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Caught in the Anthropocene: Theatres of Trees, Place and Politics

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This article investigates live performance in the broad geo-historical context of the Anthropocene, a contested term in recent scholarship, but one that offers a breadth of focus on human relations with its coexistent non-human other. These interrelations are examined through a range of theatrical and non-theatrical genres and sites from the Australian parliament's coal theatrics to exemplary performances by Indigenous companies Bangarra Dance Theatre and Marrugeku. It sets the scene with a visit to the Curtain Tree in the rainforests of north Queensland, Australia, arguing that the vitality and display of its root system models a special kind of reciprocity between the performative elements of the environment and the environmental elements of theatre and performance. This is traced through recent short-run immersive works, Hanna Cormick's Mermaid *(2020) and Melinda Hetzel and Company's* Conservatory *(2020), and a rereading of a canonical Australian drama,* Summer of the Seventeenth Doll.

To be alive today is to be caught in the Anthropocene, the epoch originating in the West in which the impact of human-centred activity on Earth tips over into dangerous levels of greenhouse gas emissions, rising sea levels, species extinction and catastrophic weather events. Initially proposed by Paul Crutzen in 2002, the Anthropocene has since been taken up across the humanities and creative arts.[1] There it has become a broad conceptual framework for analysis and discussion of the social, political, economic and cultural impact of environmental catastrophe.[2] As philosophers Manuel Arias-Maldonado and Zev Trachtenberg put it, the concept has shifted from a scientific hypothesis to an 'epistemic framework for understanding relations between society and nature in a rich and nuanced way'.[3] For theatre and performance studies, Una Chaudhuri has described the Anthropocene as a concept that allows for the reconfiguration of scale, and of human and non-human action in an expanded geophysical and temporal field, 'stretching back to deep history and forward to a far future'.[4] The volume of publications, conferences and arts festivals in the last ten years is indicative of how the Anthropocene has facilitated important conversations in our field, setting a framework for understandings of the relation between theatre and ecology.

Recently growing recognition of economic, geopolitical and gendered diversity within the Anthropocene has led to contestations of its universal claim. Ecofeminist theory, for example, argues that humanity is not equally responsible for the rapid environmental degradation of the Anthropocene.[5] A materialist argument proposes

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that the Capitalocene, a term coined by Jason W. Moore, better captures the links across capitalist economies, climate crisis and colonialism.[6] For theatre studies, Alan Read similarly prefers the framework of the Capitalocene for the way it captures 'the long durée of a capitalist mode of production that has prevailed in Western Europe since the late fifteenth century'.[7] Donna Haraway's multifaceted and molecular 'Chthulucene', in contrast to both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, replaces human-centredness in the Anthropocene with 'ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming'.[8] These alternatives encompass feminist, economic and post-human elaborations of the Anthropocene and direct us to new ways of thinking complexity and multiplicity.

In further elaborations in the Australian context, localized perspectives emerge from First Nations' knowledge systems that teach us that the Anthropocene inherits ancient intelligence despite its New World iteration. Settled by British colonizers in 1789 under the principle of *terra nullius* – land that belongs to no one – for 65,000 years prior to that date the expansive southern continent, now known as Australia, was cared for under the continuous guardianship of Aboriginal peoples, making it host to the oldest known living culture on Earth.[9] Djarra Delaney of the Quandamooka people of far north Queensland points out that Australian Indigenous peoples have been in a process of constant adaptation to climate change since the end of the Ice Age.[10] Australian writer and member of the Waanyi nation of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Alexis Wright, whose novels *The Swan Book* (2013) and *Carpentaria* (2006) are deep laments for the ways in which European dispossession of Aboriginal peoples has damaged the land and left it without protection, similarly speaks of deep time. She notes there are vast numbers of people in the southern hemisphere who do not divide time into geological epochs such as the Holocene and Anthropocene but retain a sense of the world as having 'everlasting life'. Given this timescale, humans, she argues, are not owners and users of land but its 'caretakers and guardians', a view also taken by Bangarra Dance Theatre and Marrugeku, as we will see.[11]

On another localized perspective, Australian-based environmental and feminist philosopher Debra Bird Rose argues for the importance of positioning humans, the perpetrators of the Anthropocene, within the urgent need for 'situated action' in the face of environmental change.[12] Here the emphasis on human action draws attention to the paradox that the species that causes climate change is called upon to mitigate the effects.

Deepened by Indigenous knowledge of the relation between people and land over time, and Rose's sense of situated action in the present, the Anthropocene is retained for use in this article. It does so in relation to the Australian context for its capacity to encompass diverse spatial and temporal perspectives and for its framing of human action as essential to guardianship of the land into the future.

