environmental justice is, importantly, a movement, which means that it starts and lives with the people: in the communities that are experiencing the harms and in the challenges environmental injustices enact in the places where community members live, work, and play. What this means is that while environmental justice has intellectual and academic dimensions, it is primarily a grassroots and people-driven movement (Coolsaet, 9).

The Environmental Justice Movement shifts the power away from Environmentalists who are primarily thinking about the data instead of the ways changes will affect everyday people. The people are in control of this movement. They make the decisions that will lead to positive climate and social change. When considering the Environmental Justice Movement’s influence on theatre, May states:

Environmental justice thinking and activism not only inspired a plethora of regional and community-based works, signaling a new attentiveness among theater artists to environmental issues, but also a willingness on the part of critics and scholars to recognize and theorize ecological meanings in ways that had been invisible before...these new perspectives pointed toward a growing recognition that theater has always and already been part of our collective conversation and imaginings about the natural world (206).

If theatre has always been part of the dialogue between humans and the natural world, then we must shift those conversations into ones of action. In order to do so, we must look to the ways community members took action in the Environmental Justice Movement.

During the rise of the Environmental Justice Movement, action was being taken by members of communities (primarily communities of color) speaking out against unfair environmental protection. In December of 1979, Black homeowners of Houston, Texas sought to keep a landfill from being established 1500 feet away from a public school. Locals formed a group called Northeast Community Action Group or NECAG. The group hired an attorney to file a class action lawsuit against Southwestern Waste Management Company to block the landfill. The suit became known as *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management Corp.* Although the lawsuit failed in stopping the construction of the landfill, it became the first instance of a community charging a facility environmental discrimination protected under civil rights laws (“Environmental Justice | US EPA”). If the purpose of making environmentally driven theatrical pieces is to achieve a step towards a solution to our global problem, then, like *Bean V. Southwestern Waste Management Corp.*, the work that needs to be made must be created for and controlled by the audience. Theatrical performances, on and off the stage, have the capacity to change perspectives and ignite action within the people viewing them. Discussing the power and impact theatre activism has on people witnessing and participating, May notes a time theater was taken to the streets of Seattle:

In November 1999, theater performed in the streets of Seattle formed the backbone of direct-action protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting. Using methods reminiscent of Bread and Puppet, San Francisco Mime Troupe, and El Teatro Campesino, costumed protesters, giant puppets, musicians, and all manner of theatrical activities effectively stopped the WTO meetings and shut down the downtown business districts of the city (230).

Those most affected by the pollutants of industry and the changes in the climate should be at the center of these stories because the “realities of the communities experiencing environmental injustices are often rendered invisible and ignored by the dominant society and members of privileged communities” (Coolsaet 9).

The questions previously stated shall be posed again, “How can theatre artists morally continue to create while the world confronts a precipice where life as we know it could become hazardous?” and “How can we mold our work to be climate centric and inspire drastic change?” Three components are pertinent to the future of climate theatre if audiences are to commit radical change post-show. One, the audience must be incorporated or active participants in the performance. Two, the production should aim to take place in or incorporate a non-traditional theatre setting. Three, there must be a call for environmental action at the core of the piece.

Regarding the first component proposed for radically driven environmental theatre, the work needs to be driven by the audiences in attendance if Environmental Justice is at the core of climate-driven performance. Speaking to theatre’s role in civic practice, May affirms that “...both audience and performers are responsible for bringing the play to life in the present time and in a shared place of the stage. This fundamental contract – the willingness to collectively engage in fiction for the purpose of bearing witness and finding meaning – makes theater a vital civic tool” (3). Enhancing this idea of civic engagement and moving it to civic incorporation, we should look to Roadside Theater and the tools they used to unify multiple communities into one singular alliance as an example of ways theatre can incite change.

Roadside Theater: A Collaborative Company

The work Roadside Theater has accomplished since their inception in 1975 has been rich with community engagement, artistic collaboration, and social justice. They are a professional

group of theater makers who are in the central Appalachia mountains, specifically Kentucky (“History – Roadside Theater”). Much of their work strives to “make tomorrow look different from yesterday” (Fink, 231). Residing in the Appalachian mountains, Roadside Theater’s work reflects the people who live there. In volume two of *Art in Democracy: Selected Plays of Roadside Theater*, editor Ben Fink elaborates on Roadside Theater’s storytelling style by noting:

The theater’s distinctive style, telling stories interwoven with acting and music, was drawn from mountain preachers, singers, and traditional storytellers...And as at church, people onstage and off lingered in fellowship long after the performance was over. At its best, a Roadside event was a form of secular communion (1-2).

