5 The Creative Challenge

1 Why Change?

Many – perhaps most – creative theatre-makers find this question easy to answer. The climate crisis is the most challenging humanity has ever faced. If theatre wants to be part of the conversation around it, then theatre must itself become sustainable. Productions may not be the largest part of theatre's impact on the planet, but they are the most visible. They're what theatre is for. Besides, if theatre can pioneer its own transition, it can show the way to other sectors, generating change across society.

Despite that realisation, it's important to recognise the creative challenge of thinking and working differently.

Theatre won't be transformed overnight. Sustainability is a transition in which creative theatre-makers have an essential role to play. But sustainable theatre doesn't only rest on their shoulders. They make change most effectively by embracing the collective support of the whole production team in developing a vision to its most sustainable form.

The climate crisis has generated a new set of parameters in which we need to work. A creative response begins by recognising our responsibility for the decisions we make – including decisions that harm the planet. Those parameters can, of course, be presented as restrictive. They can make it harder to realise familiar ideas sustainably.

Only through creative thinking can they be sublimated into a new future for theatre.

2 A Different Challenge

The challenge facing theatre writers, directors and designers is to conceive and create ambitious new shows which express everything they wish to say about the world while working within the reality of the climate crisis.

That reality, and the challenge of responding to it, is already shaping the work of many designers and directors.

A work of theatre can, of course, take the climate emergency as its subject – in which case it's all the more important to make it in a way that reflects climate realities. But making shows sustainably is not an end in itself. It isn't theatre's purpose or ambition which have changed; but the parameters within which it's made.

Parameters are, of course, nothing new – theatre makers have always worked within boundaries of cost, space and time. Limitation can be a spur to invention; constraint and creativity can inter-react. Almost without exception, theatre artists in their early careers work within severe constraints, making shows with whatever's to hand.

The climate emergency has brought a different set of parameters, however. Working within them is a different creative challenge.

3 A Different Approach

Some theatre-makers have been exploring this challenge for years; for others, it will be new. The future direction of theatre will take shape through the work they make.

The role of this guidance is not to suggest creative solutions, but to define the parameters within which theatre must work. Equally, it would be wrong to make assumptions about the work those parameters will generate. Sustainability might, at first sight, suggest aesthetic austerity and minimalism; and those may be approaches some theatre artists choose. But they are not inevitable answers to the new questions the climate emergency is asking.

Sustainability doesn't dictate what shows should look like. Theatre has always responded to crucial new subjects through creativity and invention, and, in the process, discovered unanticipated new forms of expression.

The climate crisis creates a new reality. In adapting their art-form to it, theatre-makers are already conceiving theatre in new ways.

4 A Different Way of Working

In the collaborative chain that makes a show, no one person can 'own' sustainability. Everyone's practice is affected; everyone is dependent on others, from producers to set-builders, to work in new ways. Responding to the climate emergency is a collective responsibility.

Sustainability requires new ways of working, therefore. It needs collegiality and collaboration, which demand more time, and promote different kinds of creative relationship.

Making shows in a linear and hierarchical way stifles the collective conversations which allow sustainable answers to be found. Makers' expertise is needed at early stages to develop an idea in the most sustainable possible way. Iterative conversations are needed to nudge a vision to its most sustainable form.

Working in this way needs more time. Schedules need to be rethought, along with budgets that pay for more time, rather than more material (chapter three provides detail on the principles of producing shows more sustainably).

New Writing and Devised Work

New writing and devised work present special challenges. Even more than usual, rehearsal is a journey of discovery and change. That energy mustn't be squeezed out of the process. Planning in advance shouldn't exclude the effect of the unanticipated.

Directors and Designers will learn over time how to balance the drive to avoid last minute change, with the need to retain creative energy. The aim must be to cushion the effect of late surprises, not wholly to exclude them.

Plan everything possible. Question a last-minute impulse to rely on 'stuff'. Think twice about making or buying more, or throwing away something that's already been made.