Given the framework of 'caught in the Anthropocene', this article considers how a diverse range of theatrical and non-theatrical performances – trees, politics, canonical drama, dance theatre, site-specific and immersive presentations – respond to the existential threat of global warming. It combines ecocritical and material theory to mediate a special focus on human actors in relation to narratives of land usage, and

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scenographic representations of place and design, including objects. Its central question is how these performances set out the ongoing legacy of the colonial and contemporary Anthropocene. This is a critical problem for Australia, currently a resource-rich carbon-producing nation that is painfully conflicted over climate policy even as it suffers catastrophic storms and fires, loss of air quality, floods and species loss. The question of the role of the cultural sector in telling the big stories of our times, and in representing the issues, emotions and politics of the day, has to be framed around more than its aesthetic value.

The Curtain Fig Tree: a model of ecological agency

While the focus of this article is human action, the analysis begins with a Prologue featuring a tree. In a national park on the Atherton Tableland in far north Queensland stands the Curtain Fig Tree, named for its 'curtain' of aerial roots that drop fifteen metres to the forest floor. The tree outlives human life cycles and has survived colonialism and capitalism. It does, however, draw attention to the environmental theatrics that take place within the region's ancient rainforests, allowing for a special kind of reciprocity between the performative elements of the environment and the environmental elements of theatre and performance. Considered in this way, the Curtain Tree presents an irresistible prompt for thinking about theatre and ecology.

In saying so, I note that Baz Kershaw begins the landmark *Theatre and Ecology* with ancient trees, and that subsequent writings feature environmental matter together with an enduring interest in the biosphere.[13] The immersive space of the Queensland rainforest is a place where humans can experience a greater connection to the non-human other, from which, as feminist environmental philosopher Val Plumwood and others have noted, we are separated in a relation of dominant and subordinate identities and where, as Freya Matthews puts it, 'the old assumption of human supremacism' might be set aside.[14] Tim Morton suggests, moreover, that within the framework of the Anthropocene humans' personal observations and situatedness no longer exist outside an ecosystem, but are 'footprints' of hyperobjects, 'things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans', such as the biosphere and climate, and, I should add, the evolution of the ancient rainforests.[15]

The Curtain Fig Tree does not present a homely domestic or plush red velvet theatre curtain but one that has weathered the outdoors and become the show itself. It looks epic in age and scale, and unrestrained by a blueprint of design and measurement. It is not a stable organism but one in flux and open to coincidence. It has apparently evolved from a random event – an improvisational offer if you like – in which a seed has lodged itself on a branch high up in the canopy of a free-standing tree (Fig. 1).

Over time, the seed has germinated, and its roots have grown vertically down to the forest floor. Enriched by the soil, the roots have grown longer and thicker, like vines, growing back up and around the host tree, embracing it from ground to canopy, round and round like the ribbons of a maypole dance. Over the next five hundred years the roots' attachments to the trunk have become all-consuming, slowly

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Fig. 1 **The Curtain Fig Tree, Queensland, 2019. Photograph by Geoff Westcott.**

strangling the host tree causing it to (tragically) fall against its neighbour, where it has lodged like a curtain rail (whereby tragedy embraces the absurd). Undeterred, the fig roots continued to grow down to the ground from the fallen, now lateral tree, forming a natural curtain that gives off the scent of wood, earth and humus. The duration of the tree's performance reminds us of the brief life of the human spectator in the earth's geophysical history. And unlike the call in the final enigmatic line of Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* – 'please open the curtains'[16] – the Curtain Tree is continually open to the elements, and to viewers who walk around and behind and stand in front of it, watching and then exiting the park as it continues to stand.

This embellished version of the explanation on a billboard in the park suggests a site-specific performance of over five hundred years' duration featuring an assemblage of trees, roots, soil and light. A contemporary of Shakespeare's, this was a gently brutal evolutionary drama extending from the early modern period to the present, where it is suggestive of a non-human-centred theatre that conveys the affects associated with wonder and attracts the fascinated attention of the human spectator standing before it.

In its forest setting, the evolution of the Curtain Tree is perhaps the ultimate version of Peter Eckersall and Eddie Paterson's notion of 'slow dramaturgy', a dramaturgy that 'foregrounds time' and 'reorients perceptions' towards a materialist or political consciousness of non-human agency.[17] Consciousness of being, language and movement is not the driver here. Jane Bennett's concept of 'the vitality of non-human

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bodies', where vitality is, after Spinoza, the capacity of a thing to have 'its own power [*conatur*] to persevere in its own being', offers a human explanation for natural events such as this.[18] Vitality captures that which is palpable and compelling about the tree.

