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Re-mythologizing the 3-R's:
From Re-duce, Re-use, and Re-cycle to Re-search, Re-vision, and Re-present

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The Myths

The Gunnison Valley of Colorado is filled with ranchers, recreationists, river runners, second-home owners, ski bums, and a small liberal arts college community. There are many here who care deeply about preserving *their* environment as it exists and who intricately connect their particular “ecological identities” with where they live.¹ Western State Colorado University inhabits this vibrant geographic area and attracts outdoor enthusiasts to thriving environmentally-focused academic programs. Yet mirroring perhaps a divisive national trend between contemporary ecological and performance discourses, the theatre program at Western has faltered, in part by failing to forge a legitimate presence at an academic table where the key players hail from Environmental Studies, the Sciences, and Outdoor Leadership programs.

¹I borrow this term “ecological identity” as used in Theresa May’s “Greening the Theatre: Taking Ecocriticism from the Page to the Stage,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* (Fall 2005): 84-103. Also, the definition of “ecology” that I am using here is “the dynamic interaction between humans and their environments” in a very broad sense.

This trend is not specific to the region, however. It is so rife that Drs. Theresa May and Wendy Arons thematically frame their trailblazing recent anthology *Readings in Performance and Ecology* with the sentiment that “performance and ecology do not easily or readily share space together.”² In this introduction, they articulate (or re-articulate) a call to arms that scholar-artists in Theatre and Performance Studies desperately need to make this essential pairing not only happen in our respective disciplines but to be sustainable and widespread enough to have an impact.³ Wallace Heim in the epilogue “Thinking Forward” believes that ‘ecodramaturgy’ (a term coined by May), should and could “find a balance between claiming itself as a discrete discourse...on the one hand, and working as a function of the intersection of *many* disciplines,” on the other, so that neither side is exclusive to or gets subsumed by the other.⁴ Hence, these two chapters bookend not only the anthology but also the obvious: there is a lot of work to be done.

So, when I began this project, this was relatively uncharted territory for the Theatre and Performance Studies program at Western (and I would argue at many small liberal arts institutions across the country), with the arts on a general level perceived as an activity that takes us “out of nature,” an antithetical standpoint in the environment not

² Theresa May and Wendy Arons, “Introduction,” in *Readings in Performance and Ecology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

³ It is generally accepted that the first call for an “ecological theater” came from Una Chaudhuri’s 1994 essay, “‘There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake’: Toward an Ecological Theatre.” *Theater* 25:1 (Spring/Summer 1994), 23-31.

⁴ Wallace Heim, “Epilogue: Thinking Forward” in *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, Theresa May and Wendy Arons, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 215.

only in which I live but where my program needs to thrive. In addition, this is a complex problem with long-term and multifaceted implications. As such, on another level, what translates to an inequity of resource and visibility between the disciplines also absents a field that has dedicated its history to exploring the intersection between the human condition and its cultures, something that we can no longer afford to see as separate from nature. It is this binary thinking (nature vs. culture) that May and Arons believe “is carrying us to the brink of ecological collapse.”⁵ Using a piece of ecodramaturgy created by my students and I, I hoped to chip away from inside the academy at the nature/culture, performance/ecology, art/science division in contributory and monumental ways. This paper discusses how student actors, writers and I (whom I will sometimes refer to as “the company”) inhabited three phases of the performance creation work to ultimately de-construct binary standards that support old “environmental” myths and re-construct a new *ecological*, performance paradigm for the 3 R’s—from Re-duce, Re-use and Re-cycle to Re-search, Re-vision, and Re-present!

In Fall 2009, I was approached by Biology professor, Dr. Pat Magee, who asked if the students in my next semester’s Performers for Social Change class would write an original piece for the upcoming annual Environmental Symposium in March. He thought, and I knew from 15 years of devising original theatre for social change, that this might provide an engaging forum to build the symposium’s initial conversation about “ecological economics,” the theme of the conference. Although hesitant, as my enrolled students were quite “green” (in terms of theatre experience, not in their collective level of

⁵ Arons and May, 1.

environmental consciousness), I knew this could be a rich space for socially conscious theatre to be introduced to a new, academic audience.

