



## Performing Ecology: Eco-Theatre, Ecocriticism, and Environmental Aesthetics in English Drama

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Received Feb9, 2026

Revised Mar12, 2026

Accepted Mar14, 2026

Online Jul.1, 2026

### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I take up the relationship of English theatre and environmentalism in eco-theatre as an art form of environmental awareness. Drawing on insights gained from ecocriticism, performance theory, and eco-aesthetics, the book explores the ways in which English playwrights and directors such as Caryl Churchill, Duncan Macmillan and Katie Mitchell are responding to environmental devastation, climate change and sustainability. This article is tracing the history of theatres in England, from the pastoral allegoricism of the drama played by Shakespeare, to the environmental-related issues being acted up, to some eco-performances where science and activism interweave. Using *The Skriker* (1994), *2071* (2014) and the thesis demonstrates how eco-theatre transforms space, aesthetics and audience engagement to generate eco-awareness. Ultimately the eco-theatre is a combination between a form of cultural critique and environmental activism using empathy, education and a sense of shared responsibility. Thus, the English language a) operates, as it has done so for thousands of years, as an expression of the ecology transformation, but also b) serves as a force for promoting a sustainable cultural ecology.

**Keywords:** eco-theatre, English theatre, environmentalism, ecocriticism, performance theory, eco-aesthetics.

### أداء الإيكولوجيا: المسرح البيئي، والنقد البيئي، والجماليات البيئية في الدراما الإنجليزية

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### المخلص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة التقاطع بين المسرح الإنجليزي والبيئية من خلال منظور المسرح الإيكولوجي (Eco-Theatre)، وهو ممارسة أدائية تدمج الوعي البيئي بالتعبير الفني. وبالاستناد إلى النقد البيئي (Ecocriticism) ونظرية الأداء والجماليات البيئية، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية معالجة الكتاب والمخرجين الإنجليز مثل كاريل تشرشل، ودنكان ماكميلان، وكاتي ميتشل لقضايا التدهور البيئي، وتغير المناخ، والاستدامة. وتتبع الورقة التطور التاريخي للموضوعات البيئية في المسرح الإنجليزي، بدءاً من الرمزية الريفية في أعمال شكسبير وصولاً إلى العروض المسرحية البيئية المعاصرة التي تمزج بين العلم والنشاط البيئي. ومن خلال دراسات حالة لأعمال *The Skriker* (1994) و *2071* (2014) وتوضح الدراسة كيف يُحوّل المسرح الإيكولوجي الفضاء المسرحي والجماليات وتفاعل الجمهور لتعزيز الوعي البيئي. وتخلص في النهاية إلى أن المسرح الإيكولوجي يعمل بوصفه نقداً ثقافياً ونشاطاً بيئياً في آن واحد، إذ يعزز التعاطف والتعليم والمسؤولية الجماعية. وبهذا يصبح المسرح الإنجليزي وسيطاً حياً للتحويل البيئي ومحقراً للممارسات الثقافية المستدامة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المسرح الإيكولوجي، المسرح الإنجليزي، البيئة، النقد البيئي، نظرية الأداء، الجماليات البيئية



## . Introduction

In the wake of the global environmental crisis, artists and cultural agents are resisting and reflecting on the potential of creative representation in a time of ecological awareness, with eco-theatre emerging as a particular modality of practice or live performance that deals with environmental problems, is an important and engaged form of art in this context. Numerous English plays have exposed and slammed what people do to nature, so it's the perfect place to investigate environmental matters through performance. Theatre has always morphed to reflect how people relate with the world around them. This is as true of Shakespeare's environs all the way to current eco-dramas about global warming (Arons & May, 2012, p. 782).