Yet unseen humans have played their part in stage-managing the show, entwining the human and non-human in an existential co-production. For example, the tree's survival is partly dependent on a political campaign for its classification as a state heritage site within a national park. Here human actors have taken up the role described by Anthropocene scientists Will Steffen, Paul Crutzen and John McNeill as 'stewards of the Earth', becoming 'self-conscious, active agent[s]' in the operation of humanity's 'life support system'.[19] Or they are like Alexis Wright's caretakers and guardians. In doing so, the quality of life is enhanced for the public, which enjoys gazing at the curtain, feeling its enchantments, its silent presence, and admires the extraordinary artwork of the tree. The metaphor turns on the human desire to consider a curtain as the threshold of a world beyond the quotidian and connects us to the secret relational world of nature. This could be a model for non-human-centred ecological theatre, one that features the environment as the foundation of human life and creativity.

An Australian classic and the ecological unconscious

The scenic coastal drive to the Great Barrier Reef and the Queensland Rainforests is stunning and then unsettling. Sugar cane fields spread out on both sides of the road, as far as the treeline on rising ground to the west and east to the coastal flatlands and the reef. In winter, the fields are straw-coloured and flat; a lone tractor idles over the wasted stubble revealing a land plundered by industrial agriculture (Fig. 2).

Ray Lawler's canonical Australian play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is a work of mid-twentieth-century realist drama about two sugar cane cutters, who might have worked on these fields.[20] While the play presents the cane cutters as iconic Australian seasonal workers spending the lay-off season in the southern city of Melbourne, the cane fields of far north Queensland induce a powerful sense of the play's unrepresented agricultural setting. The flat, featureless, uninhabited landscape presents as one that Erika Munk might call a 'vast open field … that cries out for reinterpretation'.[21] This reinterpretation would focus on the imagined and actual scale of deforestation, as we now call it, of the ancient rainforests, waterways and tributaries that once characterized the area and were habitats for birdlife, fish and reeds. Environmentalists at the time had protested that the destruction of the ancient forests was 'something akin to vandalism', but development was an unstoppable force.[22]

We are also aware now that the history of deforestation is also the history of the dispossession of Indigenous peoples in this area. Even the tourist websites acknowledge that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the lands were seized from traditional owners – the Yirrganydji and Djabuganjdji peoples – by settlers for sugar production, cattle, investment and profit. This dispossession was enabled under the Aboriginal Protection Act of 1897, which authorized the removal and relocation of Indigenous peoples to missions and reserves, already under way. From there they were sent as enslaved labourers to sheep and cattle stations or to

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Fig. 2 **Cane fields in winter, Queensland, 2019. Photograph by Denise Varney.**

domestic homes, along with thousands of indentured labourers from the Pacific Islands.[23] It becomes apparent that the vast open canefields, the unrepresented setting of a much-loved Australian drama, like other bush drama, embeds a history of the denial of colonization, dispossession and deforestation.

Such a reinterpretation might turn to environmental geographer Lesley Head, who argues that the moral and ethical enabler of massive dispossession and deforestation was the universal colonial view that tropical and subtropical rainforests are 'undeveloped', representing an unproductive 'baseline of pristineness', which is antithetical to the trajectory of the settler narrative in New World contexts. The imperative is to move 'forward through time and upward and out of nature'.[24] Coal mining, as we will see, follows this same colonial logic. On this colonialist utilitarian view, trees in the wild could not be permitted to stand around in wanton fecundity, sensually entwining branches under overhead canopies and shedding dense undergrowth. Forests left alone could make useless performance installations such as the Curtain Fig Tree.

This kind of large-scale agricultural development, as we now know, releases dangerous levels of carbon dioxide into the biosphere. Pollution caused by organochlorine pesticides, which were widely used by the sugar industry from the early 1950s until their use was generally banned in 1987, and non-degradable residues (nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous) washed into and contaminated, and now contribute, along with climate-change-induced ocean warming, to the

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recommendation that the Great Barrier Reef be included in UNESCO's list of endangered world heritage sites.[25]

The narrative of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* prompts questions about the naturalization of Australia's resource-rich lands and how endemic it is to Australian culture. Applying an ecocritical lens shows how a colonial culture dispossesses traditional owners and sustainable ecologies, how a postcolonial nation is built on extractive use of land, and how a modern nation contributes to global warming. Downing Cless observes for American drama that 'even canonical plays carry themes that demonstrate the endangered other-than-human world', and this applies to the Australian colonies as well.[26]

The question posed in this reinterpretation of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is whether the human drama reveals an unconscious incorporation of the affects of loss, of pristine land and of innocence. Does the drama incorporate loss at an Anthropocenic scale into its characters and how is this manifested? It features an anthropocentric narrative that places itself centre stage with a confidence that does not anticipate interest turning to the offstage workplace of its lead characters: the colonized and deforested cane fields of far north Queensland that remain unrepresented in productions so far. The action is set in a run-down boarding house, where barmaids Olive and Pearl wait for their boyfriends, Roo and Barney, the cane cutters, to make their annual appearance in the lay-off season. These hyper-venerated men appear to the women like 'two eagles flyin' down out of the sun and coming down south for the season',[27] unconsciously imitating the movements of birds and marine life up and down the waters off the east coast. As it is typically staged, the drama follows the two couples as the realization dawns painfully and sadly that this seventeenth year of the lay-off will be their last. The final moments in which the curtain closes on the losses within the human drama serve to defer the scale of loss at the unseen unrepresented but immanent colonial level.

