

Summary

Ecotheatre and Its Branching Performing Arts from a Posthumanist Perspective

Theatre has always been interested in the question *who* we are. As the climate crisis intensified, local communities and playwrights became increasingly preoccupied with the question of *where* we are. Alongside these two fundamental pillars floating in the waters of the stage, a third question is equally vital in today's world: *how* we are. This questions the relationship between humans and the world beyond them, its quality, modes of coexistence, and the ethical dimensions of artistic creation.

Between 2020 and 2025, when I was deeply engaged in researching ecotheatre, I witnessed several unprecedented events critical to the relationship between humans and the environment. One of these occurred in 2020 and 2021, when theatre auditoriums across Latvia were closed to audiences for an extended period due to the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing theatre practitioners to seek alternative performance formats. During this time, gatherings were permitted only outdoors, leading to the creation of walking performances, hiking performances, and audio plays that focused on the relationship between humans and the environment. Works of ecotheatre were born.

A second event occurred in January 2023, when Latvian environmental organizations – the Latvian Fund for Nature, the Latvian Ornithological Society, and the World Wildlife Fund – submitted an

application to the Constitutional Court. They challenged a regulation included in the Cabinet of Ministers rules allowing the felling of smaller-diameter trees as unconstitutional, demanding the repeal of the regulations on cutting down younger trees, and pointing out the need to incorporate sustainability principles into forest management to balance the interests of public welfare, the environment, and the economy. After hearing the case, the Constitutional Court ruled on 8 April 2024 that the sustainability and precautionary principles had not been observed during the adoption process of the contested norm. It concluded that the contested regulation did not comply with Article 115 of the Constitution, which states that the State shall protect the right of everyone to live in a benevolent environment by providing information about environmental conditions and promoting the preservation and improvement of the environment. This judgment is considered a significant victory for environmental defenders at a state level – a historic trial that must serve as a precedent.

Ecotheatre (Latvian: *ekoteātris*; English: *ecotheatre*; German: *Ökotheater*; French: *écothéâtre*; Spanish: *ecoteatro*; Lithuanian: *ekoteatras*; Estonian: *ökoteater*; Ukrainian: *ekoteatr*) is a theatre movement that addresses the interrelations between humans and the more-than-human world, wherein environmental conflicts and problematic issues are present, and which incorporates aspects of sustainability throughout the entire life cycle of production, striving towards circularity within it.

I am a contemporary of the definition of sustainability formulated in the 1980s by Gro Harlem Brundtland, the first female Prime Minister of Norway and the then chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Sustainable development is development that does not compromise future generations. Today, the word ‘sustainability’ has become hackneyed, invoked both appropriately and inappropriately, often with the assumption that sustainable simply means something that continues or lasts. In the context of sustainability, it is vital to understand *how* it continues, *how* it lasts, and *how* we continue to live in ever-changing conditions. It is not merely about continuing, but also about recognizing our impacts on one another and on the environment.

Our relationship with the environment is determined by the sum of various individual and collective attitudes and actions. Theatre

possesses the character of a collective experience and has the potential to offer new forms of relationships. In focusing on the research of ecotheatre, my intention was to uncover the artistic techniques through which it is possible to engage the theatre audience intellectually, emotionally, and physically. This is a prerequisite for identifying and exercising the often dormant muscle of ecological awareness.

Studies indicate that those who consume more culture are capable of changing their attitudes and behaviours more rapidly. Furthermore, I believe that those who create culture are also able to sense more quickly the rhythm of the planet we currently still inhabit. A continuously expanding range of themes – environmental conflicts – can be observed reflecting in ecotheatre performances. It is crucial not only to study these productions as artistic facts, but also to discern the dimension of environmental activism present within these works of ecotheatre.

Ecotheatre allows us not only to study historical or imagined environmental conflicts, but also to document the relationship between humans and the environment within specific contemporary geopolitical and social contexts, bringing environmental justice to the fore. Such instances, where art becomes a method of archiving ecocide as a crime against the environment, can be observed in Ukraine. Theatre collectives are utilizing the language of the stage to document the devastating impacts of Russia's unenlightened warfare, targeting not only human beings but also the environment.

In much the same way that Brechtian theatre was born during the interwar period, contemporary ecotheatre is developing as a response to the crises we inhabit against our will. The era in which we live can be characterized by the word *permacrisis*, or permanent crisis. Within it, attention flags, the muscle of empathy weakens, and the emotional bank is depleted. Researchers describe the ecological crisis as both a crisis of values and a crisis of the imagination. What does ecotheatre offer? A space for imagination – for a collective imaginary through which to create new ecosystems, namely new forms of relationships and cooperation between humans, other species, and the

environment, as well as new conditions for coexistence. It offers an opportunity for active hope.

The seed of my thought regarding the research into the relationship between theatre and ecology can be traced back to a time when the world was forcibly slowed down for a moment. It lived in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was soon further eclipsed by war. During this period, the world was warned about the climate crisis both by the schoolgirl Greta Thunberg – who initiated the youth environmental activist movement Fridays for Future and demanded political action – and by the near-centenarian Sir David Attenborough, who has dedicated his life to researching and documenting nature across the globe, witnessing environmental changes firsthand. It was also warned by the writer Darya Tsymbalyuk, who reported on the ecocide in Ukraine, reminding us that an attack on the land is an attack on all of humanity.

