

Theater pedagogical response to climate crisis

Outlining an ecological perspective on an academic discipline

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We are currently experiencing a destruction of our planetary foundations of life on an immense scale and at an unexpected pace. Even in our latitudes, in the increasingly rigidly demarcated area of a Western European civilization, everyone has had direct sensory experience of withered harvests in steppe-covered fields, burning forests, missing insects and storms of previously unknown magnitude. The scientific context for this is provided by the regularly published report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The fact is that we are in 'mortal danger' and action must be taken immediately. That this realization does not immediately lead to internationally coordinated political action is due to the description of the climate crisis "does not follow as a matter of course from changing precipitation patterns or the rise in sea level, but [...] is the result of power- and dominance-driven struggles for interpretation between different actors in business, politics or science" [trans. by U.P.] (Brunnengräber/Dietz 2011: 97). We are dealing with multiple crises that cannot be solved with better environmental protection measures, as it forms "a historically specific constellation of various mutually influencing and interrelated crisis processes in neoliberal financial market capitalism" [trans. by U.P.] (Bader et al. 2011: 13). The authors of the cited study name four concrete, interwoven "crisis complexes: the crisis of financially dominated accumulation [...], the socio-ecological crisis [...],

permanent crises of reproduction [...] and the crisis of parliamentary democracy” [trans. by U.P.] (ibid.). The inner connection of these crises, they conclude, results from the relations of domination, power relations and conflicts of neoliberalism (cf. ibid.).

Theater education, as a social, artistic, pedagogical and discursive practice in the medium of the performing arts, is embedded in this crisis situation. There is no ‘outside’, not even in the arts, which, as a social field of practice that is publicly or also increasingly funded by private foundations (just like the social field of education), is involved in the struggle for interpretive sovereignty. How do we as theater educators act in this situation of a complex transformation process with an open outcome? How do we respond to the increasing exhaustion and resignation that we encounter in ourselves and in the young students we are dealing with? How do we cope with the (overwhelming) plethora of concepts and proposals for mitigating multiple crises? What do we align ourselves with and to what values, to what theories, and to what examples? How does a theater pedagogical practice, theory and teaching describe itself in the (climate) crisis? My perception is that academic theater pedagogy is still in its infancy here. Fortunately, for the last two years there has existed an English-language publication that reflects from a university perspective on the requirements and possibilities of theater education in the climate crisis.

This text directly follows the reflections of colleagues from Canada, the USA, Nigeria and Australia, focuses on the ecological dimension of the crises and is written from the perspective of a representative of academic theater education (cf. Alexandrowicz/Fancy 2021). My focus is on the situation in German-speaking countries and the specific research questions arising from it. I will not derive my considerations programmatically from a normative concept of ecology but will start from the needs or interests of my students as I perceive them. My search is directed at connections between needs that seem individual on the one hand and overarching discourses on the other, which can contribute to the development of an ecologically oriented theater pedagogy. In my estimation, the great challenge here is not to lose sight of the interconnectedness

of the various crises and thus not to abandon the critical claim of theater pedagogical theory formation and practice in the face of the 'new' object.

Become active, act, be effective! Change reality in a real way!

This demand, which is expressed and unspoken to me especially by students, challenges us at the moment in the content design of the study program theater education. The attack on the boundary between symbolic action (in the theater) and real intention of effect (in the socio-political context) seems to have similarities with the spirit of awakening of theater pedagogy in the 1960s. The basis of this demand is an attitude that, with understandable impatience and radicalism, no longer wants to resign itself to contradictions between claim and reality, but vehemently advocates doing what is proclaimed: 'Practise what you preach'. This corresponds with an activist orientation, which can be observed in Germany, above all, in the intermediate field between free performing arts and theater pedagogy (cf. Pinkert 2022). Their focus is on the social situation of theater-making itself, in which the "conditions, settings, and consequences of one's own creation" [trans. by U.P.] (Falk/Schüler/Zinsmaier 2022: 15) are critically reflected upon.