Considered the Great Australian Play, the latest production was to be of the operatic version, scheduled and cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions but not before composer and director Jonathan Mills highlighted the timeless appeal of the play: 'It is time to celebrate the Summer of the Seventeenth Doll's humanity, its emotional and dramatic power, its brilliant capture of Australia's heart and soul.'[28] This triumphalist interpretation is emblematic of how mainstream theatre is caught in the Anthropocene and held there by powerful myths of nation and a bankable reputation that extends to marketing, box office and reception. Only in the background to the human drama do the effects of large-scale agriculture and the loss of biodiversity and habitat become evident.

While the iconography of the play has hitherto focused on the seventeen kewpie dolls, the endangered other-than-human world has a co-presence in the collection of souvenirs that have made their way from the cane fields, as seen in the 2012 production in Melbourne. In the play's dramatic arc, the cane cutters travel south (by train) bearing gifts, including 'a number of brilliantly plumaged, stuffed North Queensland birds', coral and shells from the Great Barrier Reef, and picture frames displaying shimmering-winged tropical butterflies (Fig. 3).[29]

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Fig. 3 **Image of the tropical birds and shells. *Summer of Seventeenth Doll*, dir. Neil Armfield, set design Ralph Myers, Melbourne Theatre Company, 2012. Photograph by Jeff Busby.**

Within the representational logic of the play, the objects are souvenirs and mementos of a faraway Edenic place, and tokens of romance. On an ecocritical view, under our noses, so to speak, the 'brilliantly plumaged stuffed birds' and 'shimmering-winged tropical butterflies' not only illuminate the gestic derangement of capturing and killing wildlife for human visual pleasure, but also constitute material traces of highly evolved endangered birds and insects. These emblematic symbolic objects, redolent with the human mastery of nature, nevertheless signal a nascent ecological consciousness of loss. The display of stuffed tropical birds and luminous shells suggests an uneasy alienation between theatrical representation and its others, works of nature captured for human signification.

Even so, the objects have an impact and are not entirely passive. Their materiality onstage evokes something of what Bennett might call 'the vitality of the non-human body', 'thing-power', like the Curtain Tree.[30] Carl Lavery calls this effect in a theatre context 'the radiance of things' that communicate through 'intensities, atmospheres and emotions', that 'touch' the spectator, and interrupt narrative time.[31] Turning the focus away from the human drama and onto the underlying substructure of deforestation, colonialism and capitalism points to the hidden enabler of daily life in the Anthropocene, and our much-loved national dramas. Joslin McKinney writes that the vitality of scenographic objects 'helps us to reconsider matter, hitherto overlooked, as fully a part of ecological, cultural and political operations.'[32] This classic work of anthropocentric theatre leaves a sediment of story that takes us deep into the history and ethos of resource-rich

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Australia, a nation that refuses to aspire to ambitious carbon reduction targets or plan for a sustainable future.

Theatre in the Anthropocene

Bruce McConachie argued recently that theatre has capacity to make the turn to telling 'the true story' that 'matters now', which is that of the Anthropocene.[33] As scholars we can identify moments that resonate with the immense geophysical power of the Anthropocene where human–non-human figurations take on expanded morphologies – cane cutters become eagles flying out of the sun. Alan Read's projection of *The Dark Theatre* suggests tragedy is the only moral and ethical response to the damage humans have caused to the planet. But this would need to be, as Elin Diamond has argued in her discussion of Caryl Churchill's 1994 masterpiece *The Skriker*, a post-human tragedy that 'suggests both a permeable border between human and nonhuman life (denying primacy to the human) and a recognition that artists, no less than scientists and cultural theorists, are key to imagining agency in life beyond the human.'[34]

Identifying the role of non-human actors is something scholars can lead, and have led, since Una Chaudhuri, three decades ago in a landmark edition of *Theater*, featured a section on theatre and ecology in which she called for theatre scholars to develop a more nuanced critical sensitivity to theatrical representations of the natural world, in particular 'the specifically ecological meaning' of scenographic language, imagery and objects. The provocation was to make a break with human-centred accounts of theatre and performance – whether socially representational, formalist or phenomenological – and to look for examples of the interrelationship of humans and non-humans in a shared environment.[35] The wider challenge was how to activate an ecological turn in our field in light of debates in the earth sciences about the onset of the Anthropocene. Lara Stevens asks what theatre needs to 'relinquish' and what it needs 'to restore' so that performance can play a productive role in responding to the climate emergency.[36] It might relinquish the centrality of the human drama, and restore an active role for the *non-human* – objects, minerals, commodities – that underpin the scenarios that play out onstage. Can we coax mainstream theatres into doing more than asking patrons to add carbon offsets to their ticket prices? Can we ask if they are going to leave the hard work of giving expression and form to the scale of anthropocentric change to the avant-garde performance sector while they keep their bottom lines above the red line?

