

HIGH TIDE



Climate Dramaturgy: How To Guide

For Dramaturgs



HOW TO: INTRODUCING CLIMATE DRAMATURGY

making theatre in times of climate crisis: for dramaturgs

'Before an idea is fully formulated, it is often a subversion of the current state of affairs by a playful or indignant creative.'

- Ann Light

Climate Dramaturgy is a **holistic approach** to theatre-making and artistic practice. Dramaturgy is about how all the parts of a work relate to one another; Climate dramaturgy is about recognising the **climate crisis is a context** for everything we do – **artistically, practically, relationally**. That is, if you're making theatre now, your work relates to social, environmental, planetary transformation. Climate dramaturgy encompasses **attention to story, process and/or materials**: it brings together many existing and desired ways of making theatre—not all of which are overtly 'about' ecology. **Great art of the climate era** will interrogate the essentials of theatre: **why, who for, how?**

We live in times of struggle. Climate dramaturgy rejects an either/or mentality of winning or losing, success or failure. It is about approach: **attending with care to our relationships** (creative, technical, administrative) as well as with the living world around us. **There are no quick fixes** but many ways of **aligning your values with your creative practice**.

Climate dramaturgy is therefore not a 'to do' list. It's an approach to making theatre that recognizes the **environmental and social** to be **fundamentally connected**. It is not only about 'greening' theatre, but also about moving towards climate justice: recognising the **extractive, transactive systems of colonial capitalism** that carried us here. By attending to climate crisis, its causes, impacts, and implications, we **more fully inhabit the real world** and become better equipped as artists to make art that truly grapples with **what it means to be alive now**.

'We've been reproducing patterns that are damaging, if we repeat them, we will be entrenching them... We need to embody a new culture to emerge it.'

- Isabel Cavelier Adarve

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY 'SUSTAINABILITY'?

- ◇ 'Sustainability' implies we can carry on as we were. But as UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said in 2021: 'Our addiction to fossil fuels is pushing humanity to the brink. We face a stark choice: Either we stop it — or it stops us.'
- ◇ **GET REAL**. What are we sustaining? Who is the status quo working for?
- ◇ **FLIP IT**: If theatre isn't climate-conscious (in form, or working process, or

materials, or story) is it in fact **ignoring the reality** we are living through?

- ◇ How can we **imagine alternatives**? – both in how we work, and what work we make?
- ◇ ‘sustainable’= something that can keep going; therefore it is future-oriented. Ask what environmental and/or social harm is also being done now, and what the **antidotes** might be.
- ◇ Instead of ‘is it sustainable?’ ask ‘is it environmentally responsible?’ **‘What impact does this have on climate crisis?’**
- ◇ How can climate crisis make us **attend to the times** we are living through, more fully, more deeply?

If you can do ONE THING:

Start a conversation with your collaborators about climate: love, longing, care and fear. We are living in the contradictions and complicities of contemporary society – **high carbon culture** – making it difficult to effect real change alone.

Recognise the challenges: where do you site the struggle? What are the antidotes? How are your collaborators feeling about it? **What matters to each of them? What will energise their engagement?** What obstacles do they feel they face? The first step towards shifting our relationship to the living world around us, is **naming, not berating**.

High carbon culture is **full of contradictions** that make little sense: flights being cheaper than trains, cheap fast food and unaffordable housing, recycling bins and exporting plastic waste to low-income countries, claiming ‘green’ policies whilst subsidising/investing in fossil fuels. By **making these contradictions visible** (and not waiting for them to be solved), we can **start to imagine alternative climate cultures**.

The first step is **starting that conversation:** about what is challenging, what is possible, and what you long for. Keeping this conversation alive **throughout the creative process** will **deepen your collaboration, and your artistic decisions** and will permit change (whether small or large, it all matters). If you work in theatre, you already know **that meaningful action is never achieved alone**.

‘The crisis is everywhere, massive massive massive. And we are small. But emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies.’

