

Going green by stages

Claire Wyatt looks for a scene change in the theatre.

From the Greek classics to the Royal Court, theatre has never fought shy of tackling the pressing political issues of the day. So it's not surprising that some of London's most prestigious West End theatres have signed up to a charter to address climate change.

Orchestrated by mayor of London Ken Livingstone, never one to shun the limelight, the Climate Change Action Plan will see theatres cutting carbon emissions through energy audits, better insulation and energy-efficient lighting. The National Theatre has made a start with its new lighting scheme, which will cut electricity use by 20%, and a tidy £100,000 a year – half the cost of an entire production on its Lyttleton stage.

“We have begun to see the arts sector really taking a lead... in instigating organisational change,” says Sara Weir from Arts Council England, one of the project donors. “Sustainable, energy-efficient practice must become central to our agenda.”

“What alters the imagination alters everything”

But there's still a fair way to go. Although the action plan includes encouraging theatre-goers to use the greenest travel option, no one is yet broaching thorny issues such as ‘tour miles’, wasteful set building, paper for flyers, posters and programmes – not to mention all those imported flowers and bottles of bubbly for the luvvies.

Even then, if theatres were to concentrate only on green housekeeping, they'd be missing a trick. The real value of theatre is as an art form that communicates to people on an emotional level, confronting difficult issues to change behaviour in a way that no science or statistics can. “If you asked a green activist to describe the ideal form of entertainment in 2050,” says director Graham Eatough, “it would resemble theatre: natural comings-together of communities to tell stories, without the wasteful production of artefacts.” Sounds simple enough... until you tot up the carbon footprint of bringing Eatough's international storytellers together in one place. Luckily, his company Suspect Culture uses trains rather than planes.

It is within these small companies that you'll find the truly innovative approaches to sustainability. As history tells us we need to go to the fringes to find out what's really brewing:

- The Arcola Theatre, a signatory of the mayor's action plan aims to become the world's first carbon-neutral theatre. It plans to generate all heat and electricity

on-site with zero net annual CO2 emissions, and to offer sustainability-themed youth and community activities.

- Trashy, a multi-art-form evening run by the Tipping Point collective and the Battersea Arts Centre to confront climate change, came complete with electricity-free cabaret – the audience lighting the set with 100 wind-up torches.
- Cirque Idyllic's touring Cabaret at the End of the World operates on a combination of solar, wind and biofuel, with recycled materials for set and costume.
- Kilter theatre company has taken a holistic approach, creating bespoke shows in response to a chosen site – using only the natural environment as a backdrop, only the materials found there as props. And because these site-specific productions don't then tour the country, they only have a weeny carbon footprint.

When theatre gets it right – by putting its own house in order, and telling the climate change story in a refreshing way – it can be powerful stuff. Robert Butler, of the arts and environment website The Ashden Directory, sums it up perfectly: “The arts mould attitudes in a way that scientific argument cannot. As Ted Hughes wrote, ‘What alters the imagination alters everything.’”

Claire Wyatt is co-founder of theatre company Kilter, and is part of Forum for the Future's Communications Programme.

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