The devised piece, however, was at first deliberately devoid of new conversation, reifying the marginal role that the theatre often “plays” in the sustainability discourse. In the piece, a group of inflated, self-important (fictional) artists—Actors for a Greener Life—demonstrated misdirected attempts to join the discussion. The Actors had just finished what they thought to be a brilliant film, replete with a downtrodden, diasporic polar bear, a “surfer-dude” hurricane, and Human who presents Mother Earth with a globe that you need to plug in. “Oops,” Human says. Hence, the film that opened the performance re-verbalized to a feverish pitch these overused myths of the movement: Re-duce! Re-use! Re-cycle!

The theatre piece that followed, however, revealed the film as parody. New stories were then told through live performance that connected clichéd themes of an exhausted environmental movement with the evolving ecology of an art form. This reformulated *artistic* landscape crossed boundaries previously policed solely for an already “green” audience and provided a re-generative space for new narratives to be planted and cross-bred. Thus, what happened through this artistic process was mirrored in the evolution of the work itself: the company grew as artists and environmental stakeholders alongside the content of the piece. As the complexity of our environmental awareness developed (re-search), so did our collective imagining (re-vision) of the power of theatre to have a real voice in the movement (re-present).

For inspiration, I linked Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed techniques together with the strategies of Greenpeace, and leaned on Theresa May’s groundbreaking

work (introduced above) intersecting the materiality (as opposed to the metaphors) of ecology and performance.⁶ And they got along much better than I had first imagined. Along with May's expansive definition of 'eco-drama,' which aims to stage the reciprocal connection between humans and the more-than-human-world,⁷ we engaged an eclectic valley-wide conversation on sustainability through the original performance, *A B-Earth Day Party for Mother Earth*. Jordan Cooper, one of the student-actors, recalls: "People hear and sometimes read about the environment and the importance to protect it to the point that, in general, it is so commonplace ears are becoming deaf to the message. Our presentation was a fresh outlet of communication that reopened the [environmental] conversation."⁸ This project negotiated new ground for me at Western, so that *all* those engaged in the dialogue—scientists, artists, and students—sat at the same academic table for the very first time, with the students of theatre having the loudest of the voices (of course): Re-search! Re-vision! Re-present!

The Re-search(ing) Phase

The Environmental Symposium was titled, "The Economy of Nature and the Nature of the Economy." Upon first hearing the title and subject area, the student writers and actors were understandably a bit dismayed. How does one translate "natures" and "economies" into meaningful theatre? What are the stories we could tell? Who would

⁶ For more information, see Wendy Arons and Theresa May, eds., *Readings in Performance and Ecology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Theresa May, "Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies," *Theatre Topics* 17:2 (September 2007), 95-110; Earth Matters on Stage website and conference <http://emosfestival.wordpress.com>

⁷ Theresa May, "What is Ecodrama?" <http://emosfestival.wordpress.com> (2007)

⁸ Personal interview, March 31, 2010.

care about something so seemingly academic? The first step was to unearth our “ecological identities.” It was important to understand as an ensemble where each of us stood not only in terms of the environmental movement—our individual involvement (or not)—but also how each of us singularly connected to the land on which we lived and if we too were affected by its material value as referenced in the beginning of the paper. We needed to first assess levels of our own knowledge and self-awareness on what we hoped to address for others in the performance piece. Realizing that we collectively knew very little—in essence we simply hadn’t ever given it much thought—the company launched into a fervent, if not frantic, phase of researching and revealing.

We also needed to find a theatrical framework on which to build our creative ecosystem. So, I reached out to May, a former colleague at the University of Washington, who eagerly shared her definition of “eco-drama” to help us get started. This broad terrain gave us the space to plant creative seeds:

An inclusive eco-drama is one that 1) illuminates the complex connection between people and place; 2) brings focus to an ecological concern of a particular place; 3) or takes the writer and audience to a deeper exploration of issues that may not be easily resolved.⁹

May also suggested content areas that we were determined to include: land and body in performance, the re-presentation of environmental injustices, green and sustainable theatre production, old cultural narratives with new stories, and the sensing and staging of “place,” a hearkening to Una Chaudhuri’s germinal work.

