

# Interview on the statement of the workshop **Theater of the Anthropocene** at the 10th Theatre Olympics Budapest

Sára Sánta asks Frank Raddatz  
and Johanna Domokos

This interview explores the key themes discussed during the workshop titled *Theater of the Anthropocene* at the 10th Theatre Olympics in Budapest. Sára Sánta engages in a conversation with Frank Raddatz and Johanna Domokos, shedding light on the purpose behind organizing the conference and the profound implications of the Anthropocene era on both the world and the realm of theatre. The Anthropocene, characterized by global ecological threats resulting from human activities, challenges traditional theatrical narratives, requiring a shift towards a more holistic understanding of humanity's relationship with the planet.

The interview delves into the potential educational role of theatre in fostering environmental awareness and sensitizing individuals to the complexities of our changing world. The speakers emphasize the need for a multidisciplinary approach, involving not only theatre scholars and artists but also scientists, lawyers, and writers in addressing the existential crisis posed by the Anthropocene. Insights from the interview highlight the importance of nurturing a collective responsibility to maintain ecological balance. The speakers also discuss the transformative potential of theatre and the diverse perspectives presented during the conference, leading to the creation of a manifesto that envisions theatre as a platform for envisioning and shaping a harmonious future with the Earth. The interview concludes with reflections on the role of theatre in the future, emphasizing its deep-rooted connection to the planet and the potential for a renewed, holistic theatre that addresses societal and environmental challenges beyond conventional norms.

*What was your purpose in organising the conference?*

■ **Frank M. Raddatz:** All our advanced civilisations and civilisations have emerged in the last 10000 years, in the Holocene, a stable warm period. This geological epoch is just passing because of human activities. That is why the dawning age after man, *Anthropos* in Greek, is called Anthropocene. The problems of the Anthropocene and the associated global ecological threats are new territory for the world and for theatre. It brings with it complex questions that go beyond the traditional terrain in which humans interact with humans, as in a play by Shakespeare, for example. Rather, it involves the relationship to the

entire earth as a planetary habitat. When the Amazon rainforest is cut down, it has consequences for the world's climate, both in Canada and in Central Europe.

So we are faced with a bundle of questions: Can the stage sensitise us to the fact that our nature is no longer stable but has started to move, with enormous consequences for our behaviour? How can this development be understood at all? Do we find ourselves in the same situation as Oedipus, who has solved the riddle of the Sphinx but eventually finds that he himself has tied the noose. In which he will eventually dangle? How can this development of existential significance, that we ourselves have triggered and are still fuelling the climatic plague, be represented in theatre a space of art? At the same time, we suddenly find ourselves in the position of the mythical figure Atlas, who prevents the sky from collapsing. Suddenly, we humans bear the responsibility for ensuring that the ecological balance is not upset. This metamorphosis of Prometheus is also great theatre material. .

■ **Johanna Domokos:** Theater is a very sensitive environment. In it, not only the psychological and social, but also the environmental and spiritual challenges of man find expression. With the organization of our conference entitled *Theater of the Anthropocene. An Overture*<sup>1</sup>, eco-conscious theater experiments, environmentally conscious activities within and attached to the world of theater, as well as eco-critical reflection in theater studies came into focus. We can consider a significant step that Frank Raddatz's almost decade-old initiative<sup>2</sup> was given the opportunity within the framework of the 10th Theater Olympiad to bring together lawyers, anthropologists, literary scholars and theater esthetes, theater makers, fellow artists and audience members to discuss the theoretical and practical possibilities.

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1 Workshop on the Theater of the Anthropocene – An Overture. <https://szinhaz.org/en/esemenyek/workshop-on-the-theater-of-the-anthropocene-an-overture/> Viewed on 08 July 2023.

2 Theater des Anthropozän. <https://xn--theater-des-anthropozn-l5b.de/en/home/> Viewed on 08 July 2013.

*We can hear many different approaches and calls for attention that the Earth is drifting towards an ecological disaster, but it is clear that people can do a lot to improve or at least stabilise the situation on an individual level. How do you see this, can the theatre play an educational role in this as well? If so, in what form?*

■ **F. M. R.:** I think the individual component is only marginal. If the energy system has to be restructured, for example shipping is to become climate-neutral in a few decades, coal mining is to be stopped and the like, these are very efficient measures. These decisions, which are made at the societal level, can be quite painful for the individual. For example, because his diesel car loses value, or he has to make investments in harmless heating. Perhaps it is less about the pedagogical value of imparting a knowledge of interrelationships than it is about developing a sensitivity to our existence in the planetary habitat. Theatre has historically played a major role in this regard because it is directed at the individual but as an element of the community of an audience. It involves the whole of life on the planet.