Their specific style of theatrical spiritual communion brings many different types of people from multiple communities together. Roadside Theater works to support each individual’s distinct experience into the room and portray those stories on the stage (Fink, 30). Due to their geographical location, they tend represent the coal miners of the area and people who would be considered lower class. However, much of their work attempts to bridge gaps between the white and Black communities in their area and other locations that reflect their own. Roadside Theater works in collaboration with other theatres to create works that mirrors the full diversity of a community (Fink, 7).

For 38 years Roadside Theater collaborated with John O’Neal, co-founder of Free Southern Theater and founder of Junebug Productions (“Seven Tracks: A Conversation Between Dudley Cocks and John O’Neal”). Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions co-created a play called *Junebug/Jack* (Fink, 5). The creation process of the piece stemmed from a technique O’Neal developed. He came up with the process of storycircles; a way of sharing personal stories in a group with a structured element. Participants of a story circle sit together in a circle and tell stories. There is a moderator who provides a prompt and times the duration each person speaks so everyone’s story is of equal length. O’Neal described story circles as having “as few rules as

possible and no laws. Well, maybe one law: the law of listening... You don't have to like the story that somebody else tells, but you do have to respect their right to tell it" (Fink, 44).

Stories circles stemmed from O'Neal's own perspective of theatre and the audience's role within it. He firmly believed that the relationship between the audience and performers is a give and take. Theatre artists give something to the audience and, in turn, audiences offer something back to the performers (Fink, 44). O'Neal's story circle process was used as a way to generate new stories and ideas for *Junebug/Jack*. The creation process began with ensemble members from the two different areas (New Orleans, LA and Whitesburg, KY) sharing individual stories dealing with race, place, and class (Fink, 5-7). The stories and themes from the early stages of the development process were used to construct *Junebug/Jack*. Once the production began performing for audiences, they used story circles as a way to connect with audiences after the performance finished as an attempt to bring differing communities together.

Through their collaboration with Junebug Productions, O'Neal influenced Roadside Theater's perspective on how and why they make art. According to Fink, Roadside Theater is aligned with populist ideals. He states "Populism is defined by a genuine love and affection for the people, all people. This is the spirit in which Roadside calls itself not a theater of protest, but a theater of affirmation — committed to honoring people's innate worth, regardless of the categories or identities they belong to" (229). Roadside Theater focuses on the power of co-creation as a way to empower members of communities who remain unseen. They see their purpose as building an alliance of average people in places they see as their home. This allows people, who may have never met otherwise, to share their own stories in order to cultivate a prosperous and united community (Fink, 231). The future of what climate theatre can be lies in the objective Roadside Theater strives for in their work; building new and stronger communities

by using theatre as a means to do so. While story circles are an effective way of building relationships with audiences, the process tends to happen pre or post show. In order to radicalize the way we, as artists, incorporate audiences in environmentally engaged performance, we should look to Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and its "spect-actor."

Augusto Boal and Partnership

Boal, an influential contemporary theatre practitioner from Brazil, concerned himself with the transformation of other peoples lives through theatre. *Theatre of the Oppressed* was written when the political climate of Brazil during the late 1960s and early 1970s was repressive (Babbage 1). There was a monumental wage gap between the rich and poor of Brazil and for most of the twentieth century the country was ruled by several military dictatorships (2). The combination of a repressive government, economic instability, and constant inflation caused upset and subsequently strikes and riots among civilians ensued (3). When painting the scene of Boal's Brazil, Frances Babbage states "The power of the (military) government increased with civil liberties correspondingly restricted; oppositional parties were outlawed or refused to participate in corrupt electoral process. All forms of cultural expression came in for heavy censorship" (3).

Having lived in and been influenced by a repressive society, Boal aims to bring theatre back to its original practice: something that is shared and created by everyone. He claims that the period in which Greek theatre began saw the departure from equality among audience and performers. Theatre shifted to being a tool that teaches spectators the mandatory nature of conformity (Babbage 37). The type of shift (theatrical and societal) Boal noticed was later recognized and developed into a theory in 1987 by Riane Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade*.

Cultural Transformation Theory indicates shifts alternating between two models of social and belief organizations. The two models are named androcracy and gylany. Androcracy, otherwise known as domination, is a societal structure that has a hierarchy where one group of people has power over the other and uses said power to control. Gylany, often referred to as partnership, is the opposite of Androcracy. The people within this societal structure collaborate together and empower each other with ideas. Eisler suggests that within gylany there were leaps in cultural evolution. Additionally, she proposes that different societies followed certain paths. Some of the paths aligned with the domination model while others followed one of partnership. However, at some point, civilization shifted from primarily following the partnership model and changed direction to domination (Mercanti, 7). Therefore, the shift Boal notes happening in Greek theatre could very well be a theatrical shift of partnership to domination.

