

HUMAN AND MORE-THAN-HUMAN IN THE PERFORMING ARTS LANDSCAPE IN LATVIA

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Abstract

Integrating performing arts research into the environmental humanities frame, the aim of this paper, firstly, is to uncover theoretical ideas of posthumanist thinkers about species interdependency [Tsing 2012; Haraway 2015] in context of the environmental issues and, secondly, to integrate these perspectives into practices of the ecotheatrical performances in Latvia.

As it is no longer possible to separate nature from culture in a world outside humans [Haraway 2003], ecotheatre serves as a form of environmental imaginary [Woynarski 2015; May 2021] reshaping human and more-than-human relations, shifting from anthropocentric paradigm towards ecocentric worldview. Theatre of species rearranges the usual anthropocentric hierarchy and includes new actors in the theatre – non-human entities and the more-than-human world [Chaudhuri 2017].

The article provides close reading of three ecotheatrical performances, including *Bee Matter* (Iveta Pole, 2021), *Mushroom Picking Championship* (Ilze Bloka, 2021), *Last Night of the Deer* (Jānis Balodis, Nahuel Cano, 2022), looking how ecotheatre practitioners discursively, physically, and visually represent non-human species and their relationship with humans in the context of urgency of the environmental issues.

In ecotheatrical performances, physicality as embodiment comes to the fore, alongside with invitation to the spectator not to *think about* but already to *think with* nature resonating posthumanism and postmodern shamanism ideas.

Keywords: *ecotheatre, theatre of species, more-than-human, ecoimaginary, posthumanism.*

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Art in the times of anthropocentrism

When we think of the theatre and the environment nowadays, in challenging, thus, fragile times of the Anthropocene, it requires to reframe that how we look at the nature and revise our relations with other species. The concept of Anthropocene, suggested by chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000, opened ongoing debate in both geology and also in the academic and art communities [Parrikka 2020: 51]. On contrary, posthumanist researcher Donna Haraway takes position that *the Anthropocene is more a boundary event than an epoch* and the challenge to deal with is that *right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge* [Haraway 2015: 160].

However, our relation to the environment is shaped by various individual and also collective aspects. In context of the environmental humanities essential are four problematic directions which could be addressed, including *alienation and intangibility; the post-political situation; negative framing of environmental change; and compartmentalization of the environment from other spheres of concern* [Neimanis et al. 2015: 67]. Furthermore, finding in environmentalism a natural partner to postcolonialism, keeping in mind consumption and colonialism [Angelaki 2022: 75], reconsideration of the human and non-human relations could propose new ecological imaginary without transgressive attitude and overdominance.

Environmental historians point out that *natural world is not a passive background to human dramas* [Bird Rose et al. 2012: 3]; in turn, theatre scholars highlight that nature for a long time has been just a background for social conflicts in modern drama, so theatre is required to *turn towards the literal, a programmatic resistance to the use of nature as metaphor* [Chaudhuri 1994: 29].

In terms of environmental humanities, Australian philosopher Val Plumwood has identified two main tasks: firstly, to resituate the human within the environment, secondly, to resituate non-humans within cultural and ethical domains [Plumwood 2003]. It leads us to the posthumanist approach, where posthumanist subjects have *powers of affecting others and of affection by others* [Bignall 2022: 104].

Reimaginary of human and non-human relations therefore calls for overcoming binary thinking where nature and culture is place in opposition. As American anthropologist Anna Tsing claims *human exceptionalism blinds us* as legacy from monotheistic religions is idea about human mastery:

These stories fuel assumptions about human autonomy, and they direct questions to the human control of nature, on the one hand, or human impact on nature, on the other, rather than to species interdependence [Tsing 2012: 144].

Interspecies relations from the posthumanist point of view

Interdependency of species is core idea of posthumanist researcher Donna Haraway who proposed that *who and whatever we are, we need to make-with – become-with, compose-with – the earth-bound* [Haraway 2015: 159]: as humans'

nature is an interspecies relationship [Tsing 2012: 144]; as no species acts alone [Haraway 2015:161]; as human matters are deeply and existentially entangled with environmental issues [Asberg 2020: 110].

Taking into account that theatre is *a practice of collaborative imagination and collective conjuring* [May 2021: 4] and at the same time *lived, affective experience* [May 2021: 280], it gives a platform for rewriting narratives shaping human and non-human relations in the context of climate urgencies or place and space for ecological, also environmental imaginaries. As emphasized by environmental humanities researchers, the **environmental imaginary** essentially impacts how we deal with environmental crisis: *like social imaginaries, environmental imaginaries are sites of negotiation that can orient material action and interaction* [Neimanis et al. 2015: 81].