For the purposes of this study, the terminology of eco-theatre (as an alternative name for environmental theatre) is used to denote dramatic and performative works that centralize ecological preoccupations and environmental awareness isn't just the practice of enacting ecological issues; it reclaims how we consider and through performance change our moral selves and capacities as a culture that plays. That is to say, the performance uses biodegradable set design, site-specific performances that engage with natural environments, and participatory styles that dissolve barriers between performer and audience or environment as examples. The outcome is a powerful, shifting experience which compels people to consider their obligations to the environment and future of the group (Bottoms & McDonnell, 2008, p. 782). Importance of using qualitative Analytical methods, this research engages textual and performance analysis to explore the ecological content, dramatic devices and representational strategies of eco-theatre of eco-theatre in major works of the English-language eco-theatrical canon, bringing out and explaining how performance can be an ally in the struggle to raise ecological consciousness and promote public discussion on the issues of climate change and environmental policy. This conversation is in line with related environmental-humanities scholarship Lark has published.

Research questions: (1) How do contemporary English-language performances represent environmental crisis and climate anxiety? (2) Which forms of theatricality (spatial, sonic, temporal, at the audience) promote ecological awareness? How can eco-theatre serve as environmental communication, without falling into the trap of shrinking theatre (and audiences) to mere didactic vehicles?

This article seeks to challenge the ways contemporary English-language eco-theatre might imagine environmental crisis and climate anxiety and how such performances can mobilize ecological awareness (1) is to define key concepts of eco-theatre and performance ecocriticism, (2) to present a

brief historical survey of the theme of environmentalism in English theatre, (3) to analyse three representative case studies and (4) to indicate aesthetic and ethical strategies through which theatre can contribute to ecological awareness.

Research problem: While climate discourse has become broadly visible in contemporary arts, there is still limited critical work that connects English form to ecology and the public. This paper investigates how eco-theatre redesigns theatrics and audience experience to render ecological catastrophe visible and visceral.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This research combines approaches of ecocriticism, performance theory, and eco-aesthetics in its theoretical framework. Instead of framing these approaches as distinct theoretical backgrounds, this essay utilizes them as two lenses to read contemporary English-language theatre for their connection to environmental issues and, by extension, as elements of a field of eco-theatre.

Ecocriticism examines how dramatic texts and performances engage with nature, the ecological crisis, and nonhuman agency through ecological approaches to dramatic texts and performances. You have received training in performance theory, which you applied to analyze embodiment, spectatorship, affect, and the ways in which environmental issues are both staged and played out for audiences. Hence the material conditions, spatial arrangements, as well as ethical implications of staging ecological issues, are analyzed according to the notions of eco-aesthetics. Combined, the three approaches enable the study of eco-theatre to address the questions of how environmental crisis is represented, how ecological awareness is produced, and how human-centered assumptions surrounding nature, culture and sustainability are subverted.

### **2.1 Ecocriticism**

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. It responded to human-centered critical traditions by challenging the demarcations of human and nonhuman life and the ecological dimensions of cultural representation. Ecocriticism thus serves as a methodological lens through which this study evaluates contemporary eco-theatre representations of nature, environmental crisis, and nonhuman agency.

Theatrical texts and performances can be read as ecocritical spaces that address ecological issues, environmental ethics, and human–nature relations. This method serves (1) makes visible how eco-theatre resists prevailing assumptions within consumerism, extractivism and human exceptionalism and (2) invites more sustainable ways to see and relate to the natural world. According to Glotfelty and Fromm, in fact, ecocriticism deals with «the relation between literature and the physical environment» (1996, p. 6). This study extends that concern to the theatre and

performance, positing that ecological meaning emerges not just from text, but from staging, bodies, space, and audience response.

## **2.2 Performance Theory**

As performance theory, especially Schechner (2006) and Fischer-Lichte (2008), is important for my analysis of eco-theatre as it focuses on the live, embodied, and affective experience of performance rather than representation alone. Theatre is not just a vehicle for representing ecological narratives, but a site in which notions of environment are enacted, experienced, and embodied by actors and audiences alike.