Boal considers theatre as being manipulated by the “ruling classes” as a means to control members of society. The methodology (*Theatre of the Oppressed*) turns theatre away from a tool of control and molds it into a “weapon for liberation” (38). Towards the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the dictatorship Brazil was under resorted to violent means to further control its society and consequentially the arts. At the peak of aggression, the police arrested and tortured theatre makers: Boal among them. After being physically persecuted for three months in the Department of Political and Social Order, artists from around the world wrote to appeal the wrongful treatment and release of Boal. The appeal was a success. He was freed and acquitted of all charges. However, Boal and his family were exiled to Argentina (15-16).

Within the confines of exile, Boal developed, adapted, and expanded *Theatre of the Oppressed* further from its influence of Brazil’s social and political climate (Babbage 16). While for many years Argentina was the primary location he stayed in during his exile, he traveled to

the United States, Europe, and other places in Latin America to share *Theatre of the Oppressed* techniques (22). This global expansion resulted in the technique, which was invented to fight oppressive authorities in the Global South, being introduced and practiced by those in the Global North (23). An expansion of *Theatre of the Oppressed* to countries in the Global North indicates that the praxis transformed into something new while keeping what was found at the start of its development at its core. Babbage sites Silvia Pellarolo's, a professor in the Spanish Department at the University of California - Northridge, argument:

...adaptations of this kind constitute necessary acknowledgments of the changes in sociopolitical structures, in First *and* Third Worlds¹, triggered by the shift of late capitalism towards globalisation of the economy. The concept of class struggle, and belief in its possibility, have been established within both contexts and to an extent replaced by wider discontent among all marginalised sectors of society. The expansion of *Theatre of the Oppressed* which from the mid-1980s forged connections with many varieties of community activism, such as social work, special education, health and human services professions, is arguably a reflection of "this new geopolitical and demographic picture" (25).

Whether *Theatre of the Oppressed* is being practiced in the Global North or South, community activism is at the heart of the practice. Expanding beyond Brazil allowed Boal's praxis to influence and impact other forms civic engagement related and unrelated to theatre.

Harkening back to the first component proposed for environmentally driven theatre, performances must be driven by the people; or in Boal's case, its spectators. One of the key components of *Theatre of the Oppressed* is that the audiences' title becomes "spect-actor", a viewer who joins and greatly impacts the direction onstage (Gewertz). Boal considers the word "spectator" to be a bad word. He uses the word "spect-actor" to humanize audiences and, as he sees it, audience and actors must be on the same playing field (Boal 154-155) . The idea being

¹ This is the language Babbage and Pellarolo chose to use in their text. The most up to date terminology is "Global North" and "Global South" (Braff and Nelson).

the spect-actor does not allow the actor to think and act for them. The spect-actor actively changes the dialogue towards words that activate changes to their given circumstances (122).

Boal states “The *poetics of the oppressed* is essentially the poetics of liberations: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action...a rehearsal of revolution” (155).

Although the actor and spect-actor are rehearsing problems in their community, working through those scenarios in a theatrical setting ignites a desire to take action in reality and begin to disrupt structures that caused oppression (142). Incorporating the audience into the performance as active contributors to the story shifts theatre out of a domination model and into a model of partnership. The creation of partnership between performers and audiences within climate theatre would put into perspective a fact about the climate crisis; the repercussions effect every walk of life and the only way to make lasting change is to work together.

Moving onto the second piece to climate theatre that results in audiences committing radical change post-show, the production should aim to take place in or incorporate a non-traditional theatre setting. The Environmental Justice Movement encourages activism to grow with the people in the communities where environmental injustice occurs every day (Coolsaet 9). If the issue being addressed involves a specific geographical location then that is where the show should be performed. When dissecting theater as a civic practice May states “theater’s inherent reciprocity encourages dialogue not only between performers and audience but also between the event of the performance and the larger socio-political milieu in which it takes place” (3). A non-traditional setting would actualize the climate injustices occurring in the world into reality. Being taken outside the theatre will cause audiences to see that the climate

crisis is not fictional. It is not something that can be forgotten about once they leave the walls of the theatre. It is real. It is happening.

