

*Howlround* ~ A knowledge commons by and for the theatre community

## **Radical Empathy, Embodied Pedagogy, and Climate Change Theatre**

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by Theresa May

<http://howlround.com/radical-empathy-embodied-pedagogy-and-climate-change-theatre>

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*This week on HowlRound we continue our exploration of Theatre in the Age of Climate Change, begun a year ago, in honor of Earth Week 2016. How does our work reflect on, and responds to, the challenges brought on by a warming climate? How can we participate in the global conversation about what the future should look like, and do so in a way that is both inspiring and artistically rewarding? Theresa May is a director, educator, and the executive director of the ecodrama festival Earth Matters On Stage. She is an inspired colleague with whom I collaborated closely on a production of my play Sila at the University of Oregon. With her usual passion, Theresa makes a case for more partnerships in educational theatre.—Chantal Bilodeau*

Every historical moment has its theatre, but never has a time so desperately needed what theatre offers. Sociologists are studying the kinds of skills and sensibilities required if human beings are to avert the catastrophes of climate change that scientists predict. Skills like radical empathy, deep listening, collective embodied practice, and a sense of self-as-community—all central to theatre as a way of knowing—are essential to what climate sociologist Kari Norgaard calls the “revolution of our shared imagination.” “Imagination is power especially in a time of crisis,” she writes. We need to “imagine the reality of what is happening to the natural world...to imagine how those ecological changes are translating into social, political, and economic outcomes, and ... to imagine how to change course.” It’s time, Una Chaudhuri writes, to bring the “vast resources of live, embodied performance [to] the service of the... radical imagination called for by the perilous predicament” of climate change.

**Theatre practices the crucial climate change skills of knowing ourselves as permeable, inter-connected, mutable,**

**and multiple. As we map alternative ways of being and relating, theatre can move us from the terrifying facts through the necessary transformations of self—a newly imagined human expressed in the context of a living, breathing planet.** 

We know that theatre not only bears witness to history, it generates new lived experience. In 2004 Earth Matters on Stage (EMOS) was founded as an ecodrama playwrights festival to inspire new plays around environmental themes, but also to provoke new *possibilities of being* in relationship with the more-than-human world. EMOS has called for plays about environmental (in)justice; plays that engage culturally diverse understandings of the environment; plays that expand the idea of “community” to include non-humans and the land itself as characters or agents. The next EMOS will be hosted by University of Alaska, Anchorage, and will focus specifically on climate change. (Stay tuned for details.)

It was at EMOS 2012 that I heard a staged reading of *Sila* by Chantal Bilodeau. It had won first place. What thrilled me was how it demonstrated what I call “ecodramaturgy,” which asks how must theatre change in response to problems that are both human and non-human, both local and global? How can we reexamine the ways we make theatre, not only the materials we use, but how we conceive of story and character, and the relationship between artistic work and community? *Sila* does all of this. The first of eight plays Bilodeau planned to write about the effects of climate change in the Arctic (see previous HowlRound article), *Sila* is a web of interwoven stories about the deeply personal impacts of climate change (what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence”) across the lives of characters that represent diverse local and global, Western/scientific and indigenous, human and non-human perspectives.

Anxious to see how the play’s three languages (English, French and Inuktitut), cultural perspectives, and non-human characters would translate in live production, I went to Boston in April 2014 to see the premiere of *Sila* at Central Square Theatre (produced by Underground Railway Theatre). Director Megan Sandberg-Zakian and dramaturgs Alyssa Schmidt and Downing Cless envisioned the production at the center of a matrix of learning opportunities that composed what we might call a climate change pedagogy. Their community-engaged dramaturgy provoked dialogue and invited examination of

public policies, cultural assumptions, and shared experience through lectures, panels and community discussions with scientists, sociologists and economists from local universities, and civic leaders and activists from community organizations. Jan Cohen Cruz points out that this kind of public engagement is how theatres make themselves essential to civic life. Does this mean that every play has an activist or educational mission? Yes. Let's not be squeamish about it. Let's be responsible for this unique opportunity to participate in a complex public debate and social transformation.



*Sila*, by Chantal Bilodeau, directed by Theresa May, University of Oregon 2015. Photo by Ariel Ogden.

But theatre can do more. When it comes to climate change, we are not only charged with telling the stories of this historical moment and advocating change, but also with applying the unique way of knowing that is theatre-making to this crisis. Theatre practices the crucial climate change skills of knowing ourselves as permeable, inter-connected, mutable, and multiple. As we map alternative ways of being and relating, theatre can move us from the terrifying facts through the necessary transformations of self—a newly imagined human expressed in the context of a living, breathing planet.

I went back to Oregon, excited to direct *Sila* at my university. What Bilodeau gave us in *Sila* was an *embodied* climate change pedagogy: a multifold learning experience we entered feelingly, exercising what Anne Bogart calls radical empathy. Not only did students and community learn about the impact of climate change on Inuit communities, about global economic pressures, about the relationship between climate justice and civil rights, those directly involved lived into it—into the chaos; the baffling politics, the personal loss.

The cultural demands of the play required partnerships with indigenous communities in our region. Yupik students, faculty, and staff became involved as cultural consultants and cast members, making rehearsals a space of connection and exchange around the lived experience of climate change. Rupturing business as usual, rehearsals became an opening through which students forged connections beyond themselves. *Sila* interrupted our western hemispheric bias by reorienting our sense of home; non-human characters tore open the status of the human; Inuit characters challenged our western Euro-American privilege. Native community members watched rehearsals and offered comments; the role of Kuvageegai, an Inuit elder, was played by a local Native elder, who shared personal impacts of climate change on regional indigenous communities. The Inuit culture, cosmology, and language at the heart of the play provoked a radical understanding of the land as a living breathing system of relatedness. (*Sila*, an Inuktitut word, means the breath that connects human and non-human.)



*Sila*, by Chantal Bilodeau, directed by Theresa May, University of Oregon 2015. Photo by Ariel Ogden.

Yupik Native law student Meghan Siǵvanna Topkok, who played the Daughter Bear, explained why kinship with animals is central to indigenous Arctic identities. “At one time in history we were the animals and they were us. People and animals were one being. It’s not a metaphor.” The polar bears were rehearsed not as objects (puppets), nor even as individual characters, but as possibilities of becoming. “Becoming polar bear” but never “acting” bear, sharing breath and continuous movement, an ensemble shaped and re-shaped, feeling into the question of kinship. Inspired by Inuit depictions of animals and humans as interwoven images of multiple forms, our Mama Bear was multiple, mutating, always shape-shifting: an intermittent apparition.

Similarly, the environments of the play were not inanimate set pieces, but a continually morphing breathing landscape, shaped and re-shaped by an always-present ensemble: ice flow became office became sea became home.

We were rearranged by the process. A year later students surveyed affirmed that something fundamental in their world view had shifted. “It was because the land was

always alive—it was us—we were breathing together that I can't look at anything the same way: that rock, that river is alive," one cast member wrote.

Can the experiences of a couple dozen folks make a difference in the face of an overwhelming global problem? I think so. It's in the bodies, hearts, and imaginations of everyday lives that change most needs to occur. I know this is a journal for theatre professionals, but I am willing to bet that some of you live (as I do) in two worlds, or that you work for a theatre company that has an educational wing. Educational theatres are uniquely positioned to bring artists and scientists, indigenous scholars and community activists, poets and city planners, performers and audiences together through embodied climate change pedagogy. Ivory towers are melting along with the ice. I urge you to demand more of colleges and universities. Build civic/artistic/university partnerships that engage the body, as well as the body politic, in the revolution of our shared imagination so desperately needed by our planet.

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