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Theater of the Anthropocene

as Artistic Laboratory
of Socio-Ecological Homeostasis

Abstract

In an era marked by unprecedented environmental challenges and the recognition of humanity's profound impact on the planet, the intersection of theater and the Anthropocene emerges as a compelling and urgent subject for exploration. This conference publication, titled *Artistic laboratory of socio-ecological homeostasis: Theater of the Anthropocene*, seeks to unravel the multifaceted relationship between the performing arts and the epoch defined by human-induced ecological transformations. By considering the interacting possibilities of scholars, theater makers and the audience, this collection aims to illuminate the interconnected role of theater and science in interpreting, responding to, and shaping our understanding of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Environmental theater, theater of the Anthropocene, interconnectedness of human and non-human lives, platform for ecological conversations, intersection of science and art

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The Anthropocene, characterized by the discernible influence of human activities on Earth's geology and ecosystems, demands a reevaluation of our cultural, social, scientific and artistic practices. In this context, theater emerges as a potent and reflective medium capable of capturing the complexities of our contemporary existence. *Artistic laboratory of socio-ecological homeostasis: Theater of the Anthropocene* delves into the ways in which theater responds to the Anthropocene, examining its potential to provoke thought, inspire action, and foster a deeper connection between individuals and their environment.

Theoretical Input

In the more and more diversified discourses of the late 20th and early 21st century, both art and science have converged toward environmental reflection through different paths. While it seemed self-evident to the ancient theater that the outside of society is besieged and inhabited by gods and other non-human intelligences, the bourgeois theater shrank to a pure interaction between people. When *Das Totenfloß* by the German playwright Harald Müller was first performed in 1984 about an apocalyptic environmental catastrophe, there was hardly any response. It was not until 1986, after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, that the play enjoyed success on the stage. Today, environmental theater for children and schoolchildren is a tried and tested means of raising awareness of the foundations of life in social structures. In many Western countries, there is hardly a support program for the stage in which the concept of sustainability is not a priority.

The innovative field of culture and art studies of the latest turn of the century not only opened pioneering inter- and multidisciplinary reflections for the individual academic disciplines, but nurtured productive researches on environment, culture and science (e.g. Serres 1995; Bheringer 2010; Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017; Bould 2021). The emerging field of ecolinguistics studies that emerged in parallel have started to investigate the relation between language and environment (e.g. Haugen 1972; Alexander and Stibbe 2014; Stibbe 2015; Zhou 2021). With ecocriticism, the relation between literature and environment gained stronger focus (e.g. Grenoble & Whaley 1998; Guattari 2008). Regarding our field, it is worth noticing the results of ecotheatrics (including eco-performance and eco-theater practices and studies) underlining the artistic and scholarly investigations upon the interrelations of theater performances and

environmental balance (e.g. Fried and May 1994; French 1998; Stetter and Sauer 2022).

By the turn of the millennium the concept of the Anthropocene, brought into play by the natural sciences to date the human-dominated epoch of the history of the earth, fundamentally changed the relationship between culture/art and nature. While on the one hand the environmental theater is geared towards the conservative preservation of conditions, on the other hand the theater of the Anthropocene is embedded in history and aims to shape the future. This theater of transformation recognizes living counterparts in the actors of nature, on whom the human species and its habitat are profoundly dependent. The global interdependencies with the quasi-subjects, as Bruno Latour put it, and planetary forces are the inescapable material of this new type of theater.

As part of ecotheatrics, but with manifold aspects (e.g. nature and environment, humans and other living beings, ecological challenges of the anthropocene era, art and science practices: see the figure below) the theater of the Anthropocene, hand in hand with the anthropocenic theater studies (e.g. Raddatz 2021; Lonergan 2023), offer us insights in the artistic laboratories, concrete actions and their academic reflections regarding rearticulations of contemporary socio-ecological homeostasis.