Three, there must be a call for environmental action at the core of the piece. The environmental injustices occurring in and affecting the communities we live in should be the subject of performances. We need to address these issues so audiences can act out and find their own solutions in order to disrupt the systems that initially subjected them to environmental injustice. Additionally, we must use the platform of theatre to bring larger attention to injustice. Sheila Christie, an educator at Cape Breton University, facilitated a conversation among ten academics, artists, and activists to express their process of using theatre to aid action towards the climate crisis. They discuss the need to stay with each other through these troubles and pursue ways theatre can aid the environmental emergency (Christie 126).

While the scope of the climate crisis is overwhelming, theatre and performance can help us examine the values that have led to the current moment and can motivate shifts in perception and practices to help mitigate the catastrophic effects of climate change. Artists and activists are using performance to raise consciousness...and explore possible futures (Christie 126).

Performance as a way to examine and motivate should be the aim of climate-driven theatre practitioners. As Boal suggests through his praxis, spect-actor involvement on stage will create a desire to take measures into their own hands. Power will be equally distributed and knowledge would be shared within this type of partnership model. Within the work, artists have an opportunity to ignite action inside their viewers. If done, in the post-show audiences will go out and change an uninhabitable planet into a tenatable one. While reflecting on the effects of the pandemic had on artists' and viewers' abilities to create and motivate, Christie stated, "when times are hard, we turn to the arts for solace; when we all work together, we can achieve radical change" (127). Considering the components of audience involvement, a non-traditional setting,

and a call to action, we will begin to assess two recent productions — Handspring Puppet Company's *Little Amal* and Emily Johnson's *Being Future Being* — and their role in changing the landscape of environmentally driven activism theatre.

Handspring Puppet Company: *Little Amal*

Handspring Puppet Company brought to life the story of a young Syrian refugee named *Little Amal*. The company was founded in 1981 by Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones. They are the leading puppet theatre company in South Africa and have shown work in over thirty countries. They are best known for their puppetry work for *War Horse* which was produced at the National Theatre in London, England (“Handspring Puppet Company - The Walk”). They later developed a work that would cross borders and become a symbol for refugee rights. Through the form of puppetry, they created the 12-foot-tall girl who would become *Little Amal*. Speaking to the message of *Little Amal*, Handspring Puppet Company's official website states “Since July 2021 Amal has travelled over 9,000km across 13 countries representing all children fleeing war, violence and persecution and each with their own story, Little Amal's urgent message to the world is ‘Don't forget about us’” (“The Walk (Little Amal)”). Throughout the month of September and the beginning of October in 2022, *Little Amal* made its debut in New York City by traveling around the five boroughs of the city to take part in fifty different events (“New York City 2022 - The Walk”). Like previous events in other countries, *Little Amal* in New York City brings awareness to children experiencing war, persecution, and displacement in the hopes that the global community will not forget about them. While the core message is still prominent in each occasion, the fifty events incorporated and celebrated other groups of people experiencing

persecution and injustice such as the LGBTQIA+ and the Lenape people. Additionally, one event focused on environmental injustice occurring in the South Bronx.

“In search of the waterfront” took place in Mott Haven which is an area in the South Bronx whose population is primarily made up of Latinx and Black people. Mott Haven has been nicknamed “Asthma Alley” because it is considered to have some of the worst air pollution in the United States. The air pollution is the result of companies housing their warehouses in the area. Fresh Direct established their warehouse in Mott Haven. As a result, exhaust emissions have risen due to hundreds of their trucks going in and out of the business on a daily basis. Also, the Wall Street Journal’s printing facility is located in the area and adds additional emissions that the community inhales. Asthma hospitalization in Mott Haven is “five times the national average and at rates twenty-one times higher than other NYC neighborhoods”(Kilani). “In search of the waterfront” centers an ongoing issue within the community to bring attention to a change that needs to be made.

The *Little Amal* event focused on an environmental issue for that specific area of the Bronx. Mott Haven is one of the only areas in the city without a green waterfront area for the community. Instead, what the community has is a waste dump. South Bronx Unite is the community group currently undertaking the issue with their Mott Haven-Port Morris Waterfront Plan. According to the group, “[the] proposal...would create public access to the riverfront for approximately 100,000 people along a 96-acre strip of public land...” (Pulla). The 2.75 million (USD) set in place for the plan is currently with the wrong government agency causing a halt in any progress. In order to activate it, the funds need to be sent to an entirely different city department.

