

ECOTHEATRE: CHANGING PERSPECTIVE FROM *WHO WE ARE* TOWARDS *WHERE WE ARE*

Mg.sc.hum. **Kitija Balcare**

University of Latvia, Latvia

Abstract

Looking from the perspective of Anthropocene, there is an urgency of environmental concerns which is growing day by day. While there is an emphasis on environmental education made by NGOs, it is important to analyze the role of the performing arts, especially, theatre, to raise awareness of environmental issues among society.

The article focuses on the development of ecotheatre on a global perspective and also highlights local examples of ecodramaturgy in the performing arts in Latvia.

This article lets to conclude that in the last years (2019–2022) there is a growing trend in Latvia reflecting on environmental topics through medium of theatrical performance and an essential raise in original ecodramaturgy. Also, there is a development of various forms in performing arts related to environmental issues. Ecotheatre becomes the form of environmental activism or, so called activism, of theatre practitioners in Latvia.

Keywords: *ecotheatre, ecodramaturgy, sustainability, Latvian theatre, environmental activism.*

Scientists are presenting increasingly alarming data on the current state of the environment, providing day by day more pessimistic calculations and unpleasant facts about *status quo* of nature, and, therefore also of the humankind. However,

Culture Crossroads

Volume 21, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol21.271>

© Latvian Academy of Culture, Kitija Balcare

All Rights Reserved.

ISSN: 2500-9974



this does not lead to a sufficiently active attitude towards nature protection issues in society. Therefore, function of the *ecotheatre* as an emerging ecosocial art practice, is to apply an emotional layer to the scientific data with various artistic strategies of theatre makers, thereby deepening ecological identity of spectators and awakening their social responsibility.

Environmental activist Bill McKibben raised a rhetoric question, asking “where are the plays” and “the goddamn operas” highlighting environmental issues which become so huge that are observable even from the space [McKibben 2005]. American theatre scholar Theresa J. May states that theatre bears an important role helping to understand our own ecological identities and our current relationship in between and among communities and places:

“As a living art form, the product of which is lived, affective experience, theatre invites us to live into our historic moment and unfolding crises and changes with open minds and feelers forward. As practice, theatre can breathe life into infinite enmeshment of usness giving form to unexpected intimacies across isolation, bearing witness to ecological vulnerabilities” [May 2021: 280–281].

Nowadays theatre also functions as a collective imagination reflecting about relationship in between human and nature. *Ecoteatre* is a form of theatre entering physical halls and imaginative stages in site-specific way side by side with the shift of paradigm – from anthropocentric towards ecocentric worldview.

There is a rapid development of *environmental humanities* field in the 21st century. This field of scholarship integrates interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach including various disciplines, from anthropology, sociology to geography, history, as well as to literature and theatre [Hubbel, Ryan 2022: ix]. This field studies relationship between human and environment. As the global climate crisis intensifies, so does the interest of professionals in the arts in the relationship between human and nature.

Theatre has historically been human-centered. However, in recent decades concepts related to ecology and the environment have also entered the field of theatre studies worldwide, shifting this anthropocentric perspective towards ecocentric one: *green theatre*, *ecodramaturgy*, *community theatre*, *ecodirecting*, and *ecological or ecoteatre*.

With the growing debate about the challenges of man-made environmental impact and the urgency of environmental issues in the public sphere, performing arts in Latvia are increasingly trying to shed light on the range of these topics as well as to think about sustainability issues in the process of production.

Until now, *ecotheatre* in Latvia has not been studied in depth and systematically in the context of performing arts processes, nor has the conceptual understanding of *ecotheatre* been defined.

What is *ecotheatre*?

The term *ecotheatre* can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, *ecotheatre* can be a form of performance that includes thematic messages on environmental issues highlighting the relationship between human and nature or eco-narratives, also dramaturgy that can be viewed from the point of ecocriticism [Chaudhuri 1994]. Also, in performance environmental aspect plays an important, active role [Hudson 2020: 5]. According to researcher Andrew McMurry there are four modes of ecological engagement looking from ecocritical perspective. Firstly, the **ecophobic** mode without any interest in the non-human world or accidental one. Secondly, the **ecopathic** mode where nature is a metaphore for human social experience and self-understanding. Thirdly, the **ecoliterate** mode which represents interplay between nature and human. And finally, the **ecophilic** mode – which passionately speaks about, for or with the non-human world [McMurry 2019: 18].