From this initial groundwork, students imagined a landscape beyond the assumptions that theatre’s role in terms of environmental awareness and change was limited to musicals about recycling or Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*. As May argues,

⁹ From *Earth Matters on Stage*, <http://emosfestival.wordpress.com/faq/what-is-ecodrama>

“Theatre [can] function as a field of exchange where myths take flight, moving between the permeable spheres of self and community and then out into the terrain of our lives.”¹⁰

What she advocates is not only an eco-criticism, a trend already heralded in literary studies, but an eco-dramaturgy. Similar to applying other “isms” to the theatre, the company viewed intersections between the human “body” and our ever-shifting environments through this eco-critical lens, revealing a myriad of dramas felt in those bodies—the body of lived experience, the body of community, bodies of land. This became the theoretical framework that rooted our fledgling drama.

From this positioning, the students could now reach underneath the trope of “green” to discover stories about the complex interrelatedness between who we are with where we are. As we juxtaposed tales of the human with nature, we revealed dimensions of power and inequity that we had not noticed before. Using Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) techniques—Forum Theatre, Image Theatre and Rainbow of Desire—the student actors experienced how ecologically-rich stories had a real and viable place in the theatre. These were not remote notions of nature. They were not dramatized animals. These were real stories about real people deeply tied to real places.¹¹ Our ecological

¹⁰ Theresa May, “Greening the Theatre: Taking Ecocriticism from the Page to the Stage,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* (Fall 2005): 85.

¹¹ This concept manifested itself in various ways throughout the script. Some of the most compelling examples came from a Forum Theatre exercise where each member of the company researched personal accounts from natural disasters that had occurred recently. With each of these testimonies, we built monologues that culminated in the final piece discussed in this paper. We were particularly struck by parents who had lost their only child in the collapse of a school in China while next door an office building remained unscathed. The Chinese government eventually admitted having cut corners in the use of resources for the building of schools during an economic boom. This account of a collapsed building fused together politics, economics, and the environment into an ecology of ‘human-made’ and human-felt’ loss. In addition, a photograph of an unnamed

identities took flight and envisioning the world through an eco-critical, theatrical lens appeared possible.

However, the “economy” part of the symposium still hovered in the wings, disconnected to the stories that were taking on flesh. So we invited experts from campus to talk about their perspectives on how the terrain of the economy connects with or rejects nature. Interestingly (or ironically), the economists and scientists expressed some trepidation as they entered our space, the black box theatre where we held our class. For the first time in this process, we did not feel like the “others.” They too had to interact in a foreign ecology in order to gain a different perspective and cover new ground. And although I am not sure we would have articulated that feeling if asked, its implied presence helped the company find a foothold of empowerment we didn’t know we had.

The results were fruitful. From David Batker, the keynote speaker of the symposium, we learned about Earth Economics.¹² From economists on our campus, we heard about the differences between a *quality* economy and a *quantity* economy and were introduced to the concept of the Bottom Billion.¹³ The magnitude of desperate conditions in which many of the world’s inhabitants exist, due to resource exploitation and

Palestinian woman sitting amidst the rubble of her home in the Gaza Strip used in an Image Theatre exercise was particularly impactful on making environmental justice issues *real* for the ensemble. Specifically, her use of a tree limb as a place to hang up her coat in an attempt to create some sense of order in the absolute chaos and devastation upon her home and her land. This contrast made the politically charged term “occupied territory,” rife with new meaning and ecological implications. The photo is available at this link:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/world/middleeast/20mideast.html>

¹² For more information, see David Batker, “What’s the Economy for, Anyway?” (Bullfrog Films, Oley, Pennsylvania: 2010).

¹³ For more information, see Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

shortages, struck a chord with the student actors. We hung on to the Bottom Billion, knowing we wanted to meet them again in the final performance.

Most unexpectedly, we built a bridge of commonalities between “us” and “them.” This cross-discipline dialogue that dominated our re-search phase started the roots of a community in which *we* as artists became stakeholders in *their* environmental movement. A final comment from May that addresses the significance of this part of our process: “Community-based theatre is more than a preamble to social justice activism, it is civic action. Transcending the town hall, theatre functions as a site of *collective dreaming* where a seemingly future might be envisioned.”¹⁴ Through the beginning stages of developing the piece, the company found some of our own environmental justice. We believed that what we performed at the symposium could actually make a difference, even have weight. We started to take ownership of the stories that *we* wanted to tell through the art form with which we so tightly bound our ecological identities. The dreaming had begun.