“In search of the waterfront” used community engagement to create a call to action through puppet intervention. The performance asked volunteers, performers, and observers to join forces in a theatrical event in order to bring international attention to an environmental injustice occurring in Mott Haven. With the help of Processional Arts Workshop, a volunteer-based puppet company that is responsible for the pageant puppets at New York’s Village Halloween Parade, the *Little Amal* team created a parade that took the giant puppet through a non-traditional theatre setting. The eight block path taken by the performers in Mott Haven began at 140th Street and ended at the Lincoln Avenue waterfront access point. The performers involved in the parade were a mix of volunteers and invited community members assembled the day of. Those involved became “spect-actors” and were able to actively make a change in the community they live in (*Little Amal: In search of the waterfront*).

Everyone involved wore fish hats that resembled ones native to the Hudson river (the mass of water running alongside the South Bronx) such as striped bass, river herring, and Atlantic sturgeon. Both volunteers and community members puppeteered giant blue fabric to represent the river. A local drum group provided the parade’s music that drew other members of the community to the *Little Amal* performance. *Little Amal* walked in the center of the theatrical river and interacted with all involved. She guided the gathering of people to the heart of one of the Environmental injustices taking place in Mott Haven. Upon reaching the waterfront, the participants partaking in and the observers of the performance event discovered that Mott Haven is one of the only areas in the city that does not have a waterfront park in their neighborhood. “In search of the waterfront” incorporated its audience directly into the performance, took place in the streets of the South Bronx, and called for the community to take action in its efforts to create a waterfront. *Little Amal* brought the community together and used an international platform to

bring awareness to an injustice happening to a community and its environment (*Little Amal: In search of the waterfront*). By furthering the ways artists can create partnership between themselves and audiences, Emily Johnson's body of work encapsulates the merging of activism and art in relation to land.

Emily Johnson: Previous Work and *Being Future Being*

Award winning body-based artist, Emily Johnson, incorporates in her work the three components proposed for the future of climate theatre: audience involvement, non-traditional theatre setting, and a call for environmental action. Johnson has been noted as one of the leading figures to guide performing arts venues in New York towards incorporating land acknowledgements, a practice that was only previously common in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, as part of pre-gathering speeches (Burke). Siobhan Burke of the *New York Times* describes her work as “Merging art and activism, Johnson’s expansive work often brings its viewer-participants into outdoor public spaces, drawing our attention to the land beneath and around us — to what has been here before and what could be in the future” (Burke). She is a land and water protector who is seeking to create a just world where performance becomes the way in which we connect with one another (human and non-human), the environment, the stories we tell, and our past, present and future. Johnson’s works are processions and portals that take audiences through the environment we reside in and act as an incentive to interact with the history of a place in order to build futures we want to live in (*Emily Johnson/Catalyst*).

Johnson is of Yup'ik Nation, an Indigenous people of Alaska, Canada, and Greenland, but is currently based in Lenapehoking/New York City (Ainana et al.; *Emily Johnson/Catalyst*). She grew up near her grandmother's roadside bar in rural Alaska. In a conversation with Bill T.

Jones, the Artistic Director of New York Live Arts, she describes what type of influence the bar had on her and what art was like in her childhood growing up in Alaska.

What I remember most about art in my family was stories...there were stories always around with the hunting and with the fishing and with the fires and there were also all these characters at this bar...[I] maybe started to make my own stories around these characters...it was a gathering place and maybe that's the art that came from my [childhood] ("In Conversation with Emily Johnson").

The creation of a gathering place and interactions between audience and performer are central to Johnson's work. When discussing the incorporation of activism within the arts and the doubts artists may run into regarding their profession Johnson states "I have less doubt. I know that what I'm doing is all that I want to do...the thing I always want to do is I want to root my work deeper and with more people..." ("In Conversation with Emily Johnson). The rooting of work and collaboration of more people comes from her desire to cultivate a just future in the present.

Johnson points to the need for climate justice to incorporate Indigenous led climate justice and resistances. As a land and water defender, she has been on the frontlines of tree and land protection in Lenapehoking. She and other land defenders have been organizing to protect one thousand trees and fifty acres on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Johnson notes that the city of New York has already cut down around seven hundred trees so there are only five hundred and five left that need protection. She stresses that soon there will not be any trees on the island of Mannahatta (what the Lenape people call Manhattan) that are one hundred years old ("In Conversation with Emily Johnson"; Harris). She points to capitalism and the expansion of real estate in the city as being the source of land demolition.