Looking back into history of the Western theatre, theatre scholar Una Chaudhuri points out that interaction with non-human onstage has been rare and mostly metaphorized: *On those rare occasions that human-animals bring their non-human cousins on stage, they tend to treat them as mirrors for themselves; (...) as symbols of human behaviour and allegories for human preoccupations* [Chaudhuri 2017: 3]. Moreover, American theatre scholar Theresa J. May, pioneer of ecodramaturgy, already in 2007 proposed ecocritical reading of plays suggesting to look whether performance inspire spectators to think newly about relationship to the natural world [May 2007: 105].

However, last decade, facing extinction of species and intensification of animal rights movement, *animals seem to be speaking back, rejecting their rhetorical exploitation, challenging us to think anew about them and about relationship to them* [Chaudhuri 2017: 4]. In order to cause a new ethical attention to human and animal relations, Chaudhuri proposed term **zoesis** *as the ways the animal is out info discourse: constructed, represented, understood, and misunderstood* to be used analysing discourse of animality and species in art, culture, and media [Chaudhuri 2017: 5].

Also, May states that *theatre can offer a source of new stories that reconfigure who we understand ourselves to be within the circle of life of the earth* [May 2021: 13], naming such theatre as urgently needed *what if?* theatre. Essential is also concept of **shared space** taking off a usual border, the so-called *fourth wall*, in between performers and spectators, as theatre researcher Vicky Angelaki proposes shared space as shared environment [Angelaki 2022: 46]. This aspect of ecotheatre is crucial to develop ideas of the environmental activism putting at the centre interspecies relations.

Ecotheatre as an environmental imaginary

As art holds together contradictions, it could shape a safe space for dealing with affective trauma of the climate change, dams, environment pollution [Davis 2020: 64]. In particular, theatre could serve as *a nourishment for our species and*

for the nonhuman communities that share this home planet with us [May 2021: 13]. Therefore, theatre becomes essential form of the environmental imaginary, but such imaginary, as posthumanism researchers Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Asberg and Johan Hedren states, very significantly impacts how society deals with the environmental crisis [Neimanis et al. 2015: 81]. As theatre researcher Lisa Woynarski suggests, *ecological performance offers the potential to reframe relationships to the more-than-human world, questioning how we perceive ourselves in relation to the environment* [Woynarski 2015: 12]. Ecodramaturgical approach of theatre makers uncovers multivocal, multitemporal, transnational and transspecies stories [May 2021: 11]. Therefore, landscapes created by ecotheatrical performances are becoming shared spaces for ecological imaginary or ecoimaginary.

As Asberg highlights, human matters often are considered as divorced from environmental issues despite the fact that those are deeply, existentially entangled [Asberg 2020: 110]. As analysis of ecotheatrical performances in Latvia shows, such productions strive to regain a lost language which existed in ancient, pagan times, in order to reconcile the non-human and the human communities [Balcare 2022]. Chaudhuri proposes idea of the *postmodern shamanism* where animal is a figure to lead a new journey across ideological borders, above modernist theatre where human has been kept separate from many “others” [Chaudhuri 2017: 33]. By suggesting term **theatre of species** as *a theatre which restages all life as species life*, Chaudhuri defines function of it as a need *to understand, so as to transform, our modes of habitation in a world we share intimately with millions of other species* [Chaudhuri 2017: 158]. I suggest to take further idea of theatre of species as a sub-form of ecotheatre, recognizing on stage co-existence of human and more-than-human.

Furthermore, on the other hand, ecotheatrical productions in Latvia tend to abandon textuality completely and focus strictly on the physicality of ecotheatre, picturing environmental imaginary anew in nonverbal frame [Balcare 2022]. Such approach of posthumanistic theatre makers resonates with Anna Tsing, as she states, for instance, *fungi are not taking a position, even the hardy lichens are dying from air pollution and acid rain*; as for humans there are two approaches for such silent storytelling: ignore or consider what non-humans are telling us about the human condition [Tsing 2012: 152]. One fruitful approach how to strengthen relations with more-than-human, according to Tsing, is to make familiar places in the landscape *as the beginning of appreciation of multi-species interactions*, due to the idea that foragers nurture landscapes including multiple residents and visitors, not just a single species [Tsing 2012: 142]. Familiar places could be interpreted also as *naturecultures* in where *flesh and signifier, bodies and words, stories and worlds are joined* [Haraway 2003: 20]. In context of this analysis, I propose to look at the created imaginary environments as a place for shared space to deepen ecological consciousness of spectators.