The Re-vision(ing) Phase

Our goal was a performance that went well beyond assumptions and myths to re-vision new ecological narratives that only the theatre could tell. Hence, the writing began. Filled with blossoming ideas and raw materials, the ensemble spent hours work-shopping on the natures of human economies, the ecologies of human natures. The 40th anniversary of Earth Day was April 22, 2010, just a few weeks after the symposium, and there were a

¹⁴ Theresa May, “Toward Communicative Democracy: Developing *Salmon Is Everything*,” in *The Community Performance Reader*, ed. Petra Kuppers and Gwen Robertson, (London: Routledge, 2007), 162.

good deal of film students in the course. So we decided to mix media and create an opening film that would celebrate this milestone by depicting a scene where Mother Earth's creatures paid homage to her 4.54 billionth birthday. They were throwing a co-existence party to which even Human was invited. Human arrives late, of course, dressed in leopard-skin pants (how offensive!), stands around awkwardly until she gives Mother Earth a most inappropriate gift—a globe that requires electricity to work.

Human's character represented the well-meaning intentions toward nature that some of modern culture has held, with nonetheless disastrous results. And although determined to make this opening film humorous, we thought it would be thought-provoking enough to germinate the rest of the piece. We realized after hours of writing and rewriting, however, that it was terrible. In fact, it fulfilled every assumption about the inability for the contemporary theatre to move beyond the surface of the debate to a legitimate voice.

Yet, in the midst of throwing out the film in its entirety, the ensemble had an “ah-ha” moment. This discussion followed: “What if we shift the opening framework to parody? Fulfill the assumptions of our target audience to the extreme? We'll show the terrible film, congratulate ourselves on a job well done, and then when its lack of quality is obvious, use the moment of internal artistic crisis to reject the overused paradigms that the film wholly embraces.” Michel Foucault, in “Of Other Spaces,” argues the importance of *crisis heterotopias* comprised of “sacred or forbidden places that are reserved for the individual who finds himself in a state of crisis with respect to the society *or the environment* in which he lives (italics mine).”¹⁵ In these heterotopic spaces, or

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986): 24.

“imagined and enacted communities,” as Foucault calls them, one can find safe yet progressive places to inhabit.¹⁶ Within these real sites, participants experience what Janelle Reinelt has defined as a *productive crisis*, one that enables “a state of acute tension, opening a space of indeterminacy in conceptions, institutions, and practices formerly regarded as viable or at least entrenched.”¹⁷

This moment of real productive process-crisis that we experienced in rehearsal—a heterotopic site—could become a “mimetic” one re-inscribed in performance. The encountering of crisis in the sacred “space” of the theatre would then be shared by all—the Actors for a Greener Life and audiences alike—so as to experience the same journey and to enable a collective destabilizing of those entrenched institutions, practices, and myths of the environmental movement. This temporarily imagined community could experience how theatre can not only deepen the dialogue by engaging an eco-critical lens, but can also assist us, the collective body politic, to gain our most valuable knowledge. This might very well be by perhaps failing miserably in the first, real, public attempt, a clear analogy to some of the beginning phases of the mainstream environmental movement that seem to have gone astray or at least have stagnated.¹⁸ An excerpt from the script:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ As quoted in Theresa May, “Toward Communicative Democracy: Developing *Salmon Is Everything*,” in *The Community Performance Reader*, ed. Petra Kupperts and Gwen Robertson (London: Routledge, 2007), 155.

¹⁸ To fully elucidate this statement would require another paper; however, of all the social movements of the 20th century, the environmental movement arguably has been the most criticized. For early responses to the mainstream Environmental Movement, see Earth First! and Paul Watson and the Sea Shepherd of the 1980s who critiqued the movement for selling out or being too willing to compromise. For more recent analyses

*As the movie finishes, there is uproar of applause from the actors **staged in the audience**. “Great work!” “That was deep!” “Damn I looked good!”*

The conversation dies down as a blindfolded director storms onto stage, with a frightened assistant (Barbara) trailing behind. He throws a script on the ground, unnecessarily stomping on it. There is an uncomfortable silence.