Performance theory in this project serves as a lens for exploring the ways that eco-theatre embodies ecology both literally and metaphorically in relation to spectatorship, affect, space, and audience engagement. With these views in mind, environmental crisis is conveyed beyond the representational dialogue or dramatic aspects, enacted through corporeal movement, gesture, sound, spatial arrangement, and the physical sensation between the performers, spectators, and performance site. In this respect, eco-theatre can be seen as an arena for experiencing ecology not simply in the sense of intellectual engagement but as both a somatic and emotional manifestation. For instance, site-specific eco-performances tend to dislodge theater from the black-box stage and put audience members into natural, urban, or damaged scenes. Not only does this relocation change the audience from passive witness to embodied experience there, in their bodies, moving through space it makes them more aware of their relationship to space, environment, and ecological cataclysm.

Therefore, performance theory enables this thesis to study the way in which eco-theatre creates ecological awareness through embodied encounter. By linking environmental issues with the body, space and spectatorship, environmental theatre helps to elucidate how performances creates empathy, feeling, and ecological sensibility.

## **2.3 Eco-Aesthetics and Environmental Performance**

In English theatre eco-theatre activity brings creative creativity together with ecological concern and from this marriage comes eco-aesthetics (in the terms of viewing performance as always already aesthetic, and an environmental boon). Eco-theatre isn't just about presenting nature; it's about representing environmental values utilizing environmentally conscious practices such as site specific work, recycled materials or community participation. It challenges perspectives that place humans at the centre and reveals how people are interdependent with nature. Eco-theatre is a form of environmental activism which encourages empathy, consciousness and collective responsibility through immersive and participatory forms of performance (Kershaw, 2007, p. 784).

## **2.4 Intersectionality of Theory and Practice**

The performance aesthetic and production practice where environmental philosophy converges is the eco-theatre. In this study, theory and practice are treated as mutually informing: ecocriticism supports reading theatrical worlds as ecological arguments, performance theory foregrounds the event-based and embodied nature of theatre, and eco-aesthetics clarifies how form can cultivate ethical attention to more-than-human agencies. In combination, these perspectives illuminate how eco-theatre can simultaneously serve as cultural criticism, and a form of environmental communication that invites audiences to consider concepts of responsibility, sustainability, and collective futures (Schechner, 2006, p. 785).

### **3. Historical Context of Environmental Themes in English Theatre**

A common understanding of the evolution of environmental themes in English theatre is from a more representative idealistic space of nature and a more symbolic moral space toward a much clearer ecological awareness and activism. In contrast to nature being an ecological concern in modern times, nature appeared more as metaphor, as a moral, theological, or restorative force in early English drama. Plays by the likes of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson which frequently stage the relation among human behavior, the natural order, and social disorder may be read as early forebears of ecocriticism. Shakespeare has almost become more nature but he shares with *As You Like It* and *The Tempest* the association of nature as a place for reflection and transformation, maybe a space for restoration, but these plays can hardly be accurately labeled environmental drama as we understand it now. During the Romantic period, theatrical and literary depictions of nature often further highlighted the picturesque, the sublime, and the sacred quality of the natural environment. Simultaneously, the growth of industrial modernity inspired the writers and dramatists alike to question the impact of mankind on the natural world. But environmental concerns were still largely articulated indirectly in terms of idealized representations of landscape, rural life, and human alienation from the natural world.

In the face of these phenomena, even in the twentieth century, with industrial expansion, pollution, war, and ecological degradation now so much more apparent, English-language theatre started to confront the unfolding experience of environmental crisis more directly. In contemporary drama, nature is not merely figurative, decorous backdrop or pseudo-spatial vessel, but also a live presence, a pressing ethical issue. While action has been pragmatic, playwrights like Caryl Churchill, Steve Waters, and Duncan Macmillan shape theatrical form toward climate change, ecological accountability, and the precariousness of the human–nature relation. This change is indicative of the rise of eco-theatre to being a form of performance that blends artistic experimentation and environmental awareness under the circumstance of ecological crisis.