Theatre can influence the attitude of society, because our attitude towards nature is itself determined by cultural history. This is why Bruno Latour says: Nature is culture! But what can theatre contribute to developing a culture that knows itself to be in harmony with ecological parameters and does not – knowingly or unknowingly – work against them?

■ **J. D.:** By now we can see that not only a lot of small changes have to happen, but also an essential transformation (see the difference between the words *Veränderung* and *Verwandlung* in German). The challenge is enormous, beyond the individual, although the change must start here. Humanity must be and perform in unity – harmonizing its external and internal worlds – with itself and its environment: the Earth and cosmos. The theater is particularly suitable to make us experience that what is outside is inside and what is inside is outside. As the theater scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte emphasizes, through its praxis “the world can become magical again”.

*Theatre scholars, lawyers, writers, and actors were among the speakers, from whom we could hear diverse approaches to the problems raised. What criteria was used to compile the list of invitees?*

■ **F. M. R.:** It was even a historian of science who spoke. That is indeed extremely unusual in the context of theatre. But this whole ecological catastrophe is only possible because of science and its application in technology. Without engaging with science, we will not escape the Anthropocene. The French philosopher Michel Serres analysed this as early as 1990 in *The Natural Contract*.<sup>3</sup> I myself founded the Theatre of the Anthropocene in 2019 at the interface of art/science and have since been working closely with various scientific institutions to bring soil, water, the forest or the rights of nature onto the stage. Law, the question of what is allowed and what is not in dealing with nature, also has enormous significance in this context. Historically, law is always subject to enormous change. But what kind of law do we need to survive the Anthropocene? In some countries, rivers or forests can take legal action. Since last year, a salt lagoon in Spain also has this right. To deal with these current issues, theatre needs texts. That is why it is of great importance to involve writers in this process. Likewise, actors who are familiar with dealing with nature, because after all they have to deal with these texts on stage. Theatre scholars report on what has already taken place on stages or performatively in this sector and what they have noticed. Basically, our entire culture is affected by this existential crisis of humanity. Seen in this light, it is also a matter of culturalising the conflict with the earth on all levels, i.e. making it the subject of our everyday life and education.

■ **J. D.:** In assembling the speakers for the event, we paid attention to bringing together domestic and international researchers and sitting down for a serious conversation without language challenges. For this, we got excellent interpreters who were able to convey accurately between the languages of the presenters and participants. We also thought it was important to invite researchers and theater people who not only talk about the problem, but also do it.

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<sup>3</sup> Serres, Michel. 1990/1995. *The Natural Contract*. Translated by Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

*What conclusions can be drawn from the lectures? Did you manage to find answers to the questions asked in the call?*

■ **F. M. R.:** It is crucial to realise that we are not dealing with linear processes. We are learning to understand that it is precisely the multiplicity of different substantive perspectives that is characteristic of this cultural transformation called the Anthropocene. There is no such thing as one causality. That is superstition. The sooner we think of the world around us, i.e. our planet, systemically and see it as an interplay of different spheres that are connected by interactions or that produce interactions, the greater the chances of calming the ecological parameters. Earth history knows many climatic conditions that are incompatible for Homo Sapiens and an infinite number of species that have become extinct due to climatic shifts.

■ **J. D.:** After the three-day meeting (which also included visits to the theater), we<sup>4</sup> drafted the following manifesto together with our speakers:

### THE THEATER OF THE ANTHROPOCENE CREATES THE FUTURE BY GIVING PLANET EARTH A STAGE

The relationship people have with nature depends on their culture. In the age of ecological threats, plants, animals, rivers, forests and landscapes can no longer be regarded as dead objects.

Without a living connection with non-human actors and their needs, no habitat will remain intact. Under these circumstances, the task of culture, like that of theatre, is to create a sensitivity to the state and processes of our planet in order to confront society with the question: what kind of nature do we want?