Director (Myke): They don’t get it, Barbara. They just don’t get it. Tell the talent.

Barbara: (*clearing her throat*) Um. Well. The executives saw the final product. They said, and I quote, “This is definitely not the right message for the 40th anniversary celebration of Earth Day!” They feel it didn’t really get at the issues...

Drew: I NAILED THE POLAR BEAR!

Jordan: My sunflower was so...natural!

Maggie: We are the “ACTORS FOR A GREENER LIFE”!

Kristin: What could *we* possibly have missed? Not the truth?

Barbara: Oh yes, right here. Truth. That is exactly what you missed. The executives actually listed some of the points maybe you *should* have covered: the hypocrisy of the “green” lifestyle; the unheard voices; Earth Economics; an international perspective....

Drew: Um, we had the polar bear!

Barbara: (*shaking her head*)...how “natural” disaster is a paradoxical term...In fact, the focus groups responded very negatively to our presentation, going so far as to say, and I quote, “we really haven’t delved into the true issues at all.”

that the movement has been misdirected see Bill McKibben and Vandana Shiva who argue that the movement has veered away from or never taken on fully issues of social justice by not considering the needs of the poor, minorities, urban settings and developing countries. McKibben repeatedly acknowledges the well-meaning but ill-informed and naïve responses of the privileged sector to deep, global environmental awareness (“What do I do once I’ve changed the damned lightbulbs?”), while Shiva views the movement as predominantly white, upper-class, and male (all categories that McKibben inhabits). In the fall of 2004, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus erupted controversy with their essay “The Death of Environmentalism” arguing that the early activism and politics of addressing smog and acid rain couldn’t cope with the complexities of global warming. Their essay sparked so much debate that they revisited it with a speech at Yale in 2011 entitled “The Long Death of Environmentalism.” Of course, there are also the arguments on the right by deniers that global warming is human-made loudly voiced by individuals such as Ron Arnold and Dennis Avery and the mouthpiece www.heartland.org.

Duke: So essentially, you're saying that we were so consumed with what we thought we knew, that we really didn't take the time to learn some of the things we didn't know?

As the actors dejectedly began to depart, one muttered under her breath: "It's not very easy being green."¹⁹ Even if this catalytic crisis may not have been easy for the actors and audience to bear, what the forced re-visioning of the film in a microcosm allowed was a thematic shift for the entire piece on the macro-level: the creation of a productive crisis heterotopia with the audience as witness-participant.

The Quakers have a belief known as "bearing witness." "A person who bears witness to an injustice takes responsibility for that awareness. That person may then choose to do something or to stand idly by, but a choice is made and he or she can no longer turn away in ignorance."²⁰ Driven by ecological spectacle, Greenpeace embraced "bearing witness" as a crucial part of their early eco-activism, a tactic that is inherently performative as it requires an audience to have impact. Theatre is both a spectacle and an environment at its foundation—*theatron*—"a seeing place." The connections were vivid and obvious. The audience would play the collective role of witness. In this "seeing place" we would all be witness to the actors' epiphanies about the environmental injustices they had yet to discover, and become a conduit for these same realizations and actions that could happen beyond the space and place of performance. In the real world, where it matters.

¹⁹ All excerpts are taken from *A B-Earth Day Party for Mother Earth*, written by Dr. Karin Waidley and the Performers for Social Change class (Jessica Banes, Sable Bates, Josh Billings, Claire Carris, Maggie Cleary, Jordan Cooper, Drew Eflin, Myke Gryswold, Matt Miller, Chris Potter, Dixie Riddle, Kristin Sidelinger, Duke Williams) Gunnison, Colorado, Spring 2010, 1-2.

²⁰ As quoted in Steven Durland, "Witness: The Guerilla Theater of Greenpeace," in *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz (London: Routledge, 1998), 68.

In essence, the environmental injustices that we chose to re-present through the performance also had at their basis the belief that inhabitants of the developed world (our audience) were perhaps, like the actors' film they witnessed, "missing the point," not digging deep enough, repeating the same tired out myths. The performance suggested that even this well-intentioned activism had rendered many counter-narratives, and the people that lived them, invisible. Alongside the Actors for A Greener Life, what also needed to be seen and not ignored was a drastically failed, real, first attempt – before one could try again.