Frank Oberhäußer, member of the independent performance group Turbo Pascal, speaks of an "activist turn" [ff.trans. by U.P.] (Oberhäußer 2022: 5) and defines it in terms of the following characteristics of (one's own) work: a decidedly political statement within the projects; bringing "marginalized perspectives" (ibid.) onto the stage; making one aware of 'one's own exclusion mechanisms' as well as a strict discrimination-critical examination of the content and artistic forms, but also of (the) organizational forms (cf. ibid.) of one's own work. What happens if one looks at this activist orientation from an ecological perspective? According to my thesis, the energetic conditions of the social situation of theater-making would then also come into view: the structural location of rehearsal and performance, the material and energy consumption in production, the (care) energy expended to enable concentration on rehearsal and per-

formance, etc. in short, the interplay between performance (production) and environment.

Here I draw on a thought by Maximilian Haas, who suggests that the term 'environment performance', "can be used to focus on the intimate entanglement of performances with their technoeological environments, indeed the environmental condition of performances in general" [trans. by U.P.] (Haas 2022: 130). Such a view could add aspects of sustainability to the claim of real effective changes of theater pedagogical "[production] conditions, settings and consequences" [trans. by U.P.] (Falk/Schüler/Zinsmaier 2022: 15). A practical example for one such approach was the master's project by Anna Hübner and Moritz Tölle entitled "Weltenwandel" (2022), in which a group of eight players examined their relationship between humans and nature and explored the generational conflict in relation to the climate crisis.

The production's set was made from large, recycled paper packages that end up as waste in supermarkets, the costumes came from second-hand sources, and the team took responsibility for feeding the group healthy, sustainably produced food during rehearsals. Energy use of the rehearsal space was not yet an issue in this production. But it is to be expected that after studies on the use of resources in state-run cultural enterprises, the currently ongoing study on climate-friendly cultural policies by the "Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft", and the plans for energy conservation at universities, smaller, municipal cultural institutions will also have to report their energy balance.

This opens up a large field for sustainable action in the sense of 'practice what you preach': it is a matter of a) paying attention to resources in a comprehensive sense and negotiating their fair distribution, b) defending complex attention to the interaction of 'environment' and theatrical practice against a reduction to certain parameters of 'energy saving', and c) a fundamental questioning of production methods and principles of performing art: "The political agency of theater is thus not limited to its artistic and discursive positionings, but includes a whole range of infrastructural forms of relation and action" [trans. by U.P.] (Haas 2022: 131).

Fight for global justice and solidarity with the disadvantaged!

The pursuit of justice and the exposure of oppressive relationships is a strong concern of my students. So far, however, this has focused primarily on the realm of their own work practice (in theater and in school) or on the social relations and conditions of theater pedagogical work in a migration society characterized by unequal power relations. In my opinion, there is an urgent need for an impulse that the power- and discrimination-critical perspective of “contemporary theater pedagogy” [trans. by U.P.] (cf. Falk et al. 2022) expands to include the ecological dimension. This would open up both a transnational perspective (for example, on the connection between neocolonialism, extractivism and migration) and focus on very local contexts of inequality in access to material resources such as space, water, and energy. But what are the consequences of such a perspective for a decidedly artistic-pedagogical practice? Here we can learn from the Californian art historian T.J. Demos, who has made the interaction of contemporary visual art, environmental activism and political ecology the basis of his research. Demos sees the climate crisis first and foremost as a political crisis, which is reflected in the lack of will on the part of political and economic decision-makers to ecological issues systematically and comprehensively (cf. Demos 2016: 12). Together with political activists, he thus advocates a major transition that must consist of a reorganization of social, political, and ecological life. “We cannot address climate justice adequately without also targeting the corruption of democratic practice by corporate lobbying, or the underfunding and failure of public transportation systems, or indigenous rights violations by industrial extractivism, or police violence and the militarization of borders.” (Demos: 12) Demos conceives of an ecology based on the recognition of the interconnectedness of these ecological, economic, political, and social issues, as a “political ecology” (ibid.). According to Demos, its ambitious and highly complex project can only be accomplished by artists, activists, and creative workers working together (cf. Demos: 16). It includes not only a critical analysis of corporate modes of production and corresponding power relations, but also a decolonization of concepts of nature in the various fields of politics,