When discussing climate justice with Jones, Johnson asserts "They started that destruction at a sacred site. At a massacre site of the Lenape people. That was a massacre that was committed in 1643. They started cutting down trees at that site" ("In Conversation with

Emily Johnson”). The massacre Johnson is speaking to is the Pavonia Massacre that occurred on February 25, 1643. The attack was conducted by Dutch soldiers and citizens that were directed towards encampments at Pavonia and Corlears Hook (what is today currently known as Jersey City, New Jersey and the Lower East Side). Around one hundred and twenty Indigenous people were killed during the night between the two locations (“Remembering Pavonia – The Pavonia Massacre”). From research she conducted with other folks and the Tribal Historic Preservation Office at Stockbridge, Munsee, they discovered that the city of New York was not actively geolocating sacred sites. That means they do not know where they should not be desecrating. Regarding the future of climate justice, Johnson speaks to social justice and landback movements being interrelated. Landback movement is a political framework that aims to give Indigenous lands back to Indigenous people (“LANDBACK - Building lasting Indigenous sovereignty”). It focuses on rebuilding our relationship with Mother Earth to one that is mutually beneficial and reclaiming our responsibility as stewards of this planet (“LANDBACK Manifesto”). When speaking about landback movements and social justice, Johnson states that “there is no climate justice without Indigenous led climate, justice and resistances” (“In Conversation with Emily Johnson”). In current and previous performances, the acknowledging and reclaiming of land is central to Johnson’s work. She sets her shows and gatherings outside of the theatre in the natural and (due to industrialization) un-natural surroundings. The audience is invited and immersed in the building of just futures by actively communing with performers and more than human kin.

Johnson is known for holding and curating monthly ceremonial fires called *Kinstillatory Mappings in Light and Dark Matter* with Karyn Recollect (“Emily Johnson and Karyn Recollect Kinstillatory Mappings in Light and Dark Matter”). As they define it, Kinstillatory is a choreography that relates to ancestors, land, and possibilities while also being a spatiality that

allows a group to hope, think, and actualize the future of the community (“KINSTILLATORY MAPPINGS IN LIGHT AND DARK MATTER —”). The gatherings are held outside of Abrons Arts Center on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Johnson and Recollect have produced many of these ceremonial fires, many of which occurred during the 2020 pandemic. During the event, guests of organizers and artists are asked to perform or share stories that protect and respect the air, water, and earth where Abrons Arts Center is located; which is Lenapeyok land (“Emily Johnson and Karyn Recollet Kinstillatory Mappings in Light and Dark Matter”). Communities, not limited to the artistic community, are asked to gather as they watch artists express positive futures and possibilities for humans and non-humans alike. Johnson considers the fire to act as a threshold that takes us out of the current crises we are in. Johnson and Recollect point to fire as being a “kin-making technology” that occurs in the brief breaks of space that the flames create. When describing the ceremonial fires they say “This is a practice of provocation. This is an offering of seed, of vessel, of protection, of becomingness” (“KINSTILLATORY MAPPINGS IN LIGHT AND DARK MATTER —”). The building of community and possible futures on the land we reside are common threads that are seen throughout Johnson’s body of work.

Johnson’s performance installation, *Shore*, pushed the confines of theatre beyond the stage. It immersed performers and audiences into the landscape of New York City. *Shore* was the final installment of a trilogy of Johnson’s works. The first was *The Thank-You Bar*, a Bessie award winning piece, which was then followed by *Niicugni*. Occurring over eight days and in three different boroughs, *Shore* was made up of four parts: dance, story, volunteering, and a feast (Burke; “SHORE —”). Johnson described it as “a celebration of the places where we meet and merge - land and water, performer and audience, art and community, past, present, and future” (“SHORE —”). It is a reflection on the history of the place from which we come from and what

it means to be where we are in this present moment (Burke). One of the days began with a hundred people meeting at a basketball court on West 21st street. Johnson instructed the assembly of people to walk together in silence as they all traveled to New York Live Arts located on West 19th Street. The path that the group of people followed was once the Minetta Creek (Burke). The Manetta Creek (changed to Minetta by the Dutch) was a natural water source on Lenape land that was covered up during the early 1800s in order to build more city streets (Eccles). The path to the theatre acted as a reminder to those in attendance that the rich land of the Lenape people had been stolen and altered to the point it was no longer recognizable.