The final moment of the opening scene heightened this awareness and rooted the foundation for collective knowing. Before the actors left the stage, a cameraman interrupted their incessant justifications that they had it "right":

HOLD IT! Stop all the chatting. Sorry to tell you people but you're already way over budget...no more time to just keep talking, keep developing, to keep squandering all your resources...it is time to act, really, there's nothing left, so it's all about improvisation now, people. Let's go! ROLLING!²¹

In a mirrored metaphor to the influence and insensitivities of the developed world, the Actors for a Greener Life headed back to the drawing board, literally. The performance began (again) with the symbolic (and real) re-presentation of what we all must bear witness to, the realities that erupted on the surface while we may have been looking the other way, thinking we had already done enough—the surface of individual bodies stricken in sickness and disease, the surface of communities depleted of the resources necessary to live quality lives, the surface of the land forever poisoned and scarred by war, spoliation, and "natural" disasters. These are the stories that followed.

²¹ *Mother Earth*, 3

The Re-present(ation) Phase

The subsequent scenes evolved from “collectively dreaming” new ecological identities and relationships that the company grew in our productive crisis heterotopia. In “It’s not Easy Being Green,” for example, we confessed the challenges we had about being “green,” while living in a very “green” place. The ultimate conflict was revealed; it takes the green to be green:

Dixie: You guys, I’ve been working on a song about going “green.”

Matt: It’s impossible.

Jessica: Yeah, I can’t afford to “go green”; Organic vegetables and local products? Right.

Jordan: But what about the health risks of GMO food, and how much it costs in energy to get it here?

Kristin: You ever heard of the term “money tree”? It takes money, to hug a tree.

Drew: To be green, you gotta have the green.

Dixie: To get the green, you gotta become green.

Chris: Greenbacks.

Sable: Greenwashing.

Maggie: Green with envy?

Kristin: The green man.

Drew: The green life.

Matt: A green future!

Jessica: You look a little green.

Myke: I gotta get me some green.

Claire: Well, it’s too expensive, all of it.²²

What made this piece easy to identify with were not only the conflict and multiple meanings of the signifier “green” as a central part of the clichéd discourse, but also the

²² *Mother Earth*, 3-4.

spectacle that enveloped the scene. As characters entered their space they brought with them a multitude of objects: fans, lights, microwaves, toasters, space heaters, lamps, bottles and cans. The stage was literally strewn with trash; water was left running, metaphorically of course; clotheslines were hung up but left empty; appliances turned on but left unused. Small acts were forgotten, invisible. Yet placing these mundane acts and objects in a bound and framed performance space, to become an actively ignored environment through which the actors had to traverse, presented an entirely new context. An aggregate cacophony of consumption and inanimate waste which the animate beings were oblivious to—not effortlessly oblivious, but effort-filled forgetting as it took work for them to ignore. Juxtaposed with the dialogue, which has now risen in volume above the chaotic musicality, the tension was acute—a moment of crisis, yet perhaps a productive one:

Dixie: I think you're missing the point. It's not the big things, it's the simple things you can do.

Myke: Small acts.²³

As Myke uttered this line, they observed how their “small acts” have added up to something potentially enormous and destructive.

The second part of the scene was spent reversing the impacts the actors had made through an equally small act: simply turning everything off. The result—the absence of ignored consumption and something equally profound—preservation. As the last light went out, the ensemble sang the final verse, at first seemingly cliché, but now reframed in a newer, actually harder to ignore environment:

²³ *Ibid.*

It's not that easy being green; having to change everything about our normal routine; But our Mother Earth is trying to tell us, you see, That if we continue, the effects will be EXTREME. It's not that easy being green, but friends understand, it's attainable, LET'S GET SUSTAINABLE!²⁴

This scene paid homage to two ecologically-conscious activists: Kermit, whose mere existence evokes the difficulties and rewards of being “green,” and the late historian Howard Zinn, who stated:

We need to address ourselves to creating a new kind of future...but we must not think of heroic acts. Our tendency is...to emulate culture which thinks of heroes and stars. And we need to think, instead, of change as a result of an infinite number of very small acts, taken by people in the faith that they will add up to something enormously important.”²⁵

Following this scene, the ensemble embodied an intellectual debate between the Bottom Billion and the Developed World, grounding depleted tropes in the land of the living. We humanized the mythical, political language by representing the Bottom Billion on equal ground, literally, with the Developed World as all the actors stood on the same size black boxes, creating a visual spectacle that revealed inequities masked beneath the surfaces of the individual and collective bodies.