economics, agriculture, justice and so on. (Demos: 18). The artistic examples that the art historian presents from these premises move beyond the boundaries of specific genres and also beyond the art framework as a whole, such as “in close proximity to field research, creative pedagogies, political mobilization, and civil society partnerships and solidarities, whereby interdisciplinary collaboration mirrors the very complex relations of political ecology.” (Demos 2016: 13) Explicit references to such artistic examples are a way to connect theater pedagogical theory and practice in a transnational way to questions of justice (of resource and burden distribution) and solidarity (with losers of the climate crisis).

In the field of performing arts, one example would be Rimini Protokoll's “World Climate Conference”, which was staged at Hamburg's Thalia Theater in 2014 in the run-up to the Paris Climate Conference, and made it possible to experience the complexity of international negotiations on concrete climate protection goals and strategies in a participatory installation. Another way is the connection between (transnational and local) protest cultures and academic theater pedagogical practice, as the critical pedagogue Richard Kahn has called for in reference to Gregory Martin as urgently needed: “a revolutionary critical pedagogy based in hope that can bridge the politics of the academy with forms of grassroots political organizing capable of achieving social and ecological transformation” (Martin after Kahn 2010: 18). In the above mentioned publication on “Theater Pedagogic in the Era of Climate Crisis” (Alexandrowicz/ Fancy 2021), one can find instances of such a connection, for example in the report by Rachel Rhoades, professor at Brock University in Canada. Rhoades invited the participants of her theater course to take part in a BLM-TO (Black Lives Matter Toronto) action at Pride, “in which they held a sit-in and used carnival-style presentation with a float covered in images of historic Black transwomen activists” (Rhoades 2021: 22). Against the background of my own practical experience, I am convinced that a connection between the power- and discrimination-critical claim of theater pedagogy and the ecological dimension must necessarily lead to an expansion of the theater pedagogical self-understanding: with regard to a) an expansion of the concept of theater in the direction of open actions and processes; b)

an understanding of who/what is actually the participants of a theater pedagogical process; c) the positioning of the discipline in educational policy, especially in relation to the program of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD); and finally d) the positioning of the discipline itself in the context of politically legitimized action.

These first two needs and related examples are strongly oriented towards actively formulated demands of young people. However, in my perception, there are also other needs of my students that are articulated less actively than reactively and find expression in denial and despair instead of loud protest.

Exhaustion and depression—longing for other forms of making theater

As a university professor of many years, I perceive that the psychological stresses of our students are increasing and that exhaustion and anxiety (from burnout and depression) are omnipresent. One can also interpret this condition as an (inter)subjective response to the interplay of the four crises mentioned above, which affect (student) subjects in the form of concrete 'stressors'. It is a task of theater pedagogy to give expression to this dimension of grief and despair as well. A successful example of this is "We for Future", a Zoom production by a youth club at the 'Theater an der Parkaue', which was created in 2020 during the pandemic under the direction of Joanna Praml. But how does one get beyond the theatrical (re)presentation of a world relationship that has fallen into crisis? Here, a fundamental change in the direction of thinking is needed: what if one were to question the human-world relationship as such and thereby not limit 'world' only to the social world of humans? What if one tried to get to the bottom of the "matrix of domination" (Collins after Kahn 2010: 9)? In view of these questions, I plead for an expansion of the reference sciences of our subject. I consider (historical-)philosophical considerations essential, which work in various ways to overcome a fundamentally crisis-ridden anthropocentric view of the world and of humanity. With a critical awareness of the interrelated crises mentioned