Forest as a familiar place for ecoimaginary: *Mushroom Picking Championship*

Performance *Mushroom Picking Championship* (*Dirty Deal Teatro*, 2021) by the young director Ilze Bloka and playwright Madara Rutkeviča is an attempt to intertwine dramaturgical theatre with contemporary dance, while also entering the field of ecotheatre. Performance contains several thematic lines – human and nature, human and time, aging and rooting –, however, not as binaries but interrelated objects and processes. Dramaturgical material includes pagane omen saying – if you see a green forest in a dream, then everything will work out – where green, fresh forest is a sign of prosperity of nature and at the same time of the society.

Performance is based on the infotaining lecture by Valda (Latvian name with the meaning *power*), long-time organizer of the championship of picking mushrooms, interpreted by actress Indra Burkovska. Participants of the championship are represented by contemporary dance choreographers' group from Latvian Academy of Culture including Roberta Gailīte, Edvards Kurmiņš, Ramona Levane, Oskars Moore, Milena Paviļča, Katrīna Stepiņa, Darja Turčenko, Vladimirs Goršantovs. At the beginning they take the roles of participants of the championship, carrying knives and plastic bags, later on slightly transforming into mycelia visualization through choreography based in interconnectedness. Spectators of the performance are given the role of supporters of the championship, mostly being silent, witnessing transformations. Performance starts with very text-based narrative and ends up visually physical way depicting gradual shift from anthropocentrism closer to the ecocentrism.

Valda is picking mushrooms in the forest, inherited from her father, adding that *papa never ate them [fungi], he adored them and called them the most advanced creatures on the planet*. She lectures in humorous way facts about mycelia secret life, asks questions to the spectators, incorporating her personal family relations with forest – starting from her grandfather to her personal convictions about power of nature in the world. Valda has promised her grandfather that she will keep this forest for mushrooms and for Latvians as place to be together. This strongly resonates with idea of Anna Tsing about familiar places as the way to accept multispecies relations.

The black room of *Dirty Deal Teatro* creates an image of the darkness of the unknown forest. Changing lights made by artist Oskars Pauliņš creates the illusion of a magical forest where the unimaginable and rationally incomprehensible can happen. The dancers are the ones who create the living scenography – both the people standing like a forest full of trees, in which at some point Valda begins to wander as if after taking hallucinogenic mushrooms, and the interconnected threads of the mushroom, discarding more and more human with every moment. These scenes vividly highlight the closeness of mutual relationships in nature and the outer

lushness of a natural forest, at the same time embodying the continuous change in nature, rejecting static scenography elements so becoming ecotheatrical.

Despite the narrative that *the forest is not a supermarket parking lot, the forest is the trees, the forest is the obstacles*, there are links to consumerism depicted visually on stage. Each of the performers owns his or her personal plastic shopping bag, branded with well-known supermarket names. These bags function instead of basket for mushroom picking parallelly drawing the idea that humans perceive forest as resource – as a place to come and own mushrooms. The rustling shopping bags at one point turn into a suicidal element and a symbolic image of the pollution of nature. Performers put bags on their heads and continue a long movement scene, keeping them pulled over their faces. Seeing a plastic bag over human face is obviously danger scene transmitting message of self-destruction: a vivid illustration that polluting environment, in this case forest, is endangering nature, including humans as well. Theatre makers highlight humans' inability to naturally integrate into the nature and meanwhile illustrates that nature and human is the same and not binaries.



Figure 1. Mushroom Picking Championship, 2021.
Photo: Aivars Ivbulis.

Also, Valda, dressed in a yellow velvet dress with frills as a chanterelle herself, sometimes flows among the dancers, but at some point the actress's participation in the movement dramaturgy ends and she observes the natural processes already from the side-lines. That could be interpreted in several ways. Firstly, as the gap in between nature and human hard to cross, secondly, as the stepping back and giving agency to the new generation being open and able to be with not be in nature. Quoting lines from the performance verbalized by Valda:

Where do we live? How do we live? What are we doing? We are destroying nature! We are destroying ourselves! What kind of symbiosis can we talk about here? But man must be in symbiosis with nature, otherwise the world will perish, there will be nothing left! If humanity dies, what will happen? What will remain? Mushrooms.

Gradually shedding layers of clothing, performers' movements intertwine, visualizing invisible connections with one another and embodying mycelia structures through choreography. Spectators are confronted with the landscape where nature silently accepts everything, even eats it, recycles it, adapts to it, in other words – nature continues with or without human intervention believing in a longevity of the nature.