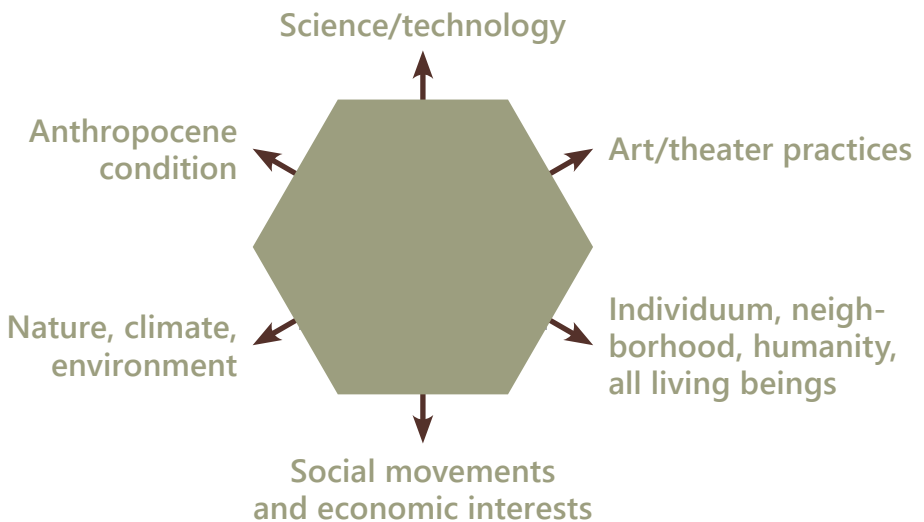


Fig. 1. Components of Anthropocenic Theater Studies

Our Publication

The present publication is a result of a three-day event including a workshop with academic lectures and artists' reflections, several theater visits, and many informal discussions among the lecturing and attending participants taking place in the framework of the 10th Theater Olympics (Budapest, June 8-10, 2023). How, and how long can we, humankind, be co-existent with the environment on planet Earth? And, how are her various natural entities incorporated in present day legal, artistic and theatrical life? Moreover, how can theater along other arts contribute to the recreation of harmony of our ecology? These were just the opening questions placed at the intersection of academic and artistic reflections to invite the participants to reflect on their own connection to water, trees, resilience, artistic creation and much more.

The resulting writings are here subdivided into three chapters: that of studies, interviews, essays and artist contributions. The series of studies is opened by the programmatic kind of paper by Frank M. Raddatz entitled *The theatre of the Anthropocene, concept, questions, performances*. By describing the concept, aims and practical steps of the foundation *Theatre of the Anthropocene*, the author reflects on the question at the intersection of ecological theatre and art/science : Why is the art/science interface central to this theatre or Anthropocene aesthetic? Furthermore, Raddatz elaborates several answers to such central questions: How can the concepts of a pre-scientific world, which were in close exchange with the non-human powers, be transferred to a science-based civilization based on a techno sphere? How can the theatrical stage deal with these challenges?

In his analysis entitled *On Stage: A contract with Nature*, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger take his point of departure from *Le Contrat Naturel* (1990), the French philosopher Michel Serres' (1930–2019) manifesto for caring about our planet and its planetary future. It is an apologia for giving the things around us, for giving nature a voice again. Instead of being parasites, we must become symbionts again. Rheinberger's study, followed by Eliane Beaufigli's *Inviting the terrestrial on stage in our minds and bodies*, investigates alongside Bruno Latour how we should develop the conscience of all that attaches us materially to the world as well as to others, human and non-human. Certain theatrical devices invite precisely the spectators to study the relations they have with their environment and their co-habitants. This contribution emphasizes four immersive

or participative forms, which are very different in nature: *Cracks* by choreographer Charlotta Ruth (DK), *Devenir forêt* by Marina Pirot (Bretagne, FR), *Où atterrir* by the collective *Où atterrir* founded by Latour (Paris, FR), and *Democracy of Organisms* by Club Real (D).