In this scene, the characters first collectively echoed the rhetoric of the international discourse: “Consumption on a global scale must decrease drastically; green technologies must replace old ways of progress. The Bottom Billion will benefit from changes made by leaders from the Developed World.”²⁶ Then, the opening morphed into a topography of individual voices, pleading for prosperity in health and goods as a result of the progress that much of the world had already experienced. The actors told multiple

²⁴ *Mother Earth*, 5.

²⁵ As quoted in *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*, ed. Mark O'Brien and Craig Little (Philadelphia: New Society Publishing, 1990), 12.

²⁶ *Mother Earth*, 7.

stories of those Bottom Billion who remain voiceless in the global political arena but all desire the basic “things” needed to survive—clean water, clean air, a clean bill of health. The result of the debate recognized that fates were in each other’s hands, the same hands that had already discarded the Bottom Billion and so much waste.

This scene culminated in a visually haunting moment of crisis. The debate began by piling what one is “Rich In…” in a heap on the stage: Friends (digital cameras), Knowledge (laptop computers), Health (bottles and bottles of medicine), Progress (cell phones), Skill (again computers), Family (again digital cameras), Character (bins of clothes), Food (empty boxes, jars, bottles, take-out containers, coffee cups, trash bags, waste). This grew until there was literally an enormous pile of “stuff” taking up the apron of the stage. The last actor entered the space and walked behind the pile—she had nothing to contribute. She asked the audience her question: “Rich in…?” She looked at the pile, and then back to the audience with the only answer she had. “Nothing.” The actor exited; the pile remained.

After an uncomfortably long span of time when nothing happened, one of the Bottom Billion started crawling all over the pile, scavenging, throwing things here and there as if it was all equally trash and treasure, finding pieces of the developed world’s detritus to discard or preserve, searching desperately for something, anything, in an extreme display of materialism and wealth gone mad. The audience sat agonizing while nothing was happening, waiting for someone *else* to *do* something about all that stuff: Get rid of it. Clean it up. Police it. Recycle it! When finally an actor “did something,” the image left many wanting to look away from the violence of the final spectacle, a base act of human survival dependent on living off others’ trash, discarded by worlds that had

“developed” before them. Being bound by conventions of the theatre, the “seeing place,” the audience had to bear witness.

The final piece desired to unhinge the word “natural” from “natural disaster” and in that gap, explore the dire impacts that humans have had on the more-than-human world. We staged an at once visually compelling and horrifying spectacle that asked the audience not only to “bear witness” but to ask oneself: How much of a hand have we all had in creating these deadly landscapes?

The scene began with characters voicing a collage of not *who* they were, but *where* they were:

Actor: I was in Sri Lanka on vacation with my family, my mom, dad, and two little brothers.

Actor: I was in Port Au Prince where I have lived my whole life...

Actor: I was in Concepcion, Chile where I had just moved to start a new job

Actor: I was in China, in the Sichuan province...

Actor: I was in New Orleans, living in the ninth ward...

Actor: I was in Haiti...

Actor: I was in Los Angeles

Actor: I was in Mississippi

Actor: I was in Indonesia

Actor: I was in Katrina

Actor: I was in my home.²⁷

Each of the actors wore a white shirt. On either side of the ensemble, two separate actors, also dressed in white, were bending over buckets; they appeared to be washing their hands. Each character began to tell their lived experience, overlapping their words and

²⁷ *Mother Earth*, 13.

desperately trying to get *their* narrative into the mainstream above the din of the others. At first, all of the descriptions were about where they were when “it” happened—the earthquake, the hurricane, the fire, the tsunami. The images spoken of were staggering. Then all at once, everything stopped as the two actors on the side lifted their hands out of the buckets, covered in red paint. In silence, they walked to each of the characters and placed a red handprint on their white shirts, saw it, and then returned to their place. “The human nature of natural disasters,” one said.