above, depression would then become less of an individual (neoliberally interpreted) deficit, and more of a subjective response to “alienation” and “loss of world” [trans. by U.P.] (Rosa 2020: 33), as a “state of relationless relationship in which subject and world are inwardly disconnected, indifferent, or even hostile to each other.” [trans. by U.P.] (Rosa 2020: 37). Exhaustion, in turn, could then be interpreted as the result of a dilemma: subjects of Western societies often have the best intentions to contribute to ‘climate salvation’, but within their social structures there is no way out for them from being invoked as “*homo economicus*-human as accumulator [...] forever consuming and bound to economic growth” (Gabrys 2018). For me, these findings give rise to the question of how theater education can process these subjective responses to crisis events as starting points of transformative education in Koller’s sense in the medium of the performing arts. The orientation of this kind of transformative educational processes would then no longer be (arbitrarily) open, but, in view of the “new problem situation” [trans. by U.P.] (Koller 2012: 16) of the climate crisis, would be oriented towards a transformation of an anthropocentric world and self-relations. The direction of which could be described, for example, by the notion of the “resonance relation” [trans. by U.P.] (cf. Rosa 2016: 285), that of sympoiesis (cf. Haraway 2018b: 51), or the revision of the understanding of “modern man” by the “earthbound” [trans. by U.P.] (Latour 2017: 488). An immense field of research opens up not only in the orientation towards—in the broadest sense ecologically oriented—new fields of knowledge, but also towards the medium of theater/performance, the subject of our discipline. In this context, it can be observed that the theatrical arts of our Western tradition, as “the most anthropocentric of all the arts” (Una Chaudhuri after Alexandrowicz 2021: 135) face particular challenges in rethinking the “tectonic shift” (Raddatz: 62) of the dissolution of the traditional subject-object relationship. This is demonstrated, for example, by the theatrical experiments of Tobias Rausch and Frank M. Raddatz. Tobias Rausch has conducted practical research on the representability of nature or natural phenomena on stage for many years (cf. Rausch 2019), and Frank Raddatz is currently testing an interweaving of scientific and artistic forms of knowledge and representatives of both fields on a stage of “hybrid nature” with

the “Theater of the Anthropocene” [trans. by U.P.] (Raddatz 2021: 72). Author and director Kevin Rittberger accuses such attempts of ignoring the reality-constituting power of the theatrical apparatus and thus reproducing outdated dualisms (cf. Rittberger 2019). Rittberger, on the other hand, demands that

[t]he protagonists of a theater of climate change must first allow for apparatuses that do not permanently reproduce exclusions, but allow for the expansion of anthropocentric body boundaries. Next, dualisms and hierarchies must give way. So that there is no longer the impression that culture can observe and represent nature. Instead, multiple cultures of nature are intertwined and interwoven in an ongoing practice of becoming-with [trans. by U.P.] (ibid.).

To explore and experience these possibilities of a practice of ‘becoming-with’ in an aesthetic way, I consider an elementary area of theater pedagogical work. For in such a practice, the actors not only focus on the negative effects of the crises, but also try out alternatives in an existence-affirming way, as marginal as they may seem for the time being. It is becoming apparent that in order to develop this practice, a further contemplation of performative settings, some of which are also designed for participation, is productive. I am thinking here, for example, of the “Animals of Manchester (including humanz)” project that Sibylle Peters tested in Manchester in 2019, or of “Kritter. A Speculative Narrative of Beings of All Kinds”, which was performed by Turbo Pascal at the Feld Theater in Berlin in 2023. Also to be mentioned here would be my own experiments with performances in/with landscape that I have been undertaking with students at the UdK for over ten years (cf. Pinkert 2023).

With these reflections, I have placed the needs of my students at the center, as I perceive them. But they are, of course, also my own needs and my question of how to deal in a professionally informed way with what “drives me insane” [trans. by U.P.] (Latour 2017: 41). With this in mind, I refer in the end to the manifesto of the publication *Theatre Pedagogy in the Era of Climate Crisis*, whose last sentence reads, “We do not expect

ourselves, or our students, to remain unchanged by the agendas articulated here: we embrace individual, collective and planetary transformation” (Alexandrowicz et al. 2021: 206).

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