Much of this work is undertaken in the Australian performing arts by Indigenous theatre companies representing a cultural perspective that rejects the Western mastery of man over the environment, of the separation of human and non-human, and that recognizes the unique life force of land or country. Here I turn to two of Australia's leading Indigenous and intercultural companies, Marrugeku and Bangarra Dance Theatre. Marrugeku is led by co-artistic directors Dalisa Prigram, who is also lead choreographer and dancer, and Rachael Swain, director and creative co-producer. The company's multimedia touring performances are developed and performed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists on country in the Kimberley region of

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north-western Australia. Bangarra Dance Theatre was founded in Sydney in 1989 and under the artistic direction of Stephen Page has since become one of the world's leading dance companies. The creative team, which includes Frances Rings as co-artistic director and Jacob Nash as designer, is dedicated to the development of new Indigenous work that expresses traditional and contemporary ethics and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

Marrugeku's *Cut the Sky* features climate change refugees on a burnt landscape across significant past and futuristic time zones ranging from the 1980s to 2065.[37] It features a self-described 'meditation on humanity's failure in the face of our own actions'.[38] The dramaturgy offers 'Indigenous perspectives on climate change' in the midst of proposals to extract and process natural and liquefied gas from a large basin 'the size of Germany' that lies underneath the region.[39] Swain gives extensive detail of this and other works in her book *Dance in Contested Land* (2020). Here, I want to touch on two memorable images. The stage features the rusting remains of industry half-buried in sand, like Shelley's Ozymandias, radiating obsolescence. Following the climate refugees onstage, is the lone human–non-human figure of a kangaroo in a high-visibility vest moving through a smoke-filled landscape (Fig. 4). It is familiar and estranged, haunting the spectator with its combination of isolation and vulnerability.

Peta Tait describes the effect of this 'ambiguous more-than human presence' as one that 'momentarily invites cognitive reappraisal' and expands 'the viewer's perspective'.[40] This changed perspective is from the human to the non-human in a theatrical setting historically dominated by the human drama. The Curtain Tree awakens similar cognitive and affective responses.

As I began work on this article in December 2019–January 2020, states of emergency and disaster were being declared across the eastern states of Australia as out-of-control bush fires swept across the country to the coastlines. Of the intensity and range of the bushfires, the Climate Council of Australia would conclude, 'The summer of 2019–20 saw unprecedented climate impacts fueled by the burning of coal, oil and gas.'[41] Overall, in addition to twenty-four people killed, and thousands rescued in military evacuations, 10.7 million hectares were burned, and over a billion animals affected.

Amid the bushfires, images of wounded kangaroos separated from their mob were widely mediatized. Here we see how Marrugeku's representation of the lone human–non-human figure of the kangaroo in a high-visibility vest moving through a smoke-filled landscape is a prime example of the predictive power of the theatrical image beyond the framework of the stage, into human-induced tragedy.

Amongst the repertoire of the major Australian performing-arts companies for 2021, Bangarra Dance Theatre's *SandSong*, stories from the Great Sandy Desert, appeared to be the only performance created around the intersection of colonialism, land and culture. In a recent Bangarra work, *Dark Emu*, the company, as Tait explains, explores continuous interactions with the natural world, with dancers using soil, dust and seed to create tactile sensations on the skin and in the air.[42] Performances make it clear that the European separation of the human and non-human, and of the human from the environment, runs counter to Indigenous knowledge of interconnectedness.

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Fig. 4 **Josh Mu as human–non-human kangaroo in *Cut the Sky*, Marrugeku, 28 February 2015. Photograph by Jon Green.**

For *Terrain*, choreographer Francis Rings explains,

> Landscape is at the core of our existence and is a fundamental connection between us and the natural world. The power of that connection is immeasurable. It cleanses, it heals, it awakens and it renews. It gives us perspective. It reminds us of something beyond ourselves and it frees us. But more importantly when we are surrounded by nature, we begin to understand our place and how we are a very, very small part of a much larger, much bigger picture. *Terrain* is where spirit and place meet.[43]

Terrain is a homage to country and inspired by the power of natural forces and the vulnerability of ecosystems within a landscape that has existed and evolved over millennia. The background to the dancers in the photograph (Fig. 5) depicts the Lake Eyre region, a great inland salt lake that cyclically fills with water and empties. Here

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Fig. 5 ***Terrain*****, Bangarra Dance Theatre, Ensemble. Photograph by Greg Barrett.**

we see lines on the landscape representing how human actions scar and disrupt the delicate balance of the natural environment.