The actor József Szarvas, who takes care of the native fruit faculty, rightly wove the thoughts started in this call: "Our created world has an enemy and that is

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<sup>4</sup> The signatories are Eliana Beaufils, a researcher at the Sorbonne in Paris, cultural anthropologist, writer, lawyer, MMA MMKI director Csáji László Koppány, cultural researcher and academic performer Domokos Johanna, LMU theater studies professor Andreas Enghart, Berlin-based dramaturge, director, author Frank Raddatz, the retired head of the Berlin Max Plank Institute Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, the Austrian-born ecocritic writer Katrin Röggl, the actor of the National Theater, the founding father of the Pajta Theater József Szarvas, and the writer, director, ecologist, and beekeeper Tibor Weiner Sennyey.

the person who only consumes culture. Sensitization is just covering up the problem." The artist Tibor Weiner Sennyey repeatedly mentioned the visionary idea of Garden Hungary.<sup>5</sup>

**Your works and books were also thematized (one book was even launched at this event) at the conference: can we hear a few words about them?**

■ **F. M. R.:** The book launch is related to an anthology edited by Johanna Domokos. I myself have written several essays on the relationship between theatre and the Anthropocene<sup>6</sup>, and also a small booklet with the ambiguous title *The Drama of the Anthropocene*.

■ **J. D.:** I dealt with the performative processing of Anthropocene reflection within the framework of several university courses (see e.g. in 2012 at the University of Bielefeld a whole-day performance series that grew out of a half year long seminar). Its expression in dramas and other literary writings is reflected by the anthology *Megfeledkezve a világról magnóliavirágzáskor* (Forgetting the World at Magnolia Flowering)<sup>7</sup>, which release was timed for our Anthropocene theater event. This publication contains literary texts from Northern Europe and accompanying analyzes that deal with the large-scale crises of our time, such as the finiteness of the earth's raw material reserves, environmental pollution that threatens human, animal and plant existence, the resulting intensification of conflicts between social strata, and nations etc. This publication presents the literary reflection of the global and local challenges of our Anthropocene age, from early texts of Finnish, Sami, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Greenlandic and Faroese literature to the latest works. The translators themselves provided great help in the selection of the texts, such as Petra Németh, Kata Veress, Dániel Veress, and Miklós Vassányi, who did a great job with their translations. The included case studies relating to works of literature, drama, and other media shed new light on the role of culture, history and

5 See: <https://adrot.hu/kertmagyarorszag-weiner-sennyey-tibor-eloadasa/> Viewed on 07 July 2013.

6 See e.g. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003046479-21/theatre-anthropocene-frank-raddatz> Viewed on 07 July 2013.

7 Domokos Johanna, ed. 2023. *Megfeledkezve a világról magnóliavirágzáskor* (Skandináv antropocén irodalmi betekintő). Budapest: KRE–L'Harmattan Könyvkiadó.

society in the formation of narratives on nature and the environment, and offer a comprehensive and multi-faceted overview of the most recent ecocritical research in Scandinavian studies.

*What is your opinion on whether the theatre will continue to exist in the future?*

■ **F. M. R.:** Theatre emerges from cults closely linked to the rhythm and phenomenon of the planet. The Greek Dionysia, the tragedy festivals in Athens, took place at the beginning of spring and were linked to the return of life in nature. The theatre god Dionysus pays homage to the principle of metamorphosis and also appears on stage as an animal. The Dionysian situates an earth-bound world of constant transformation. This also concerns death. Dionysus is the only god who can die. No art form is better suited to ventilate the relationship to nature than the stage, but to do so, it must learn to reactivate its Dionysian roots. If it succeeds in doing so, it is predestined to be a place where society negotiates its existential problems beyond good and evil, even under the changed conditions of earth history.

■ **J. D.:** A holistic theater is perhaps more needed today than ever. Our environmental problems are the result of our internal crisis. A theater space in which people can once again be present for each other with heart and soul (be it human or beyond) requires wise catalysts. Here and there, the hidden stream of specific traditions, knowledge and experimentation still surface. One must look for it delicately. Mostly with silence, then with its competent performers, teachers.

*What are your Anthropocene projects presently working on?*

■ **F. M. R.:** As part of the Theater of the Anthropocene's current projects, we are accompanying a workshop in Hamburg on the subject of the deep sea: *Who owns the seabed?* with musical and poetic contributions. A large performative project *Metamorphoses of Water* is planned for the fall in Berlin. We are also currently developing a concept for trees in the city, having successfully presented the pilot project *A lonely tree in a concrete jungle* in Karlsruhe in December 2023. We are also working on the topic of soil on behalf of a Bavarian foundation.