Performance, containing split between verbal part and nonverbal part, represents that nature does not speak in verbal human language instead implicating physical language as a tool of building up longstanding human and non-human relations. Choice of interconnected choreography is the artistic strategy in the space of ecotheatrical performance opening up possibility to embody nature suffering in plastic pollution and absorbing it, leaving legacy of micropollution in nature, in mushrooms which accidentally could end up on the plate of the human. Message that goes through the performance reminds: polluting nature is polluting ourselves at the same time putting us under threat of survival comparing to the nature as the strong ally.

Embodying bees through materiality of hive: *Bee Matter*

Multimedial, physical performance *Bee Matter* (Iveta Pole, *Homo Novus Festival*, 2021) is created as an audio-visual rock concert, where the role of a rockstar is played by a bee queen, wearing a black motorcycle helmet on her head, ironically illustrating the bee's eyes looking at everything from its improvised throne – a pollen-dusted office chair. The performance, like a peculiar music video for the buzzing of bees, affects the viewer's senses, awakening the very sensitivity to nature and dropping a drop of tar to self-absorption, while narcissistically looking not in the reflection of the stream, but in the video camera of a mobile device.

There are six performers – Johhan Rosenberg, Lea Sekulic, Keithy Kuuspu, Jette Loona Hermanis, Ji-Seo-hwon, Liisa Saaremäel –, outwardly androgynous, with waist-length, wavy, blond hair wigs on their heads, in beige underwear, with sports shoes on their feet. Zooming as an indication of being in their insect environment. Performers lack individuality in visual meaning; however, they retell onstage matriarchical hierarchy of the hive. Audience is attracted by anthropomorphised scenes of bee relations, but at the same time leaves a feeling of an outsider.



Figure 2. Bee Matter, 2021. Photo: Alan Proosa.

A yellow, circus-like round arena coloured by a beam of light. Yellow-black, pulsating graphics filled with hexagonal elements in the background and equally dynamic music rhythms. From time-to-time phrases are heard, shouted into the microphone, about a body with a sting, with wings, with a snout, but the texts are fragmentary and remain in the background of the physical theatre experience as irrelevant, placards. Transcending the memory of the human body in search of new movements, theatre makers create ecoimaginary through the senses, including, hearing, sight, smell, taste.

As Chaudhuri pointed out when actor embodies animal and spectator witnesses it, *it is like crossing another culture, hearing a strange language, experiencing a frightening recognition that is at the same time a delicious bafflement* [Chaudhuri 2017: 4]. Ecotheatrical space is made up from material, sensual elements including sounds and colours, such as vibrant buzzing and zooming of bees, lot of yellow colours immersing into pollen dust and sticky honey. Spectators are treated with this honey by bees. Androgyne performers faint, shake, sink, faint – they break their ties with the human movement structure. Androgyny in their look and costumes lead to deliberation of faciality. Repeating visual elements on stage prevents the human mind from seeing the individual, generalizing and equating to a single, unified image of the bee. The important role of bees in the ecosystem is highlighted by a close-up video of an army of attacking bees flying straight – in a frontal attack. Bees are narrated as soldiers or even the last knights of nature who keep alive the world populated with consumerists.

On video projection made by artist Katrīna Neiburga audience is offered to take the bee's point of view, the video projection allows spectator to follow the bee's path through a field of cereals and poppies, with a possible sound of how the bee hears/sees. That is depicted as claustrophobic buzzing and a dizzying trajectory. Such bioperformative turn brings spectator even closer to the imagined possibility to look at the world through the bee's eyes – to exchange point of views – therefore coming closer to cross imagined species boundary.

Generalising concept of physical performance, all bees look the same for human, all humans look the same for bees, narrowing the line between binary approach us [humans] and they [bees] and emphasizing idea of *naturecultures* brought up by Donna Haraway [Haraway 2003].

Summing up, director Iveta Pole uses a corporeal artistic strategy to exchange roles – bees become humanistic, humans become *beeistic* – addressing the mind and the body of spectator by tasting honey, changing point of views (attacked by bees or flying as bees), using vibrant ultrasounds.

Thinking with the deer: *Last Night of The Deer*

Ecotheatrical performance *Last Night of the Deer* (*Homo Novus Festival*, Riga, 2022) is made by two theatre practitioners – Jānis Balodis from Latvia, Eastern Europe, and Nahuel Cano from Patagonia in Argentina, places which they characterize as places *where dead are not really dead and trees can speak back*.