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Working collectively also requires a high degree of trust and mutual respect. Makers, production staff and suppliers are all part of a team whose shared purpose is to realise creative ideas sustainably.

Theatre is a wide road filled with collaborators all travelling in the same direction. Responding to the climate emergency is a collective responsibility, and the work it generates will be a collective endeavour.

5 Some Starting-points

As stated above, it is no part of this guidance either to prescribe creative answers, or predetermine outcomes. There is no single creative prescription for the new approaches which are growing out of the climate crisis. Collectively, theatre-makers are inventing them, show by show and season by season.

For the many theatre-makers who have already engaged with the challenge of the climate emergency, the notes that follow may therefore seem superfluous. They should be read not as prescriptive, but as a series of starting-points which summarise theatre-makers' experience so far.

The Concept

How sustainably a show can be achieved can depend on the director and designer. Responsibility for working sustainably lies with everybody, and teams must collectively rise to that challenge. But making work within the parameters of the climate emergency is a journey that starts with the initial concept.

Sustainability can never be an afterthought. It needs to begin at a show's inception.

Collaboration

Making a show sustainably is a collective task. By working together, teams can refine a show towards sustainability using their common expertise.

New production milestones are needed to support this:

- A sustainability meeting at concept stage integrates sustainable thinking from the outset.
- Later, the White Card model can be the focus of a 'Green Card' meeting where the whole team audits design against Green Book targets, workshops options, and agrees actions.

Flexibility

Collaboration requires flexibility. Working with a team to nudge an idea towards sustainably means sharing control. Everyone needs to keep their minds open.

Losing a few centimetres here or adding some there might make it possible to reuse last year's revolve, or help the workshop cut a floor from fewer boards. A reused stair from a previous show might not be the first idea – but it might be the right one. Designers working sustainably keep their minds open to change.

Time

Working in this way needs time. It takes time to invent sustainable ways of achieving a creative vision, just as it takes time to track down sustainable materials – time which producers must include in schedules.

In the same way, conceiving a show sustainably also needs more time. Less resource demands more invention; template solutions will no longer work. Theatre-makers need time to find new answers to new questions.

Doing More with Less

Whenever designers ask themselves if each element is working hard enough, sustainable thinking is aligned with creative process. Sustainable theatre-making requires everything – every idea, every piece of material – to work as hard as possible.

Different Approaches

Stage design has developed a tried-and-tested technology of new ply cladding on new steel frames. That's challenging to achieve sustainably. Some designers have found it helpful to start from a different place – from a space's architecture; from what's available in theatre stores; or from the particular qualities of reused or recycled materials.

Sustainable Making

There's guidance for sustainable making throughout this volume.

- The first step is to minimise, through design, how much material a set requires.
- The next is to find reused components or recycled materials – ideally locally, to reduce transport.
- Failing that, new materials can at least be sourced as sustainably as possible.
- The very last resort is virgin material from unsustainable sources which harm the planet.

Intellectual Property

Bespoke designs need to be protected. No one wants to see their work turn up unaltered in someone else's show. But copyright can be safeguarded by identifying the specific components a designer wants to protect. Everything else – generic components such as windows and floors, masking, salvaged materials etc – can be made available for reuse or recycling.

More Isn't the Answer

When a show proves troublesome, teams have sometimes tried to solve the problem by modifying sets or ordering new props. That can ruin a show's sustainability. Better solutions may need more time instead – for planning, preparation, or experiment.

Look Ahead

Productions don't end at the final curtain. In a circular economy, everything on stage should have been used before, and will be used again – and theatre makers need to think of that in advance. If the team has made something of value, there will be other ways of valuing it again. Don't assume that a show's final audience is the skip.

6 Additional Benefits

Sustainable practice doesn't only benefit the environment.

- Working collaboratively improves working culture for everybody.
- Working collectively brings more diverse talent into the industry.
- Working locally connects theatre to communities.

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