Searching the world map for places from which species have vanished, or where human lives and entire cities have been erased, is not the best way to learn geography. As children grew, so did anxieties about the kind of world they would inhabit. Consequently, there was also a growth in the number of productions that sought answers to similar questions through the diverse languages of the performing arts.

To examine the relationship between art and ecology, my research is grounded in the burgeoning field of the environmental humanities, closely investigating how art awakens ecological awareness. The study intersects theatre studies and environmental science, drawing on posthumanist philosophical theories, the tenets of climate psychology, and the territories of biology and ecology.

This monograph is based on my doctoral thesis, 'Performing Arts in the Discourse of Ecocriticism: Ecotheatre in Latvia in the 21st Century', which I defended at the University of Latvia on 25 November 2025. It is the first interdisciplinary study to focus on the analysis of theatre productions within the discourse of ecocriticism in the context of environmental conflicts and the sustainability of the performing

arts, drawing attention to the role of art under the conditions of the ecological crisis. The study maps the branching of ecotheatre – both in terms of its origins and historical influences, and its thematic and scenic manifestations.

Although an ecocritical perspective on productions can be applied to plays written and performances staged across various periods and eras, this study focuses on productions created in Latvia in the twenty-first century, while simultaneously illustrating the developmental processes of ecotheatre with examples from elsewhere in the world. The study reveals the experiences of various continents in practices characteristic of ecotheatre, but focuses closely on examples of the performing arts in Latvia, using an ecocritical close-up to uncover their underlying posthumanist layers.

The research is based on drama, musical theatre, puppet theatre, and contemporary dance productions created by Latvian theatre artists. It encompasses works created and performed for audiences in both publicly funded repertory theatres and non-governmental or project-based theatres that align with the principles of the ecotheatre movement, without evaluating their artistic value or the professional performance of the theatre practitioners.

In the context of the performing arts, this monograph does not examine circus performances. Their research would need to be based on a historical perspective within the context of the development of the animal protection movement. Similarly, performance art has not been considered, as its close-up analysis would need to be expanded within the context of econationalism.

The concept of sustainability in theatre is applicable to three areas: theatre buildings and their sustainability; the daily operations of theatre practitioners and audience habits; and theatre productions and their life cycles. In this study, attention is focused on aspects of sustainability in the creation of theatre productions in connection with the approach of ecoscenography.

The first chapter, 'Ecocriticism in the Age of Posthumanism', focuses on the theoretical tenets of posthumanism, the role of ecocriticism

in cultural studies, and the objectives of the environmental humanities. The chapter examines the field of ideas that resonates within works of ecotheatre.

The second chapter, 'The Genesis and Ecosystem of Ecotheatre', introduces ecodramaturgy as an approach to storytelling about environmental conflicts; ecodirecting as an approach to the ecocentric staging of plays; and ecoscenography as an ecologically ethical approach to a production's life cycle, striving to implement the idea of circularity. These three approaches are united by the umbrella term 'ecological theatre' or 'ecotheatre', for which I offer a comprehensive definition and outline its application in both a narrower and a broader sense:

To reveal the roots and manifestations of ecotheatre in works of performing arts and within theatre as an organization – in other words, to uncover the ecosystem of this theatre movement – I offer its schematic presentation in the model 'Ecotheatre and Its Branching'.

The third chapter, 'The Expression and Techniques of Ecotheatre', outlines the artistic techniques and means of expression characteristic of ecotheatre: time, place, body, co-creation, and ecospectations. The aspect of time manifests itself through the dispersion of space-time, intergenerational bonds, folkloric layers, and the utilization of life stories. Place in ecotheatre expands from the performance space to the scale of home and landscape, revealing geographical, vanished, vanishing, imagined, and invisible landscapes, thereby allowing place to assume an active role. Within the body, a tendency is observed shifting from movement to bioperformativity, which brings issues of bodily memory, transcorporeality, and interconnectedness to the fore, while also marking the problem of embodying humans and non human beings in the performing arts. Co-creation with the audience, the location, and experts from other fields is a prerequisite for the polyphony that characterizes ecotheatre. It is possible to view ecotheatre as a manifestation of environmental activism within the artistic space through the language of the performing arts. The modalities of ecospectations – humour, mourning, and hope – delineate the emotional palette with which theatre-makers work.

Is ecotheatre an art for survival, or rather, the art of survival?

As discussions surrounding the ecological crisis and the impacts of climate change intensify, art has the opportunity to become an intermediary space for conversation, to reveal diverse perspectives, and to affect individuals not only intellectually but also emotionally and even physically. The imaginative space created by ecotheatre provides a safe environment for exercising ecological awareness. Ecological awareness, in turn, is a prerequisite for hope, an active stance, and ultimately, considered action in resolving environmental conflicts. A production will most likely not save the world, but the audience can help to achieve this by acting empathetically and with foresight within their own personal lives and professional spheres.

