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100
PLAYS
TO SAVE
THE WORLD

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Introduction

People often ask: where is the great climate-change play? The answer is it's here, it has already been written, and quite possibly it was staring you in the face. Writers have for years been wrestling with the challenges the world now faces, but clarion calls from the past by visionary playwrights are only now being listened to. Extinction, extreme weather, resource shortages, failing political leadership, truth, denial – these things already exist in the playwriting culture. We just need a sharp new ear to tune into their resonances. In addition, new plays are being written every day dealing head-on with these topics. This book attempts to encourage new readings of those classic plays and to propel great new writing into sharper focus.

This book is unapologetically activist. It is a call to arms. The aim is to make programming great environmental plays easier, watching great environmental plays more accessible and having life-changing conversations much more likely. This book is not intended to be prescriptive. Instead, we offer it as an empowering and enabling guide. We hope it is of use to theatre-makers in rural and urban contexts, in venues and on tour, student, amateur and professional. All of us are in the same fight. We are imagining progressive new productions of these plays that inspire new thinking. We hope you will not be limited by place or time or setting. We encourage you to make dynamic, theatrical choices that offer audiences fun, provocation and hope, and most importantly, the possibility of change.

We – artists, thinkers, creators – have a responsibility to communicate the truth of this emergency. The future we currently face is as uncertain as it is daunting. The world is shape-shifting and our culture must too. We believe by wrestling with some of the issues raised in these plays we can help tell new stories about the way we might want to live. There are plays for all tastes here, all points of view, all approaches

to this cultural moment. This selection of plays, seen in context with each other, stimulates a conversation about how many ways we can invent our future.

The Anthropocene is the name given to the geological age we are in now. Named after the Greek '*anthropos*', meaning 'man', it was chosen to emphasise the truth that humankind has now left a geological footprint on this planet: radioactive isotopes are found in glacial ice; the high levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere are detectable in tree rings and limestone; our plastic waste is forming a new sedimentary layer. But still large swathes of the population opt out of believing in these facts. Why? We have to consider that the stories we tell, the way in which we tell them, and on which stages they are told, might be part of the problem. We urge theatre-makers and programmers to become part of the Theatre of the Anthropocene, telling stories that anticipate our future, acknowledge our past and make our present liveable.

Fighting the climate crisis is a global endeavour. We read plays from English-speaking theatre cultures, as well as many plays in translation. We called theatre companies, spoke to agents, contacted writers directly, sought recommendations and searched online. This book includes writers from many countries and many different backgrounds. There are voices and places under-represented – and we urge translators and commissioners to enable more work from the Global South to be heard. Excitingly, new work about the environment is being produced all the time. It may be strange to say, but we are hopeful this book will date rapidly and that soon thousands of new plays about our new world reality will dominate our global stages. This book is simply a snapshot of where we are now and shows us where we need to go. Our criteria was that each play needed to have been/be about to be professionally produced and/or be available in published/accessible form. We sought a wide range of narrative styles, small casts and large, ensemble and leading roles, domestic and political, intergenerational, animals and human characters. The idea that all climate plays are either scientist plays, dystopias, or had to have a polar bear in them was blown clear out of the water very early on.

Some of the plays included here were written long before such a thing as a climate crisis was known about. Some were written more recently but without an explicitly stated intention that the play addresses environmental issues. In both instances we have cheerfully taken the view that works of art out there in the world are to be interpreted and interrogated as others see fit. We don't pretend to put forward definitive

readings of these plays, simply to allow aspects of them that we believe could speak to this moment to shine through. Relationships to nature, geopolitical issues, social consequences of environmental impacts; all of these, to us, help tell the story of the most pressing issue facing us today.