For instance, one of the first vivid examples of *ecotheatre* in Latvia is the performance-hike *Mārupīte* (2012) created by director Valters Sīlis and playwright Jānis Balodis. This performance is considered to be the first consistent example of ecological theatre in Latvia [Adamaite 2015: 247]. It is based on documentary facts and draws attention to the issue of environmental pollution in river Mārupīte in Riga city as it is considered to be the second most serious ecological catastrophe in the time of independent Latvia. During the performance spectators go on a hike along the river together with the team of performance trying to find out what actually happened there and who has to take responsibility about it as it is perceived as a criminal act against nature.

Researcher Wallace Heim in her paper “Theatre, Conflict and Nature” argues that the contribution of theatre to discussions on environmental issues is not to offer alternatives or raise awareness in contact with nature, but to reveal the inevitability of conflict: she sees the ecological functions of theatre in its ability to detect a crisis of democracy [Heim 2016].

On the other hand, *ecotheatre* can be used as a concept to emphasize and analyze the sustainability aspects of a performance making, taking into account the environmental impact of the processes during the production of performance, during the performance itself and also after it. As *ecotheatre* pioneer researcher Una Chaudhuri emphasizes scenes filled with rich, man-made scenography further underscore the distance between human and the nonhuman [Chaudhuri 1994]. *Ecotheatre* demands awareness of the ecological footprint or impact on the

environment made by creative team of performance. For instance, as a good practice in systematic, not free will approach there could be mentioned the National Theatre of Scotland, which built into its contracts a target for reused materials in their new sets. In Latvia, when speaking about *ecotheatre*, one can see that there are natural materials – reeds, birch twigs, stones – used for costumes and scenography for site-specific theatre or such second-hand materials as donated clothing. For instance, travelling performance-workshop for children “Plastic Hooligans” (*Plastmasas huligāni*, 2019) by Beatrise Zaķe and Pamela Butāne story about sustainability importance illustrates with workshop where children have to collect plastic garbage before coming to the performance. During the performance it is recycled to get new materials made in front of young spectators.

Ecocriticism can help to discover new lines of storytelling on environmental issues, while the most vivid stories related to nature are possible when one is physically present there [Stibbe 2019: 82]. Ecotheatrical performances mostly are taking place outdoors and, therefore, using as less as possible classic scenography solutions. For example, the performance *Mārupīte* takes place in an urban environment without additional scenography solutions, thus reducing the consumption of resources that would be required if the performance took place in a classical theatre hall on stage.

Premiers which reflect on environmental issues in time of pandemic in Latvia were mainly site-specific theatre cases: “Forest” (*Mežs*, 2020) by Valters Silis, “Trees Have Stopped Talking Since Then” (*No tā laika koki vairs nerunā*, 2020) by Krista Burāne, “From Ceikste to Aiviekste” (*No Ceikstes līdz Aiviekstei*, 2020) by Jānis Balodis and community theatre in Lubāna. These are performances for which environment largely becomes a co-author at the same time decreasing ecological footprint of performance itself using scenography of nature naturally.

Looking for defining *ecotheatre* as a new concept in theatre studies in Latvia, author of this paper suggests that *ecotheatre* is a form of the theatrical performance representing and questioning interplay between human, non-human entities, nature in the context of environmental challenges looking for alternative co-existence ways taking into consideration also sustainability aspects of the performance itself.

Ecodramaturgy: where are we?

In the 1990s, ecocriticism entered literary studies, and gradually this ecocritical view also entered theatre studies and art practice. Ecocriticism can reveal the relationship between human and nature in various ways, such as historical, psychological, political, philosophical, while actualizing the idea of environmental justice [Rižijs 2019: 447]. Ecocriticism also seeks to see the connection between environmental issues and social issues, opening up a new perspective on the co-existence of the human and particular environment including non-human entities.

Consequently, the analysis of performances in ecocritical reading is also gaining relevance. Una Chaudhuri, an American theatre researcher, was the first to address ecocriticism in theatre studies. In her 1994 article “There Should Be a Lot of Fish in This Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater” she refers to several American theatre associations that she believes show new outlines of materialistic ecological theatre practice, renouncing universalization and metaphorization of nature [Chaudhuri 1994].