Two out of eight days of *Shore* were Community Action focused. One day, a volunteer group went to Governors Island to work with the Billion Oyster Project. This project is working to reintroduce billions of a specific species of oysters, that were once native to the harbor of New York but diminished over centuries, back to the waters. The oysters from the volunteer day became part of the menu during the final feast of *Shore*. The leftover shells from the feast were recycled by being used to grow even more oysters in the harbor (Burke). On another Community Action day, Johnson and volunteers assembled in Queens at Rockaway Beach where a dune had been hit by Hurricane Sandy (Burke; “In Conversation with Emily Johnson”). The event was led by teens from Rockaway Water Alliance, an organization whose goal is to motivate residents of all ages living in Rockaway to look after their community and environment (Burke; “About Us - RISE”). When discussing arts’ role in activism, Johnson harkened back to this specific Community Action day of *Shore* by stating:

in the far Rockaways we were...planting bushes and trees on a dune that had been hit by Hurricane Sandy...we were out there with kids and folks from the Rockaways...in my mind that’s just an example, that planting all of those bushes and those trees...is a real action, right. It is a real action and it has real effect, it has real resonance. And also, performing on a stage is real action, has real resonance, has an affect (“In Conversation with Emily Johnson”)

Highlighting the real effect performances and communing have within the world of activism is central in Johnson's body of work. One of her most recent shows, *Being Future Being*, uses audience incorporation, non-traditional theatre settings, and has a call to action at the heart of the piece. The three part performance pushes audiences further towards cultivating a better future for the generations that come after us.

Being Future Being is composed of three different performance gatherings: *Land/Celestial*, *Inside/Outwards*, and *Underneath* (“BEING FUTURE BEING —”; “In Conversation with Emily Johnson”). We will be focusing on *Land/Celestial* and *Inside/Outwards*. Johnson describes the meaning of the title, *Being Future Being*, as living in the present while actively conjuring the future we want (“In Conversation with Emily Johnson”). Further expanding on the title's meaning, the performances act as a stimulus for the building of relationships between performers, audiences, and environment. By building relationships within *Being Future Being*, a community is constructed and begins to take action towards returning to a way of living, supporting environmental, and Land Back efforts. On the official site for the performances, Johnson states “the multilayered performance becomes a site for transformation, ushering into focus new futures with the potential to reshape the way we relate to ourselves, our environment, and to the human and more-than-human cohabitants of our world” (“BEING FUTURE BEING —”). Within the world of *Land/Celestial*, the performance focuses on the relation and collaboration between humans and trees.

Similar to one of the eight days of *Shore*, *Land/Celestial* began with a group walking towards a destination. It began on Houston Street on the Lower East Side and continued in the direction of East River Park. The mass of people walking together were led by a trumpeter who, from time to time, played notes that indicated the way forward. Two people held a banner that

had a phrase that would become a thread between *Land/Celestial* and *Inside/Outwards*: “The Forest Is an Archive of Breath.” The procession of people were led to a demolition site in East River Park where hundreds of trees had been bulldozed away. There, the mass of people were split into three groups and ushered to watch three short performances (Burke). At each performance spot, Johnson introduces audiences to three different trees. They are fire tree, sound tree, and protect tree. At sound tree, Johnson and her collaborator, Sugar Vendil, share with the audience a movement, a story, and a sound. Using microphones, Johnson collects sound from the ground while Vendil gets theirs from the tree. The group taken to fire tree meets Ashley Pierre-Louis. They are encouraged to walk around the perimeter of the tree as Pierre-Louis explains why Johnson and the collaborators found moving to be the fullest way to experience the existence of the tree. Finally, at protect tree, the audience is invited to simply observe the performance that unfolds (“In Conversation with Emily Johnson”). Siobhan Burke of *The New York Times* witnessed the performance at protect tree and described it as such:

My group followed our guide along the sparkling riverfront to a shady grove, where colorful handmade quilts — a signature of Johnson’s gatherings, designed by Maggie Thompson — awaited us on the ground. After the heat of the midday sun...the shade of the tall trees was refreshing. We sat and watched as two performers, one in a stunning sound-emitting quilt sculpture (designed by Korina Emmerich) slowly diverged from each other. As the Quilt Being (Jasmine Shorty) walked toward the water, Stacy Lynn Smith danced restlessly among fallen leaves, as if gnarled roots were snaking up through her limbs (Burke).

Johnson sees *Land/Celestial* as an assembly of audiences, performers, and trees who become collaborators that will activate a better future for land being demolished in the present (“In Conversation with Emily Johnson”). In this activation and imagining, all viewers are encouraged to situate themselves towards activism that focuses on land restoration and living as one with the land (Burke). Incorporating a non-traditional setting for performance reminds audiences of the non-human life they are fighting for. With *Inside/Outwards*, Johnson and the ensemble must

perform inside a theatre. Although audiences are put back inside an indoor theatre, the performance situates itself to rebel against the walls that were put on top of the land.