SandSong offers a complex colonial history in four acts, with the first two each designated as a season ranging from the cold dry to the hot dry. This is interrupted by a third act signifying the arrival of colonists, and the shift from bush life to enslavement on cattle stations. A final act brings the wet season, the temporary release from enforced station labour, which in turn releases an explosion of intergenerational grief and then ceremony to begin the healing in contact with the land.

With the notable exception of Indigenous dance and theatre that claims a high level of ecological agency, in 2021 the mainstream state and subsidized theatres in Australia, which consider themselves major forces in Australian drama, remain caught in the slow death throes of the Anthropocene. New human dramas and the usual adaptations of the

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ancient and modernist classics fill us with false promises that our stories are still the ones that matter. This repertoire reinstates what Lavery refers to as humans' 'much vaunted exceptionalism and apparent omniscience',[44] in a case of denialism that mirrors policy at the political level.

The politics of climate change: coal theatrics

Denialism, understood as 'an expansion, an intensification, of denial', paradoxically denies it is in denial.[45] This was evident in a performance in 2017 when the former treasurer, now prime minister, Scott Morrison, held up a lump of Australian black coal in the Australian Parliament. The coal had been provided by the pro-fossil-fuel lobby group the Minerals Council of Australia, an industry association that advocates to government and the media on behalf of major mining companies. Morrison brandished the coal for a laugh saying, 'This is coal … Don't be afraid, don't be scared, it won't hurt you. It's coal.' Outside, another record-breaking heatwave was under way. The coal was passed around among right-wing politicians with great hilarity, leaving black stains on hands, made more visible against the whiteness of the Members of Parliament's skin.[46] The stunt prompts questions for a theatre analysis about how the assemblage of actor and prop, politician and coal, constitutes a '*walking, talking*' mineral that says more than intended about its denial of the climate-changing effects of coal.[47] The true but concealed story was that vested economic and political interests depend on coal, even as it leaves their hands dirty.

Later dubbed coal theatrics, the performance of combative denialism proved to be an unreliable medium. While seeking to ridicule the idea that inert matter in the form of a harmless object was capable of unleashing the dystopic future predicted by the Doomsday Clock, this theatre of bravado undermined its own intent, like an 'Unhappy Performative' that fails to mean what it says.[48] The cavalier turn for the boys on the front and back benches, featuring a prop semiotized to downsize the significance of fossil-fuel emissions in the face of global moves to phase it out, turns out to be a desperate case of coal-dependence. Public ethicist Clive Hamilton saw a tragic death wish fulfillment in this dependence: 'It's almost as if, like King Lear raging at the storm, [conservative politicians] Turnbull, Morrison and Joyce are defying nature to do its worst, almost willing it to happen because mankind will prevail.'[49] One moment fiddling, the other raging as bushfires blazed, the performance appealed to a jingoistic nationalism that sought to refamiliarize coal as a beloved national asset whose existence was threatened by global forums such as the UN.

But it failed. The theatrics came to an end when the parliamentary warden reminded the treasurer that props were not permitted in the house. A female attendant in uniform carried the now banished object out of the room for disposal. Perhaps this material object was returned to the lobbyists who had provided it. Or it was placed in the parliamentary archive for future historians, or a bin. In any case, the image is captured in video and print. The warden's intervention only heightened the theatricality and performativity of denialism as it exposes the hero's delusion that

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Fig. 6 ***The Mermaid*, Hanna Cormick as the mermaid. Coal Loader, Sydney, January 2020. Photograph by Michelle Higgs.**

presenting coal as a mere object conceals the nation's desperate submission to the agency of fossil fuel and minerals.

And yet there is an overflow of significance. Coal theatrics counterintuitively affirm Bennett's materialist tenet that non-human matter or things 'in the right confederation with other physical and physiological bodies' are capable of being actants that 'can make big things happen',[50] including, as we know, the transition to the Anthropocene. Coal theatrics are Anthropocenic theatre even as they deny Paul Crutzen's proposition that human activities – namely industrialization, deforestation and continuous economic growth – have had such a profound impact on the environment that the planet's geological composition and biosphere have been radically altered. The stunt points to a prevailing political and economic system in the thrall of coal, and the problem of Australia's refusal over the last decade to set carbon reduction targets. It also exposes the abundance of coal that sees the nation home to the third-highest reserves of coal after the USA and Russia. In exports, it is the sixth-largest coal-producing nation and one of the world's biggest carbon emitters on a per capita basis, cleverly concealed by its relatively small population.