Nature as a metaphore is such a common aesthetic feature in the drama of realism and humanism that there is a great possibility of missing out on the possibility of *ecothatre*. It is the metaphorical use of nature that can interfere with the portrayal of real environmental problems.

Looking back into history of theatre and dramaturgy, one can observe that nature has mostly taken its place in the background of performances, played the role of a symbolic force or served as a metaphor for the human. For example, the ancient Greek play “Birds” (414 BC) by Aristophanes reveals the playwright’s own knowledge of ornithology and the nuances of twenty-four bird species, creating a satirical work about humans.

Natural elements have also often been used to mark the passage of time, for example, by visualizing the change of seasons or the cyclicity of life as such. The beauty of nature and the threats it poses have also coexisted: in the Greek tragedy, for example, the sea is both peace and danger, and the forest is both magical and frightening. There was even a belief of ancient Greeks that acts of social injustice could bring environmental punishments as the gods could express their irritation through natural disasters [Cless 2010: 21].

Despite the discussions about roots of *ecothatre*, historically, theatre has been generally considered to be human-centered. Some researchers mention Henrik Ibsen’s play “An Enemy of the People” (1882) even giving to that status of grandfather of *ecothatre*. However, this play addresses the issue of human dilemmas, not so much cares about environmental issues themselves. Locally binding case study for such dual perception of the play could be mentioned Rūdolf’s Blaumanis play *Indrāni* (1904) showing conflict between generations with context of changes in natural landscape.

Even then Chaudhuri wrote that although discussions about deep or shallow ecology seem seemingly distant from theatrical science, they provide a kind of framework for these discussions to continue in the form of *ecothatre*. Moreover, this kind of investigation, as the researcher calls it, is critical not only because the theatre engages in a socially and politically important debate, but also because such performances are important to the environmental activism movement and to the future of humanity as a whole. She emphasizes that *the ecological crisis is a crisis of values* [Chaudhuri 1994: 25]. Therefore, it is important that theatre has an important role to play in this.

Chaudhuri is opposed by the British researcher Downing Cless, who published his book *Ecology and the Environment in European Drama* in 2010. Cless emphasizes that classical dramaturgy is a matter of interpretation. Respectively, it is also possible to highlight the ecological line in the work of classics. It all depends on the director's intention. So, Cless also introduces the concept of *ecodirecting*. At the same time, the researcher points out that many ecodrama works do not have the structure of the usual message, replacing it with the direct interaction of the environment and actors, including the audience [Cless 2010]. Therefore, *ecodirecting* could be defined as an attempt to emphasize ecological themes in canonical plays.

May in her article "Greening Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage" says there are two strategies for making theatre greener. First, analyzing classical works from the point of view of ecocriticism. Second, creating new, original drama that corresponds to the ecodrama. Both pioneers of the concept ecodramaturgy Chaudhuri and May point out that the usual anthropocentric theatre is looking for answers to the question **WHO ARE WE?** In contrast, *ecotheatre* including *ecodramaturgy*, seeks to answer the question **WHERE ARE WE?** [Chaudhuri 1994; May 2005: 100]. As May states it:

"Theatre is not only a means to find an answer to the age-old question of who we are, but also to the urgent ecological question of where we are?"

Ecodramaturgy tends to step out of the juxtaposition of nature and culture in terms of content, allowing to look at the world from the point of view of ecological justice: *theatre could be a force for healing, justice and resilience* [May 2021: xiii].

The strategy of ecodramaturgy is to ask questions, urging them to actively review and question the existing system, rather than imposing ready-made solutions.

Awareness of ecological identity at stake

The birth of the concept of *ecodramaturgy* dates back to the early 1990s, when May set up the *Theater in the Wild (TITW)* initiative in Seattle, USA. It was based on site-specific performances related to the environment. This was followed by a thematic international conference on *Theater in the Age of Ecology* in 1991, which examined how performing arts responded to the growing environmental crisis. At the conference Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Robert Schenkkan expressed the idea that playwrights should become the creators of new myths.