Inside/Outwards occurred in October of 2022 at New York Live Arts (“Emily Johnson : Being Future Being - NYC”). As time inched closer to the start time of the performance, the doors to the theatre had not been opened causing the lobby to become packed with audiences waiting for the opportunity to be seated. Out of nowhere, a spot light from outside of the theatre’s entrance was aimed at someone on top of a parked car. Johnson, who was atop the car, was lit up by the light and began speaking through a megaphone she had in hand. She began passionately illustrating the story of the land we live on, the land below us, the sky above us, and the things surrounding. Within this true story of the we were on, she spoke to whose it was before; the land of the Lenape people. At one point, Johnson began describing a dream she had about the show. She recalled the audience being there in front of her in the dream as she was standing on top of the same car. Her friend and performer in the show, Jasmine Shorty, was beside her. In her dream, the two of them began screaming a blood curdling scream — which she began reenacting for the audience in the present — “We will destroy you.” Johnson spoke passionately about what everyone (artist and audience) should do for the future of this land (*Being Future Being: Inside/Outwards*). At a different point in the speech, Burke quoted Johnson saying ““What if right now, everyone of us turned everyone of our cells toward justice”” (Burke). Orienting our cells toward justice is the call to action of the entirety of *Being Future Being*. As Johnson sees it, the practice of positioning our bodies and minds towards justice will cultivate a better future that everyone, past, present and future, deserves (“In Conversation with Emily Johnson”). This future is a future where human and non-humans live peacefully alongside each other and the land is respected and cared for.

After her speech on the care, Johnson joined the audience in the lobby and began asking for twenty audience members to become volunteers. Once twenty people offered themselves for an unknown task, they were to follow her into the theatre space leaving the rest of the people in attendance behind. Once a few minutes passed, ushers who worked for New York Live Arts led the rest of the audience to the show (*Being Future Being: Inside/Outwards*). Burke recalled the path to the theatre being “through a circuitous backstage route, which had us approaching the performance space not from above but from under.” Near the dressing rooms of the route, the audience passed by the banner from *land/celestial* that said “The Forest is an Archive of Breath” connecting the two parts of *Being Future Being* together. When entering the performance space, the remaining patrons saw the twenty volunteers standing at specific points on the stage. Once the non-volunteer audience was seated, the indoor performance began. Johnson and performers brought twenty chairs onto the stage. The volunteer audience members were given non-verbal cues from a performer in a quilt costume of where to sit (*Being Future Being: Inside/Outwards*).

Throughout *Inside/Outwards*, the dancers on the stage performed their structurally choreographed improvisational movements around the audience members on stage (“In Conversation with Emily Johnson”). Along with that, Johnson moves around the stage with a microphone and a transportational speaker so she can speak directly to the volunteers on the stage. The speaker was constructed in such a way that the sound is centralized to wherever it is being pointed at. The result, whatever Johnson says to one audience member on stage cannot be heard by anyone else. It is an intimate moment of performer and a single audience member communing together in a specific moment in time (*Being Future Being: Inside/Outwards*). Regarding the movement of the piece, Johnson and performers created an objective with their motions. That is, to resist the stage they are on and the building structure they are in. They move

with a frustration that indicates they are trying to reach the ground that is underneath the building. In her interview with Jones, Johnson stated that the movement piece was a way for the performers to push through the literal, and figurative, walls of an institution (“In Conversation with Emily Johnson”). Through the action of resisting what has taken over a land, Johnson and the performers encourage similar resistance in the audience (on-stage and off). The message being, if we focus our energies towards moving our entire being towards justice, we can push through the walls that keep us from the natural world and work towards rectifying what has been desecrated. With this goal in mind, the land can be returned to those who had it stolen from them and we can all begin to live side by side with our more than human kin.

Conclusion

The current environmental state of our world, Environmental Justice Movement, building partnerships between audience and performers in Roadside Theater’s and Augusto Boal’s theatrical practice, and a dissection of *Little Amal: In search of the waterfront* and Emily Johnson’s work in relation to climate theatre has been investigated in this thesis. This exploration was undergone to determine the role of theatre artists in the future of climate activism. Musing on the power theatre has, May determined:

Through its unique embodied, immediate, and communal qualities, theater can advocate for environmental justice, develop a sense of connection between human and nonhuman communities, and strategically animate the ecological world so that the very boundaries between nature and culture, self and other, begin to dissolve (280).

Therefore, live performance can be used as a powerful tool in climate activism. Theatre practitioners can explore ways to mobilize audiences into action by incorporating the three components proposed: Audience involvement and incorporation into the performance, productions taking place and incorporating non-traditional theatre settings, and a clear call to

action at the heart of the piece. We only have a finite amount of time to lower our greenhouse gas emissions. We must do all that we can to prevent our planet from turning into something that is unrecognizable and uninhabitable for human and non-humans alike.

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