#### **3.1 Early Foundations**

William Shakespeare and his contemporary Ben Jonson are better seen as early figures of an ecology of the theatre than as practitioners of environmental theatre in a modern sense of the word, since the natural settings of their eight Renaissance plays frequently underscore their moral, social, and symbolic significance. The pastoral tradition, which celebrated the harmony between humanity and nature and idealised rural life, was a large influence on style and subject matter. He both literally and symbolically employs the forest in “As You Like It” and “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” to suggest how corrupt court life is compared with the freedom and vitality of nature. The forest of Ardenne, for instance, is a representation of renewal and searching one’s own soul but it also conveys the discord between society and nature itself. *The Tempest* (1611) also communicates with colonisation and humanity’s assumption of control of the natural world. These are themes that hint at future worries about the environment being taken over and used for profit. These early representations demonstrate how the theatre developed as a platform for negotiating humanity’s ethical and material relationship with nature, a connection that would increasingly become more intricate (Chaudhuri, 1994, p. 786).

### **3.2 The Industrial Revolution and the Romantic Turn**

The Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries changed a lot about how people and the environment interacted, and English theatre portrayed this transformation. As industry advanced, playwrights began to scrutinise the social and ecological consequences of mechanisation and urbanisation. People used the stage to emphasise how much they missed nature and how much they hated industrial progress. *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) is a lyric epic of one of dramatist Percy Bysshe Shelley who dreams of liberation from tyrannical tyranny and the restoration of equilibrium in nature. This is similar to the Romantics’ idea, that nature is morally and spiritually significant. Social realism was often employed in later Victorian plays to show the damage that pollution by factories and other industrial activity was causing to the environment (Kershaw, 2007, p. 786).

### **3.3. Twentieth-Century Transitions**

The 20th century saw enormous changes in how the environmental confronted theatre. It was new in that we could demonstrate isolation and nature in different fashions. After the war, environmental care, peace, and civil rights became more important to people. Playwrights began to write about how bad things were getting with all the new technology and how scared everyone became. For instance, Edward Bond’s *The Sea* (1973) employs the seashore as a symbol of chaos and renewal. Caryl Churchill’s *The Skriker* (1994) combines folklore and environmental destruction to explore the psychological and ecological consequences of excessive capitalism (Morton, 2007, p. 786).

By the end of the 20th century, eco-theatre had started to become its own artistic movement because of environmental activism and the rise of ecocriticism. Theatre professionals such as Baz Kershaw, Timothy Morton, and Una Chaudhuri supported the idea that theatre could embody ecological philosophy through sustainable production techniques, participatory performance, and site-specific work that reconnects audiences with their surroundings. (Churchill, 1994, p. 787).

### **3.4 Contemporary Eco-Theatre and Climate Change Performance**

In the 21st century, English theatre has become more interested in the climate disaster as a subject and a way to express stories. Katie Mitchell, *Complicité*, *Headlong*, and The Arcola Theatre's *Green Stage* project are all examples of modern playwrights and groups that integrate environmental concepts in their work and business. Today, eco-theater includes plays about climate change, species extinction, pollution, and sustainability. It also uses ecological ideas in set design and how the audience interacts with the play. Books like *Ten Billion* (by Stephen Emmott, 2012, p. 787) and *2071* (by Duncan Macmillan and Chris Rapley, 2014, p. 787) teach us a lot about the society we live in. This change starts a new chapter in the lengthy history of how English theatre has interacted with the environment. It turns theatre into a location where people can work together to help the environment (Macmillan and Rapley, 2014, p. 787).

## **4. Case Studies in Eco-Theater**

To comprehend the transformation and impact of eco-theatre on English theatrical traditions, it is imperative to analyse many works and performances that address environmental concepts on both intellectual and practical dimensions. *The Skriker* (1994) by Caryl Churchill, *2071: The World We'll Leave for Our Grandchildren* (2014) by Duncan Macmillan and Chris Rapley, and *Ten Billion* (2012) by Katie Mitchell are all examples of this movement. Every show addresses urgent environmental questions, as it also shifts the form and perception of theater. These works demonstrate how theatre can shift the conversation about the environment by integrating ecological consciousness in its writing, design and overall creative approach (Sheldon, 2016, p. 787).