Economic historians argue that attachment to the past delays investment in value-added commodities, leaving the nation without a high-tech, low-emission export capability. Steffin, Crutzen and O'Neill refer to hysterical political attachments to fossil fuel as concealed under the pragmatics of a 'business-as-usual approach' to economic development,[51] despite the fact it is increasingly interrupted by catastrophic firestorms and other environmental disasters, creating conditions no one alive has ever seen before.[52] This approach is supported by a national ethos that holds that we pick ourselves up and start again. Lesley Head describes this colonial-in-origin ethos as 'the national myth of vernacular stoicism', which expresses itself as a repression of emotion in the face of adversity. It also leads to a

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failure to change its resource-dependent economy.[53] Meanwhile, the ecocritical approach I am advocating here asks whether our theatre repertoire also follows a 'business-as-usual approach', putting commercial interests or reliable repertoire ahead of commissioning socially engaged or consciousness-raising works that might envision a carbon-free future.

Counterintuitive performance: *The Mermaid*

Such a socially engaged and ecologically committed work is Hanna Cormick's *The Mermaid*, an independent work, curated and presented in January 2020 at the Sydney Festival, as bushfires sent thick smoke into the city. Originally to be staged outdoors, the conditions sent the performance indoors at the historic Coal Loader site on a peninsula overlooking Sydney Harbour. For thousands of years the lands of the Cammeraygal people, and then a picnic area for the working class, the promontory was developed as an industrial site in the early 1920s. It became a vast coal storage depot for bulk carriers and a staging post for transfering coal onto smaller coal-fired vessels and trucks. The site was decommissioned in the 1990s and reopened as a sustainability and cultural centre in 2011.

The Mermaid drew historical potency from the site of its performance amidst the nation's continuing affirmation of coal mining, and the presence of smoke from the intensity of the bushfires. It gained additional gravitas through Hanna Cormick's physical presence. Cormick is a dancer and performance artist who now lives with a series of untreatable immunological conditions that affect her mobility and make her allergic to the toxins in the air we breathe. Hence the wheelchair and full-face respirator mask she wears at all times when leaving the purified air of her home (Fig. 6).

The audience enters one of the former coal loader tunnels and witnesses the artist in a mermaid tail in a wheelchair attached to an aqualung, her fingers bound by thin metal thread to protect from breakages. The coal storage tunnels now emptied of coal and its dust had become a space in which the human legacy of its pollution was embodied in all its frailty and persistence by a mermaid that spoke volumes.

A voice-over asked patrons wearing make-up, perfume, deodorant and so on, or chewing gum, to move to the back of the space to protect the artist from the contaminants on our bodies. I moved to the back feeling guilty and appalled that I presented a danger to the artist, more than aware of being a complicit carrier of the chemical industry's toxic products. This experience bears out Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin's observation that 'the Anthropocene is primarily a sensorial phenomenon: the experience of living in an increasingly diminished and toxic world'.[54] The performance I attended was halted for more than ten minutes as the artist suffered a major seizure. Her carers monitored her condition and explained that we should wait until it passes, and she is still. Music played while paper notices were leafed through like a PowerPoint documenting the state of the Earth's atmosphere. Cormack describes her condition as part of the ecology of immuno-deficiency, global warming and industrial toxins. She explains how the embodied presence of the mermaid in a wheelchair

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Fig. 7 **Niow in Melinda Hetzel and Co., *Conservatory*, Melbourne, November 2020. Photograph by Pia Johnston.**

> is not just an image … of disability, how being out of the water, the mermaid has to use a wheelchair. It was also a comment on the toxicity of the planet. The way that we've polluted it to this point, and the damage it is having on ecosystems, creatures, and populations that we don't normally see.

Inspired by the writings of philosopher and activist Paul Preciado, and Audre Lorde, a carer holds a prompt card that declares on behalf of the mermaid, 'I'm not a fighter, I'm the battleground.' Compared to the glibness of coal theatrics, *The Mermaid* chooses an art gallery and a former industrial space over the parliamentary music hall to offer small audiences a space for contemplation. This is the gift that can sustain solidarity in the face of political noise.

Conservatory, 2020

Staying with the theme of resistant performance, a collaboration between Melbourne-based artists Niow and Melinda Hetzel and Co., *Conservatory* was a live-streamed durational performance installation that took place in a plant-filled greenhouse in a city park for one day only in November 2020. This local city council-sponsored event was devised for a solo performer who inhabits the greenhouse from the middle of an afternoon through to sunset and into the evening. Audiences on site and online are invited to observe a silent figure, Niow, as they play, dance, dream, lose hope and find it again. The human in the conservatory can seem

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to stand in for the distant grounds of the rainforests of far north Queensland, where the desire to be immersed in vegetation leads a dramaturgy of wonder.