The stories resumed; characters spoke of clashes between the wrath of nature and a “human-made” resource-driven decision in the wake of “their” natural disaster: the evacuation after Katrina, the absence of aid in Haiti, the health risks in Indonesia, the collapse of an elementary school in China while a neighboring office building stood unscathed. The painters continued to adorn the bodies with red handprints, marking everywhere there was still unclaimed space.

When the actors’ bodies were covered by red handprints, representing the impressions of the human-made world on the natural landscape, the painters returned to their buckets and frantically tried to wash the red from their hands. But their skin absorbed more paint, and it splashed onto the floor. The spectacle was overwhelming, for them as characters and for the audience, as they were all, at once, acutely aware of one another. Together in the same place were the people whose collective lived experiences were being shared, not in the past, but in the present. *They are here* in their bloody clothes. The handprints became part of their ecological identities and our communal responsibilities. They were *of* them, *of* us, and we could not choose to look away without them bearing witness to our denial. At the end of the piece, the painters stared helplessly

at their blood-covered hands and the deadly spectacle they had created. The ensemble looked with horror at each of their blood-covered bodies and the hands that made them.

We were all complicit:

Kristin: It's not natural to feel this kind of fear?

Sable: Is it natural for a 6-year old to be in charge of six babies?

Duke: They call this a natural disaster, but is there anything natural about this?

Josh: Is all this destruction just an act of nature?

All: Or did we *all* have a hand in it somehow?²⁸

Conclusion—the 3-R's Re-Newed

Film is already fulfilling an important role in merging the arts and the environmental movement; for this medium, the possibilities for spectacles that beg audiences to bear witness are infinite. But theatre can also effectively and powerfully carve this heterotopic “place” for performance. *A B-earth day Party for Mother Earth* presented an evolving ecological drama, while it rejected stale, binary themes of a clichéd environmental movement. Through the process and performance, the student writers and actors re-formulated performance terrain into a rich ecological landscape previously traversed only by environmental stakeholders. David Batker, the keynote speaker who developed Earth Economics, stated that our performance made his ideas more meaningful than his lecture ever could.²⁹ Another Environmental Biology professor, Dr. Jonathan Coop, still recalls the performance three years later:

I vividly remember the piece...I remember the 1-2 emotional punch-intellectual

²⁸ *Mother Earth*, 16.

²⁹ Unscripted comment during keynote, March 25, 2010.

catalyst that the students delivered...Ecological economics generally lent itself well to detached and scholarly lectures. The students brought it immediately and viscerally back to earth by opening up whole new emotional dimensions from which to view the subject matter--through humor, irony, anger, fear, sorrow and compassion—that before had remained hidden. The effect was chilling, revolutionary, and enlightening. For me it was quite profound.³⁰

Most significantly, as argued in the beginning of the paper, the direct participants—myself and the student actors—became stakeholders invested in the realities and the possibilities of the movement, both environmentally and artistically.

Finally, from Dr. Pat Magee, who had initially commissioned the piece, “What really struck me was the ability of the performers to grasp key issues at the crux of the tension between ecologists and economists and to produce a balanced and highly thought provoking performance that rocked not only the audience's thinking, but also their guts and hearts.”³¹ Considering the interdisciplinary discussions that followed the performance, and the excitement for theatre and performance to be a central voice in the conversation, the goal of the initial proposition was achieved: “This was exactly what I hoped for - something to shake people up, to rouse them from complacency, to challenge them viscerally...what is only possible when we expand ourselves to allow the depth and complexity of an issue inhabit us.”³²

It was the theatre that provided this re-generative and creative space, through research, revision and representation. If theatre is to continue to sit at the academic table of *this* mainstream, we as artists have to do the hard work: dig deep (re-search), plant new ideas (re-vision), and be willing to grow (re-present). But we also must root the

³⁰ Email interview, February 12, 2013.

³¹ Email interview, March 8, 2013.

³² *Ibid.*

communal essence of theatre at the foundation—what makes the theatre unique are the living, breathing human and more-than-human worlds that can dynamically co-exist, in the same place at the same time, and will not allow any of us, at least for a moment, to look away.