The following reflection of this chapter, entitled *The Tragedy of Earth. Climate change in German-speaking contemporary theatre*, by Andreas Enghart turns its attention to climate change and species extinction, which are also an immense challenge for German-language theatre. Paradigmatic stagings of the last few years are presented and their dramaturgical potential to adequately deal with the tragedy of the earth and to initiate necessary changes will be discussed. Above all, Enghardt emphasizes, facts need to be presented and commitment encouraged in our present day theater.

In the final study of the first chapter, *Antropocene and Performing Science. Examples from University Bielefeld*, by the researcher-performer Johanna Domokos reflects on how a performance setting engages students in academic, affective and aesthetic learning about a seminar's chosen topic. By heruristic overview of both recent performing science events at University Bielefeld and courses dealing with Anthropocene topics, the author demonstrates through the analysis of a concrete event how an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered academic performance chain in the busy university hall of University Bielefeld make the students and employees who are passing by aware of the challenges of our Anthropocene age.

The present publication contains two interviews. In the first one, Annamária Rojkó asks the actor and activist József Szarvas about his performances, and how planting native fruit trees in the Carpathian basin supports relearning culture and strengthening the community. In the second interview, Sára Sánta talks with the editors of this publication about the broader context of the statement born as a final thesis of the workshop.

Following the studies and interviews, the section of essays contains two papers. In *The natural and supernatural existence of rivers before, during and after the Anthropocene*, László Koppány Csáji invites the readers on a journey through the history of mentality from Siberia through the Pakistani–Afghan border to India, from the ancient Greek afterlife through the source region of the Nile to the period of the Roman occupation of Hispania. Through which metaphors connected to rivers can we learn more about humanity's past – and present? What can today's people learn from rivers? – asks the author. While

searching for answers, the author elaborates the usefulness of Victor Turner's concept of social drama. This study outlines the dangers inherent in listing the sins of humanity in the name of environmental protection, and aiming only at the breakdown (deconstruction) of great promises and narratives, as well as what could be the dire fate of the regulations of a global and environmentally conscious social monoculture. The second essay of this unit is an artist contribution. Entitled as *Background, antecedents and practical implementation of the art of beekeeping* Tibor Weiner Sennyey reflects on Aristotle's and Shakespeare's relations to bees, as well as how art, poetry and drama relate to beekeeping. The sincere question of what is the responsibility of artists during a world crisis is elaborated also from a personal view.

The final section of this publication contains two artist contributions. The intro passage of *Acting in the Age of Multiple Crises? Acting in the Age of Eco-cide? Acting on stage?* by writer Kathrin Röggl asks: Why are we not acting? Who is acting? What is action? Both her literary letter Dear River and the comments to the creative process of her play *The Water point* to generational conflicts over economic logic. As the last contribution to his thematic issue, the polyglot poet and ethnobiologist Sabira Ståhlberg deconstructs our challenging time with a multilingual creative text entitled *AnthropoSun Poetry Wanderung*. After decoding the Anthropocene as „An troppo sin? Ant trop scene? / Anthropocene: Human. Nature. Relationen. Dialog. / Terre. Air. Wasser. Fire. Void.“ she invites us to an aesthetic mental journey into glossolalia poems including a monolingual translation and poetic interpretation.

Closing thoughts

As we navigate the Anthropocene, *Artistic laboratory of socio-ecological homeostasis: Theater of the Anthropocene* invites participants to engage in a dialogue that transcends disciplinary boundaries, encouraging a collective reimagining of our relationship with the planet. Through a diverse array of perspectives, this conference publication aims to inspire a renewed sense of purpose within the theatrical community, urging practitioners and scholars alike to harness the transformative power of theater to navigate the challenges of our age.

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the Uránia journal for all the technical and linguistic support our group received during the workshop days and in the bilingual finalization process of our publication.

May all living beings on Earth enjoy fulfilled lives under healthy circumstances and be happy, peaceful, and free from suffering.

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The Editors

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