### **4.1 Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* (1994)**

The “Skriker,” a transmogrifying fairy of English folklore, is the power and fury of nature. Her shattered, lyrical speech is the way that nature’s balance goes awry. This would indicate that language And environment can both collapse. Churchill blends patriarchy and capitalism and hurting the environment from an eco-feminist perspective all together. But the play’s jumbled-up structure and a story that does not run in a straight line demonstrate how messy the world becomes when everything literally falls apart. There’s something unsettling in the very combination of organic materials, distorted acoustics and immersive design, or whatever those all happen to be for a given production; it often has us pondering how unstable the natural world is. Churchill’s plays show what

eco-theatre can do in terms of politically and emotionally intervening, at the level of both form and content, in issues such as aesthetics and action so that consciousness is renewed on an ecological basis (Morton 2007).

#### **4.2 Duncan Macmillan and Chris Rapley's 2071 (2014)**

The World We'll Leave Our Grandchildren is a sort of eco-theater that combines acting out stories with talking about science. The play was written by Duncan Macmillan, a writer, and Chris Rapley, a climate scientist. The first performance was at the Royal Court Theatre in 2014. 2071 is a lecture-performance that uses real data on global warming, carbon emissions, and future climate projections to present a story about climate change through the lens of personal and generational responsibility. The dramatic piece illustrates the use of eco-theatre to educate the audience by merging knowledge of the environment as a science with understanding a deeper emotional connection towards the nature. The minimalist setup with just one performer and visual elements makes the ongoing climate crisis feel much closer and more immediate. Rather than merely observing information, they become engaged in a moral dialogue regarding what the world should become (Sheldon, 2016, p. 788), shattering their ignorance through performance.

#### **5. The Impact of Eco-Theatre**

English eco-theatre is very much influenced by eighties US trends. It has turned the stage into a place where, for people to consider society and the environment as it does here, is natural. Eco-theater gets people to think about what happens when people don't care about the environment by combining themes about climate change, sustainability and how humans relate to nature. It goes past just telling stories the way people usually do, to make experiences that are moral and emotional and educational, helping us know how everything else depends on everything else that's alive. It does this by tapping into new modes of innovation, like the bizarrely local and how we might make things that are eco-friendly. Art and activism engage together, what she is doing partakes of eco-theatre practice that risks changing not just how artists go about it but most importantly how we perceive our environment in naely being neological art. It has brought together artists, scientists and environmentalists to create performances that turn scientific data into human-narrative stories that are accessible and plucking at the heart-strings. In general, such efforts lead to communities with more control over their own destiny and a better quality of life all around including an easier time living sustainably and fighting for the environment. The most significant aspect of eco-theatre is that it has the potential to transform people from passive 'witnesses' into engaged activists in the fight against environmental degradation. This is evidence theatre can engender cultural and ecological regeneration (Wallace, 2016, p. 788).

### **5.1 Theatre as Environmental Education and Activism**

Eco-theatre is also a method of educating the public about science and involving them in community. It changes the conversation about the environment into something more comprehensible, more relevant, more engaging. You can see that educating role in works such as the show 2071, where artists work with scientists to tell stories so lucid and emotionally immediate that they bring home what has to be done about climate change. Eco-theater is eco-activism, too, but it doesn't finish with the stage. There are theatre companies who have made the equivalent leap, and gone green in cutting carbon emissions and teaching people how to live more sustainably reusing materials after shows are over, says Arcola Theatre's *Complicité* and *Theatre in the Mill*. These projects present a full picture of performance, where the way things are constructed matches with the values of the environment. Eco-theater not only teaches people about the environment, but it also shows them how to live in a way that is good for the environment. This shows how to live in a way that is good for the environment in a little way (Wallace, 2016, p. 789).

### **5.2 Transforming Theatrical Aesthetics and Production Practices**

Eco-theater has an effect on how theatres look and what resources they utilise. Theatre has always used a number of things, like producing rubbish, building sets and employing power. Eco-theatre goes against these rules by making sustainability a component of how plays are written and acted out. Eco-theatre transforms what theatre can be by employing recyclable materials to construct sets, energy-efficient lighting, and playing in public or natural spaces. Baz Kershaw's idea of "theatre ecology" claims that performance is an ecosystem made up of energy, resources, and connections that all depend on each other. This change accords with that way of thinking. Companies in the UK like Julie's Bicycle and The Green Theatre Initiative have made these ideas more official by paying for shows that have the least effect on the environment and getting people involved in creative ways. Eco-theatre combines creativity with moral duty to have the rest of the performing arts community think about how it affects the environment (Morton, 2007, p. 789).