The plays chosen from further back in time – Aristophanes, Chekhov, Brecht – seem eerily prescient when read through environmental eyes, both predicting and speaking directly to this moment. Their relevance is a useful reminder that staging environmental stories is not just the responsibility of playwrights. Theatre-makers of every discipline – casting, design, acting, directing, stage management – must reimagine and reinterpret these plays through the prism of the present. The contemporary plays – by writers such as Erika Dickerson-Despenza, Chris Bush and Lucy Kirkwood – concentrate their fire on a diversity of targets, visionary in their writing and unflinching in their gaze. The climate crisis is not one problem. Turning down the global thermostat won't solve habitat destruction or reconnect people to the natural world. Collectively, we hope the choice of plays creates space for dynamic discussion of the multifaceted, interconnected, complex collision of environmental challenges we are now facing.

The compiling of this collection has reminded us that we need to acknowledge that the nature of our international theatre reveals our collective thinking, and that maybe our collective thinking is sleepily behind the curve. The wilder plays are born from the imaginations of writers whose neighbourhoods are burning and whose homes are flooding. The further you are from the daily lived reality of the climate crisis, the quieter and more formally conservative the plays. This collection has revealed how the world is reshaping itself violently in the physical realm and how that is impacting on the reshaping of stories we need to tell, not just for now but for generations to come. This climate emergency will, in many ways, be the subject of all of our art for the foreseeable future, just as it ought to be the dominant discourse in our political, economic and social spheres.

Writers won't just write plays about these issues for a short while, after a fashion, believing the crisis will then be over. This is our new reality. The shifts we make societally in the next decade will be with us forever, otherwise the undeniable truth is that the concept of forever will itself no longer exist.

We have learned from assembling this collection that the impact of the climate emergency is altering the way that plays are written and for whom they are written. The movement of peoples has an impact on our

stories, and the rise in the pitch of the voices that need to be heard has an impact on our listening.

This collection has also raised questions about how epic the plays need to be, how global in outlook, how formally elastic and inventive. We can no longer navel-gaze and clink our gins. We need to capture a reality that we have never experienced before. We need to unleash the power of a total theatre, an era of playwriting that embraces epic stories, and values playwrights' intelligent, focused urgency and understanding. We need to exercise and stretch our thinking, widen our eyes, strengthen our neck muscles for the sustained looking up we now need to do. Theatre must imagine the future, and help us reach towards the bold, humane, quick thinking we are going to need.

About This Book

We have focused on playwrights. We know there is much brilliant devised, unscripted, immersive, interactive, site-responsive work out there, and we salute and applaud all of those makers. The intention here is simply for producers and companies to find scripts they can read and plays they can consider programming.

The plays included have all been written in or translated into English. They are available either in published form, online, or through direct contact with writers. Libraries, bookshops and search engines will lead the way.

We limited ourselves to one play per writer. There were multiple plays by Caryl Churchill and Wole Soyinka, for example, that we could have chosen. But given the wealth of material on offer, we decided to feature as many playwrights as possible, introduce as many writers to readers as possible, support the broadest range of artists that we could, and trust the reader to go on a subsequent journey of their own discovery.

Apart from the odd exception, we have focused on full-length plays. There are brilliant initiatives that ask writers from around the world to contribute short plays for instant debate and easy dissemination. More information about these can be found at the end of the book.

We read well over three hundred plays and could've read many more. This is not a definitive collection. We chose strong plays that we feel speak to this moment in theatrically exciting ways. We wanted an overall balance of content, genre and cast size. We wanted to represent as diverse a group of ideas and writers as possible. We know there are lots of plays we left out and we embrace the debate. Get in touch, tell us, social media the hell out of it. Let's collectively put together another book of another hundred.

We spent a lot of time wondering how to arrange the plays and finally settled on twelve chapters, each representing a particular aspect of the

climate crisis. Each chapter carries a short introduction by way of establishing some context for the situation we find ourselves in. Although each play is situated within one of these categories, the chapters are offered as loose collectives. Don't let that stop you from focusing on other aspects of the play in your productions. Some plays could've been put in two or more categories. Others are category-defying by nature.

At the back of the book are indexes of the plays by title, playwright's name and cast size to give you alternative ways to search for plays you might be interested in. There are also resources for further reading and some information on how this book was printed.