May emphasizes that a prerequisite for the emergence of *ecodramaturgy* is that the playwright must be educated about environmental issues, especially those that are significant locally. It is important that *ecodramaturgy* works in connection with their place, local problems, thus achieving this emotional connection with them. Recent case study in Latvia could be community theatre "From Ceikste to Aiviekste" (2020) which was built up as site-specific performance in Latgale, Lubāna pointing out

climate changes through the life-story of local Marija Diliavka, a lady who manually made meteorological measurements all her life, is showing also documentary photos representing time and landscape before. This performance includes econarrative about human who is, on the one hand, co-existing with changing landscape and, on the other hand, changing it himself/herself by doing melioration works or fighting with the river.

Later, in 2004, researcher May also co-founded the ecodrama festival *Earth Matter on Stage EMOS*. The fact that *ecodramaturgy* works are not just works to promote a greener attitude is also shown by the guidelines for the playwright competition, which illustrate what works can be submitted to it:

1. plays that put an ecological issue or environmental event/crisis at the center of the dramatic action or theme of the play;
2. plays that expose and illuminate issues of environmental justice;
3. plays that put ecological issues on the community's agenda;
4. plays that give voice or character to the land, or elements of the land;
5. plays that explore the connection between people and place, human and non-human, and/or between culture and nature;
6. plays that grow out of the playwright's personal relationship to the land and the ecology of a specific place etc.

However, the first three works that won the festival's competition in 2004 were about trees and forestry challenges. It is also in line with the works created in Latvia in recent years, which fall into the category of *ecotheatre*: "Tree Opera" (2019) by Anna Ķirse, "Forest" (2020) by Valters Silis, "Trees Have Stopped Talking Since Then" (2020) by Krista Burāne, "Ways of Woods" (*Malkas ceļi*, 2020) by Andrejs Jarovojs, marking the trend of this *ecotheatre* development in Latvian theatre processes.

Nevertheless, *ecodramaturgy* is not just works that highlight or explain environmental problems. According to May, the task of *ecodramaturgy* is to allow the viewer to feel more alive, listen and become more aware of their ecological identity when leaving the performance.

Some green questions and features

When analyzing performances, it is possible to use not only the ecocritical view of them, but also a practical analysis tool *Some Green Questions to Ask a Play* developed by May particularly for the performing arts field.

In total these are twelve questions, such as how does the show reflect the environmental problems of its time and place; how does the show reflect the historical philosophical paradigms of man's place in nature; how does the show spread or undermine existing narratives on human use of land; how does the choice of performance space affect the interaction between the audience, the performer and

the environment etc. [May 2007: 105]. The tool was developed by researcher May in 2007 in her work *Beyond a Bambi: Toward Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theater Studies*. She not only discusses the topic of *ecodramaturgy*, but also offers a methodology for its analysis that can be used for theatre performances. It helps to understand if and how nature is gaining a role in the performance and what sustainability aspects it is taking into account.

Ecodramaturgy works are characterized by several common features. For example, external **expert comments**. Scientific data, references to research are often used. For example, in Krista Burāne's performance "Trees Have Stopped Talking Since Then", scientists even participate as performers in the performance itself, increasing the credibility of their opinion. It helps to make believing relationship to facts.

Verbatim technique is also used. It is usually created from the transcription of interviews with people who are connected to a common subject. Such interviews which are conducted by company making performance, including, director, actors, are later edited into a performance dramaturgy or text. This is observed in several performances as main tool drafting performance texts for such performances as "Forest", "From Ceikste to Aiviekste", "Trees Have Stopped Talking Since Then".

One of the features of *ecodramaturgy* is the **presence of other non-human beings** in the performance. Performance "Bee Matter" (*Bišu lieta*, 2021) by Iveta Pole performers are trying to transform into bees, abandoning the human habits, movements and language.

Ecodramaturgy is also evidenced by the signs of **anthropomorphism** or the attribution of features that are characteristic of human, such as the tree that speaks or the spirit of the meadow that walks around. The features of anthropomorphism can be seen in several works. For example, "Forest" and "Trees Have Stopped Talking Since Then" use legends that in ancient times trees spoke, thus illuminating the gap between modern man's inability to understand natural language. "From Ceikste to Aiviekste" represents a talking horse and a spirit of a meadow during the performance.