### **5.3 Audience Response and Emotional Engagement**

Eco-theater has a tremendous impact on how people feel and think. People who watch the show often claim they feel wonder, sadness, guilt, and strength, which shows how many different feelings occur with being aware of the environment. As Una Chaudhuri states, eco-theater can produce "climate trauma," a so comprehensive understanding of the ecological crisis that produces deep despair in people while also powerfully making them want to change. Not that this kind of feeling is entirely detrimental. Many works reach back and forth between despair and hope to create the holding environments in which solutions to become durable and robust. The interactive segments of *The Skriker* and 2071, as well as post-show discussions, get people to talk to each other, work the

problems out together, allowing the thoughts convert into action. At the core of the eco-theatre potential to transform audience experience is such affective resonance, which transcends cognition to include shifts in drive and behaviour (Sheldon, 2016, p. 790).

#### **5.4 Eco-Theatre as Cultural and Political Intervention**

More than something artistic and a way of teaching, eco-theatre should be a format for people working out culture/politics. It shows how, contrary to the basic principle of capitalism, anthropocentrism and extractivism have a negative impact on the environment. Ecotheater is situated within a larger genre of environmental humanities that utilizes art to raise awareness about natural conservation. This is a wonderful approach to shine a light on climate change and how people must respond to it differently. A pair of works that have influenced the way we discuss climate change and other environmental issues are *Ten Billion* and *2071*. These have been discussed, debated and chewed over through the corridors of schools, colleges and environmental conferences. This suggests that the arts and sciences are increasingly converging to tackle environmental challenges (May 2019).

#### **6. Conclusion**

English-language performance Eco-theatre signifies a move far beyond the old relationship to theatre, the environment and public consciousness. This theoretical approach can not only correct us to stop pretentiously fooling with the nature as the background or a symbolic context, but also brings performing experiences related to ecological crisis to the front of dramatic stage. The spatial arrangement of the actors in horror stages environmental crisis as are language as broken, as testimony as grounded in scientific fact, as expressive through movement or embodied performance, as sound, as address (directly or indirectly) to the constituent audience. This paper has suggested that contemporary eco-theatre makes ecological damage visible, embodied and ethically urgent representation of and response to environmental crisis. The Skriker invokes a sense of ecological anxiety through fragmentation of language, disturbance of mythic continuity, and disintegration of the natural and social order. This idea of generational responsibility informs the material of your recent piece, titled "2071," staged as a lecture-performance about climate crisis, where scientific data is brought into the sphere of personal consequence. Something like a short avant-garde opera, in which a performer urgently discloses her data, and there is no time for reflection between establishment of environmental catastrophe and delivery of empirical evidence blithely offered as an essentially theatrical encounter with the limit of the planet, all happens in *Ten Billion*. Analysis also indicates that ecological consciousness is mediated through particular forms of theatrical queuing. For instance, spatial practices including site-specific or minimal staging mediate the audience to the place or the environment. Sonic and visual elements generate sensory experiences of instability, urgency, or ecological loss. If climate change and intergenerational responsibilities characterize some of these performances, it is the temporal structures that connect present action with future consequences.

Via our address to the audience and the expectation that they will participate, we change spectators from passive observers to ethically implicated witnesses.

Lastly, eco-theatre acts like an environmental communication tool, but pulls theatre back from the trap of being entirely a didactic workshop. Its potency rests in its capacity to afford audiences affective, aesthetic, and ethical experiences through which they can feel, wonder, and re-orient their connection to the natural world, rather than solely in the manner in which it transmits ecological messages. This study, through the literatures of ecocriticism, performance theory, and eco-aesthetics, shows that eco-theatre has the potential to function as cultural critique, environmental communication and ecological imagination in practice. It beckons people to grapple with climate anxiety and to dream up wiser and more sustainable futures.

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