Otherwise, we recommend flicking through, landing on a play, planning a production, and saving the world.

2 UNCLE VANYA

Anton Chekhov (1889)

'Forests keep disappearing, rivers dry up, wild life has become extinct, the climate's ruined and the land grows poorer and uglier every day.'

Astrov, the country doctor who utters these words in *Uncle Vanya*, is all too aware of the ecological devastation being wrought by nineteenth-century industrialisation. And yet, like many of Chekhov's characters, he is equally in awe of progress and the social emancipation it promises. The tension between these two ideals snaffles him like flypaper, stuck between inaction and apathy. Astrov's focus closes in on matters of the intellect and the heart, while all around him the sound of the axe, steadily chopping tree after tree, reverberates through his hollowing heart and the emptying landscape. Against the backdrop of an imminent storm, we watch the characters discuss the destruction of the natural environment while they destroy themselves with drink, bemoan unrequited love and mourn unfulfilled dreams. Both the place and its people are on a slippery slope into quiet decline.

Chekhov loved trees. His characters are forever setting off for walks in the woods, noticing the sound of the leaves, or recognising the stupidity of chopping them down. On his own country estate he planted both woods and orchards (yes, including cherry). In *Uncle Vanya*, he presents the full spectrum of human relationships to nature, from characters who respond to aesthetics – 'Oh, isn't that pretty' – to those who want to exploit: 'How much would that bring in?' Chekhov walks a line between the two positions, showing that we may attempt to divorce ourselves from the natural world, but it will always seep deep into our psyches. Underneath everything is a distant alarm bell, ringing somewhere over there, trying to rouse us, attempting to raise into conscious thought the terror of the subconscious: that the impoverishment of the environment is the impoverishment of our souls.

Uncle Vanya is a stunningly beautiful play made more resonant when its central absurd tragedy, of denial and inaction, of fiddling while Rome burns, becomes its wider context.

60 THE CHILDREN

Lucy Kirkwood (2017)

'Yes so then I wanted to call Robin so I walked, I ran down to the beach, because the reception – and that's when I saw the tide had gone out. I mean it wasn't miles but it looked like miles, and then I saw the wave, only it didn't look like a wave, it looked like the sea was boiling milk and it just kept boiling and boiling and boiling.'

T*he Children* is set in a small cottage on the east coast of England in the near future, where a recent disaster at the nuclear power station has devastated the area. Robin and Hazel want to continue living in their house despite knowing the dangers of nuclear fallout. They are retired from their jobs as scientists at the plant they helped to build. Electricity and water are rationed and they keep a Geiger counter to check for signs of radiation. Hazel is determined to preserve some semblance of normality and lives the healthiest life she possibly can. Robin disappears daily to feed cows who miraculously survived. He brings home salad that Hazel checks before devouring. Rose, a former colleague, whom they haven't seen for thirty-eight years, turns up at their door. She seems intent on disrupting their precarious but ordered existence.

This is a genuinely disturbing play. Lucy Kirkwood's three-hander pulls no punches. It asks the central question of this global crisis, unadorned. Will we take responsibility for our past actions? The scenes have the visceral tang of life lived in a destroyed landscape. Gradually we realise why Rose has come back. She wants the young scientists and physicists who are currently in the leaking nuclear plant, working to make it safe, to be relieved by those who are over sixty-five. Having built it, they should be the ones to secure it. She needs twenty people. She has eighteen. She has government approval. Robin and Hazel now know why she is there.

Hazel goes mad. She has four children. She is a good mother. Why can she not be allowed to see her grandchildren grow up? She vents her anger about Robin and Rose's past affair. Robin admits that he has been returning to the farm every day not to feed the cows, as Hazel was willing

to believe, but to bury them. He coughs up blood, setting the Geiger counter off noisily. He is happy to agree to Rose's request. Is Hazel?

The bonds between these three people make their long-standing obligations towards each other very present in the room. And this in turn allows them to face their obligations towards future generations. This is a tough play, brilliantly effective.