Rooted in *verbatim* approach and made as an eco-poetic dialog mythical performance takes spectators on a journey reconstructing real route made by the authors from Klaipeda port to the Riga in a dark, snowstormy night. They were driving, taking roles of the Driver and Co-pilot and sharing personal memories and opinions, choosing smaller side road until they hit the deer on the road or deer hit the car on the road. Both authors announced this road-type performance as *a story about all-too-human forests and the more-than-human spirits that inhabit it*.

Conversation which opens the story starts with the reference to the mother of Driver saying that she is ethnographer with special interest in symbolic meaning of birds in Latvian folklore, therefore Driver also has knowledge rooted in pagane folklore, including *how to turn into a werewolf, where to find the dead from the plague, how to recognise places that witches visit*.

Whereas Co-pilot describes flashbacks of his childhood and mythical figure of his father which pop to his mind while entering supermarket. Theatre makers nominate supermarket as modern city dwellers' *forest* where humans are just *confused animals*. Anonymous tuna can on the *Lidl* shelf reminds Co-pilot of his memories being a child and his father as the person who *rode horses, hunted birds with stones, knew how to kill a chicken, a pig, a duck, knew how to fell a tree, he fished*

to have something to eat when he got lost, took out of jail his gambler father, made fires in the night, and knew how to guide himself back by the stars, however, later on father's figure is described by elements such as money, military service, work in supermarket. As Co-pilot points out, my father, I guess, is a wild animal, but his children are city animals.

If mother bears ecofeministic attitude towards nature including intuitive knowledge and closeness to pagan rituals related to nature, on the contrary, the father's image is made out of patriarchal demonstration of power over nature despite his knowledge how to get fire in forest and how to find a way by stars. They exchange personal stories until the moment when car hit the deer/deer hit the car which is characterized by Co-driver: *the deer does not understand what has happened to him, we are now inhabiting a confused space.* This metaphysical space in between life and death of the animal is also shared space with spectators as one of them is invited to embody the animal.



Figure 3. Last Night of the Deer, 2022. Photo: Aivars Ivbulis.

Other spectators are given the role of the forest, embodying figures of trees in the dark room of culture house in periphery of Riga. Mythical approach forms performance as a magical realism ritual where spectators are invited to take part as a witness of journey from anthropocentrism closer to the ecocentrism.

Presence of the deer is vocalized through the rhythmical soundscape reminding scraping of the deer hooves. Also, the presence of the animal is symbolically depicted with real antlers – element from the real deer. These antlers are given to one of the spectators who is invited to try out being deer who currently crosses the road in

between life and death turning storyline again from consumeristic existentialism issues back to spiritual process where non-human is alive.

Deer's thoughts are spoken aloud using *thinking-with* approach: saying that the forest is here to say a farewell and conjure up a moment with nice summer day where the deer is eating fresh, juicy leaves, sharing them with others; later on, remembering early days near the river, wind that shows the way and at one moment forest which becomes unrecognisable turning its back to the deer as a signal that deer has to leave. Balancing on the thin line in between life and death deer describes his farewell until Co-pilot puts the point at the end with smashing a stone – so the wounded animal could be free to go, leaving just a physical body or, as described by authors, *just a meat now* which is left to eat for four cruel dogs, domesticated by a human yet wandering, angry pets.

Authors of the ecotheatrical performance *Last Night of the Deer* create shared space, rooted in mythical, pagane atmosphere, described in parallels, for instance, supermarket as human natural biotope and animal as soulful entity with personal memories. However, human relates to the animal through anthropomorphic approach, lending to the deer humans voice together with humans' memories about beautiful moments in life connected with childhood, peaceful days in nature and tastes of the world, and notions about the death.

Conclusion

Although there are still metaphorical and anthropomorphising features in the depiction of non-human entities on stage, close reading of the examples of theatre of species reveals that theatre practitioners in Latvia are already approaching the narrative of interspecies relations.

By attributing specific roles to spectators – such as forest, deer, bee – and also exchanging them through performance, corporeal involvement of spectators is intensified through their senses, therefore deepening their ecological consciousness. In ecotheatrical performances, physicality as embodiment comes to the fore, alongside both verbal and non-verbal invitations to the spectator not to *think about* but already to *think with* nature which resonates with posthumanism ideas and enlivens, the so-called, postmodern shamanism.

By blurring boundaries between human and non-human, ecotheatre brings up a new landscape where nature is shared space: all entities there are interactive entities highlighting interrelatedness. Understanding of the concept of shared space is essential precondition to approach environmental activism through performing arts spreading shared responsibility idea already beyond ecotheatrical performances.

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