– **Adrienne Maree Brown**

If you can do MORE THAN ONE THING:

The NEXT PAGES share 3 entwined threads for manifesting climate dramaturgy in your work. Whatever you decide, explore these approaches:

- ◇ **YES/AND.** Use the improv strategy of 'yes/and': celebrate what people are doing and build on it.
- ◇ **Acknowledge challenges: embrace antidotes;** take challenges as a chance to sharpen your ideas. When proposing antidotes recognise struggles and adapt as needed.
- ◇ **Recognise interdependence:** foster theatre as an ecosystem of mutual support, in active resistance to pressures to isolate and compete.

These strategies will start to enable you to shape a culture that becomes the norm. By acting **as though** the world you're aiming for were already in existence you begin to shift artistic culture towards climate care – and ultimately, **climate justice**.

'Tomorrow belongs to those who can hear it coming'

- David Bowie

CLIMATE DRAMATURGY FOR DRAMATURGS

Climate dramaturgy has three entwined threads which, braided together, will mutually enable each other: the stories you stage; the materials you use; and the working process. Find what works for you in your context.

Questions/provocations/suggestions:

1. What STORY are we telling?

- ◇ What does it mean to make theatre **in the context of ecological crisis**? There are as many ways of exploring climate crisis, ecology and human-nature relations as there are kinds of theatre. A play – and how you **stage it** – might:
 - ◇ explore **joy, grief, loss, anxiety, scale** (and our difficulties computing it), **frustration, despair, fury, pain, love**, and any other emotion provoked by climate crisis and/or human relations with each other and the living world and/or
 - ◇ address cognitive dissonance, gaps between belief and behaviour, intergenerational conflicts
 - ◇ reveal the **political and social systems** that brought about the catastrophic era we are living through (as tragedy, comedy or any other genre)

- ◇ tell stories that centre **postcolonial narratives** and/or decentre Eurocentric/Western models
- ◇ notice **the uncanny** – e.g. landscapes that are the same but not the same; seasons out of kilter; cultural gaslighting
- ◇ represent entanglements with other living beings; humans as interdependent
- ◇ work out **how else we might live** – and **who else we could be**
- ◇ **taboos** in relation to any of the above
- ◇ What kind of story about humans is the work presenting? (**Individual or networked? Hierarchical or multi-relational? Collaborative or competitive?**)
- ◇ Ask yourself and your collaborators what the writing or rehearsal choices assume to be **simply 'human nature'**
- ◇ How useful – or dramatic – is privileged individualism in the context of a world facing climate collapse? 'The Hero's Journey' is complex and doesn't necessarily automatically mean **complicity in individualist-saviour narratives** but it is worth being conscious of this!
- ◇ What might the **unintended consequences** of your standard choices be? What ideas or structures might they perpetuate? Who might they exclude?
- ◇ Where is the **agency/power** located in the **form and story?** Relate this to how we make work together and materially – **does form/process contradict what the story is exploring?**

2. How we make work TOGETHER

- ◇ Recognise people & planet are **interconnected**. Attending to only one aspect can harm another. Centre anti-racism work, anti-ableism, decolonisation. Inequitable power relations contribute historically and in the present to climate crisis.
- ◇ **Who is the work speaking to? How and why?**
- ◇ Ask for conversations about production conditions. **How we rehearse** is as significant as what in enabling climate-careful creativity.
- ◇ **'Co-creation'**: what's the method? How are you working with theatres to address hierarchies/positionality/dividing responsibilities/expectations/credits?
- ◇ **Start conversations early** with director/team about rehearsal process and how the conditions shape what is possible aesthetically
- ◇ **Recognise internalised capitalism**: rushing, productivity pressure, extractivist attitude to yourself and others

- ◇ How do you use financial power? Can you hold early-stage conversations with funders/theatres in relation to **environmental and social** impact?
- ◇ Ask to read a theatre's Ethics and Environmental policies. Share thoughts on how your writing process/production can align with/foster the theatre's aims.
- ◇ Collectivise and share: Dramaturgs can join the dramaturgs' network and unions Equity, Stage Directors UK and BECTU
- ◇ Who and what are we **celebrating/noticing/platforming?** Be aware of cultural dominance of individual hero narratives, both in the work itself and how it is marketed