Amongst the conservatory plants are placed common everyday human objects and a variety of costumes that act as prompts for pre-choreographed sequences of action. It is often not clear to the spectator whether the performer is meant to be 'animal' or 'human', 'male' or 'female', 'old' or 'young'. The figure's interaction with natural objects (leaves, soil, water, dirt), with the products of industrialization (clothes, plastic, cardboard, glass, china and so on) and with digital technology suggests it is an 'Anthropocenean', Lesley Head's term for the 'well-off citizens of the Modern World',[55] but this figure is intent on disavowing that status and seeking a different mode of being. The figure may well be grieving the loss of citizenry by maintaining tactile relations with the manufactured hyperobjects of modernity while also embracing fluid states in amongst the stillness and silence of plants, bacteria and soil; the mineral presence of the recording equipment; and the human compulsion for continuous action, now rendered absurdly out of place (Fig. 7).

Conservatory searches for that which Lavery refers to as an 'ecological consciousness' that 'undoes the supremacy and centrality of the human subject' with all the loss and adjustment that must come with it.[56] Here the 'more-than-human-world',[57] and the interdependence of self and other, human and non-human, can perform in relational, interconnected ways. This highly imaginative whimsical performance also creates, as Jen Parker-Starbuck puts it, 'imaginative worlds [that] carry a great potential to influence actual worlds'.[58]

Here the aesthetics of the exotic plants in the greenhouse and the reflection of the trees outside on the interior glass walls render the objects of modernity time-based, pending obsolescence, and indifferent to the Anthropocenean. The non-dominating *anthropos* becomes, then, a species in a multi-species world. This gesturing away from busyness – towards uncertainty – offers a meditative clue to moving away from industrialized modernity.

Conclusion

Among the most audacious and persistent climate justice and anti-fossil-fuel activists are Australia's Climate Guardians, who gathered over a decade ago as an ensemble of eco-activists styled as angels. Since then, the Guardians' situated actions have included the blockade of the G20 2014 leaders' summit in Brisbane and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 21) in Paris. At other vigils they have held banners declaring 'our Prime Minister turned his back on the future by declaring his loyalty to coal' or 'Industry Lobbyists are not Qualified Scientists'.[59] Their appearances draw attention to the opposition in Australia to the protection of the fossil-fuel industry. The Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow in November 2021 is the final date for nations to avert irreversible global warming. So far Australia has refused to commit to targets, a stance it repeated at President Biden's recent climate summit, and the G7 conference in Cornwall in June 2021. Historian Judith Brett has remarked that Australia

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was one of a small number of countries 'wrecking' the chance of effective agreements to cut greenhouse gas emissions in Madrid in 2020.[60] Will it do the same in Glasgow 2021?

The politics of climate change raise critical questions for theatre and performance studies, such as 'what can theatre do?'[61] These politics have seen a theatre of cruelty take place in Australia, bringing down three prime ministers, including Julia Gillard, who had managed to legislate a carbon tax in 2011 before she was destroyed by misogyny and climate denialism.[62]

In reflecting on the performances discussed in this article in terms of what theatre can do, it becomes clear that Bangarra and Marrugeku, especially with capacity for national and international touring outreach, model a style of ecological and culturally attuned leadership and creativity. *Cut the Sky* offers a powerfully affective vision of the desolated landscapes of the mining era; *Terrain* foregrounds the interrelation of First Nation peoples and landscape as a vital core of human–non-human existence. These messages are offered to those who will listen. Of the white Australian classics such as *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* the history of colonialism and large-scale agricultural land clearance haunts the Anglo-European frontier story. A relationship breaks up due to the irreconcilable differences between the sugar industry and human machines. The small-in-scale sector that sees *The Mermaid* and *Conservatory* developed within festival circuits has the advantage of independence to experiment with ecologically engaged performative realities. *The Mermaid*, performed in the ruins of coal, draws attention to the obsolescence of fossil fuel while showing its lasting effects. *Conservatory* investigates the beginnings of an ecologically engaged way of living. The strength of the works is that together they counteract the denialism of coal theatrics.

There is no reason other than convention why theatre cannot rupture long-held patterns of thought and feeling, especially about the status and centrality of the human character within its environment. And yet in the Australian context, theatre and drama lag behind performance art and installations, as well other art forms, including film, visual arts, literature and digital media. Can the machinery of mainstream theatre, with its funding, its programmes, its marketing and its global audiences, find a way around its human-centred drama, or does it leave it to avant-garde and performance art, with its committed audiences, to do the hard work? And yet theatre's capacity for live affective storytelling is there for harnessing, especially if we think about the important stories it has told over millennia.

At present the juggernaut that is the global theatre industry appears caught in the Anthropocene. And yet as scholars we want to reaffirm the role of theatre and performance in responding to the environmental crisis for the ways in which it can imagine alternatives to the capitalist and colonialist growth mentalities that have created the environmental problem we face.

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