Documentality is one of the features often shared by *ecodramaturgy*. Real facts, real events and also real records – audio files, video clippings, documentary photos, archive stories. Performance "From Ceikste to Aiviekste" telling life story of the lady who manually made meteorological measurements all her life shows also documentary photos representing time and the former landscape. Performance "Trees Have Stopped Talking Since Then" builds dramaturgy through real figure – the first official gardener of Riga, the capital of Latvia – Georgs Kūfalts who made city greenery projects one hundred years ago. This performance is a social activism form for director Krista Burāne in context with protests for several tree and parks cutting situations in Riga in 2020.

In *ecodramaturgy* forms of the **environmental** theatre and also the **site-specific theatre** play an important role, as they allow to break the division of the classical theatre space between actors and spectators, encouraging a new level of reciprocity and participation. At the same time, this approach also strengthens spectators' connection with the natural environment, if the theatrical performance takes place in nature. It helps to deepen the ecological identity of spectator letting experience performance in natural context.

Conclusion

Summing up, it can be concluded that number of theatrical performances that comply with the principles of *ecotheatre* in Latvia is steadily growing. Most of them are examples of environmental or site-specific theatre, and drama that have been created through co-creation exploring the ways how to look at relationship between human, non-human entities and environment. Bringing in *ecotheatre* on various stages in Latvia it brings also new forms of storytelling in theatre together with activating critical thinking about sustainability aspects of production processes among theatre practitioners.

As there is a rise in performances challenging current interplay between human and nature, there is also a necessity to consider not only origin of *ecotheatre* and *ecodramaturgy* and theoretical principles, but also to analyze *ecotheatre* as phenomenon in Latvia. This research is going to be developed looking how *ecotheatre* becomes a form of environmental activism linking performances to the current environmental issues globally and locally.

Sources

- Adamaite, U. (2015). Mārupītes Trešais tēva dēls. Režisora Valtera Siļa radošais portrets. In: S. Radzobe (red.). *Latvijas jaunā režija*. Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 239.–269. lpp.
- Chaudhuri, U. (1994). There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater. *Theater*, Vol. 25 (1), pp. 23–31.
- Cless, D. (2010). *Ecology and Environment in European Drama*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Earth Matter On Stage*. Ecodrama Playwrights Festival. Available: <https://www.earthmattersonstage.com/new-play-competition> (viewed 24.11.2021.)
- Heim, W. (2016). Theatre, Conflict and Nature. *Green Letters*, Vol. 20, pp. 290–303.
- Hubbel, J. A., Ryan, J. C. (2022). *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Hudson, J. (2020). *The Environment on Stage. Scenery or Shapeshifter?* London and New York: Routledge.
- Kalniņa, I., Vērdušs, K. (2013). *Mūsdienu literatūras teorijas*. Rīga: LU Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts.
- Lavery, C. (ed.) (2018). *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?* London and New York: Routledge.
- May, T. J. (2005). Greening the Theatre: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage. *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 84–103.
- May, T. J. (2007). Beyond a Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies. *Theatre Topics*, Vol. 17 (2), pp. 95–110.
- May, T. J. (2021). *Earth Matters on Stage. Ecology and Environment in American Theater*. London and New York: Routledge.
- McKibben, B. (2005). What the Warming World Needs Now is Art, Sweet Art. *Grist*. 22.04.2005. Available: <https://grist.org/article/mckibben-imagine/> (viewed 26.01.2022.)
- McMurry, A. (2019). Ecocriticism and Discourse. In: S. Slovic, S. Rangarajan, and V. Sarveswaran (ed.). *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 15–25.
- Rižijs, M. (2013). Ekokritika. No: I. Kalniņa, K. Vērdušs (red.). *Mūsdienu literatūras teorijas*. Rīga: LU Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts, 447.–465. lpp.
- Stibbe, A. (2019). Discovering the Weatherworld. Combining Ecolinguistics, Ecocriticism and Lived Experience. In: S. Slovic, S. Rangarajan, and V. Sarveswaran (ed.). *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 71–83.

This research is funded by the Ministry of Culture, Republic of Latvia, project “Cultural Capital as a Resource for Sustainable Development of Latvia”, project No. VPP-KM-LKRVA-2020/1-0003.