3. How we make work MATERIALLY

- ◇ Does this feel like an area where you have little power/responsibility? Is that true? Can you put climate considerations into the **conversation around staging** – at script or production stages?
- ◇ Request carbon literacy training (theatres offer this as 'Intermediate' Green Book). If it doesn't exist, asking will create demand.
- ◇ Consider lighting designer's Paule Constable's ideas of 'Artistic Economy': that climate care invites us to be better artists, to **interrogate our ideas more thoroughly**, to discover what is **essential**, in the most **artistically-rigorous and refined expression** of the work.
- ◇ Can you support writers in **sharpening their writing/aesthetic choices** through considering the **implications** of what their script demands materially?
- ◇ Script notes can stipulate production conditions. Encourage writers to put their **climate commitments into print**. For example:

*'The production should be as low waste with as light a carbon footprint as possible in all aspects including props, set, printing, travel etc. otherwise the **staging will contradict the content**'*

- Mojisola Adebayo, 'Notes' to Family Tree, 2023

'Please take positive action against the environmental harm caused by the rehearsal and production of this play. The diversity of the cast and crew of this production should reflect, as far as is possible, the diversity of the world outside the theatre.'

- Dawn King, 'Diversity and sustainability statement', The Trials, 2022

EXERCISE: REFLECT & RESEARCH

WHAT MAKES YOU TICK: How do the three threads of story, working together and materials relate to your current work and artistic ambitions?

You can work through the following as an exercise – yourself, with your team, and/or with the theatre(s) you are working with. Or you can take what follows as principles to apply more generally across your work:

- » **CELEBRATE** what you're currently doing
- » **FIND EXAMPLES OF WHAT** another company/show/organisation is doing that embodies one or more of climate dramaturgy's principles.
- » **DREAM up** what you would love to do, if circumstances allowed it

ACT & SHARE

- » Talk about your celebrations and inspirations with your collaborators
- » What did you DREAM of? Chances are it already exists somewhere or has been tried out by someone.
 - ◇ Seek an existing example: **adapt it, implement it, scale it up.**
 - ◇ If you can't find it, how might you **sow the seeds** to make this happen in your context, now or in the future?

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD: NEXT STEPS

Ask yourself: how did exploring these suggestions in relation to your practice make you feel? What excites you? Which are you already doing? Which can you embed in your practice?

Remind yourself and others that **there's no one way** of getting it 'right' – and that perfectionism is likely to get in the way of acting. Ultimately, as a practice, climate dramaturgy invites you to approach whatever you do next with the principle of **hope as a verb** rather than a noun; that is, as an **action**, not a **feeling**. **Hope as a verb** is 'about **doing not having, doing not wishing**' (Käthe Weingarten). Why? Because if hope is something you have, it can be taken away, and can quickly dissolve in despair when outcomes are not visibly achievable ('solving' climate crisis, surviving capitalism, dismantling imperialist patriarchy). But **when hope is something you do, and do with others, then no matter what happens next, no one can take that away from you:**

*'hope is a practice; it is something we do with others. A practice is a program of action undertaken, not just or even for pragmatic purposes, but as **an expression of who one wants to be and how one wants to act in the world.** [When] the present is filled with working not waiting, we scaffold ourselves to prepare for the future'*

And finally...

- ◇ Don't let overwhelm get in your way—decide on **something you can action** in your context and do that.
- ◇ Keep holding **conversations** with your team/with peers about how you'd like to be working, and act whenever conditions allow (or act to change the conditions).
- ◇ **Return and reread** this 'how-to' document in a month or so – what else can you act on/expand (with thanks to Ecotage for the 'R's): **refuse, rethink, reimagine and regenerate?**

These guides – for writers, directors, dramaturgs & producers – were written by director-dramaturgs Lucy Wray and Zoë Svendsen (AHRC Climate Dramaturgy Research Fellow with High Tide 2024-25), in consultation with playwright Nicole Latchana, designers Vicki Mortimer and Paul Burgess, dramaturg Clare Slater, production manager Paul Handley, and Artistic Director of HighTide, Titiola Dawadu. The guides were further inspired by participants' engagement in many climate dramaturgy workshops 2024-26. See also: <https://metisarts.co.uk/climate-dramaturgy>

Designed for you to print (in black & white), add your own notes/highlighting, & keep.