Viewing ecotheatre as a collective environmental imaginary, closely examined examples reveal how this movement is characterized by the coexistence of diverse space-times, the strengthening of intergenerational bonds, and the utilization of folklore, myths, and life stories. Furthermore, it activates bodily memory and the senses, rejects the spoken word in favour of a bioperformative physical presence, and provides an affective experience that draws upon a broad emotional palette. This is complemented by a co-creative process present both during the development of a production and in interaction with attendees during the performance itself, as well as an aspiration towards active engagement – intellectually, emotionally, and physically.

Just as organizers of environmental protests – including theatre practitioners – employ a theatrical approach, productions similarly incorporate environmental conflicts, with theatre-makers offering the audience diverse perspectives on a given issue. Environmental activism in the practices of theatre professionals manifests itself in both directions: through the creation of artworks on environmental themes – incorporating real-life events, references to political processes and decisions, and personal experiences into the performances – and through participation in environmental protests, thereby expanding their performative character and fields of expression.

Works of ecotheatre are characterized by a shared demiurgic function; they are created in co-creation with others who are not routinely involved in the performing arts. This includes local residents, specialists and researchers from various fields, journalists, archive and museum professionals, audiences, non-governmental organizations, and targeted age-specific demographics, such as children or young people, among others. As an inclusive strategy that activates polyphony, co-creation can be utilized during the conceptual development phase, the staging process of the production, or within the performance itself.

When creating productions, it is essential to understand networks of relationships. This means recognizing not only interpersonal connections but also mediated networks, discerning behind materials and objects the hands and lives of the people who created them. One of the artistic strategies of ecotheatre is the awakening of the senses and emotions. This is a way to maintain a connection with the world, with one another, and with all living things. This stance – maintaining a spiritual and physical alertness – can help restore balance in a world dominated by all manner of noise.

In researching ecotheatre, I observe that theatre practitioners employ diverse strategies – sometimes combining them – to encompass the dispersion of spacetime and to deepen the understanding of natural cycles and environmental history. Firstly, to strengthen interconnectedness, they utilize an intergenerational approach and generational stories, both by retelling or inheriting ancestral knowledge and by linking the present with future generations, including their own children and grandchildren. Secondly, they utilize folklore – including legends, folk songs, beliefs, proverbs, and spells – to travel through time and space. Thirdly, to bring environmental issues into close focus, they utilize the life stories and personal experiences of various individuals, ranging from the ‘ordinary person’ to scientists, researchers, and environmental practitioners.

Productions within the movement of ecotheatre reveal diverse strategies in the selection and creation of place. Firstly, they utilize

real outdoor locations, both for performances set in a single specific site and for productions that take place whilst in motion along a designated route or territory. Secondly, ecotheatre is characterized by reconstructions of vanished places, which are brought to life within black-box studio spaces, through audio plays, or in the format of digital theatre. Thirdly, ecotheatre employs a site-specific theatre approach by selecting locations – such as museums, abandoned factories, or landfills – that are capable of assuming an active role in the performance.

The movement arising from the bodies of ecotheatre participants – both performers and audience members – possesses an essential presence in forming an understanding of interconnectedness within ecotheatre. Interconnectedness has a bodily character. In ecotheatre productions, this reveals itself through a pronounced physical presence. It frequently involves the abandonment of specific roles and overt facial expressions, often alongside the rejection of dramatic text as the foundation of the performance.

Echoing postdramatic theatre, ecotheatre tends to feature a pronounced fragmentation in scenes and movements. To emphasize interconnectedness, theatre-makers utilize the bodily engagement of the audience: they intensely and materially stimulate their senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell), and involve them in choreographic patterns. Through this live scenography, participants become an active part of the landscape and develop a deeper awareness of their role within the ecosystem.

Ecotheatre is capable of creating a space of collective imaginary that is open to the manifestation of diverse ecospectations. These can coexist within a single production: humour, which uses the presence of the comical and the ironic to draw attention to environmental conflicts by highlighting their contradictions; ecogrief, which reveals existing or potential losses to the audience; and hope, which is a prerequisite for further environmental activism or action.

Theatre is a live art. It must breathe alongside the zeitgeist and present to humanity that which individuals might otherwise prefer not to see – especially in times when everything has become theatrical,

from geopolitical ‘productions’ of the absurd genre to solo performances on social networks. I believe that theatre still possesses the power to peel away layers of prejudice within a person, reaching down to the place where the core lies, wherein empathy slumbers. It can awaken, remind, comfort, heal, and, ultimately, provide the courage to act – even in times when reading the news daily induces a profound desire to watch the curtain fall and to begin anew, finally granting the lead role to humanity.

Will ecotheatre be a lifeline in the ocean of human adversity? Time will tell. Undeniably, this theatre movement, in its fullest sense, is essential for collectively seeking ways to continue in the here and now, and to preserve everyday life and the planet as habitable for everyone and for all living things. Art possesses the power not only to change people but also to transform itself. And it may well be that the world will be saved not by beauty, but by creativity. As is well known, everything begins with the first step. It is only vital that this step leaves the smallest possible ecological footprint, and that the traveller moves with the gentlest of touches.

Ecotheatre development scheme

