

# Reflections on LTC Artists Climate Lab (September 2018)

## Background

In September, 2018, the network of theatres in the London Theatre Consortium were invited to send artists to take part in the first ever Artists Climate Lab: an LTC initiative which was supported by Arts Council England.

The lab was spearheaded by Dan de la Motte (Young Vic), Lucy Davies (Royal Court) and Ellen McDougall (Gate Theatre), who had completed Julie's Bicycle's Creative Climate Leadership course, and Clare Slater (Donmar Warehouse). The artists who took part had a diverse range of practices including visual art, design, directing, writing, dramaturgy and dance. The aim of the week was to facilitate space for reflection on making art in the context of climate change, and to gain a clearer understanding of how we can respond to this challenge as artists. The participants included Deborah Pearson, Moi Tran, Josh Parr, Holly Race Roughan, Isley Lynn, Abigail Graham, Ruth Sutcliffe, Eleanor Sikorski, Tassos Stevens and Shane Shambhu. It was co-facilitated by Dan de la Motte and Anthony Simpson-Pike, who also worked as the dramaturg for the week.

Throughout the lab guests were invited to visit the lab, which took place at Hawkwood College in Stroud, an ethical centre housed in a historic building run on ecological principles. Amongst the guests who visited the lab were Pete and Jodie Hawkes of Search Party (performance makers), Gayle Chong Kwan (artist), Chiara Biadiali (Julie's Bicycle), Toby Peach (theatre maker), Abhishek Majumdar (playwright/theatre director), Zoe Svendsen (academic and theatre maker), Nii Obodai (visual artist), Polly Higgins (lawyer), and Simon McBurney (Complicite). The range of experience the guests shared with the artists was huge, ranging from family centred activism to changing international law.

We asked the group to reflect on their experience, how the lab had affected their lives and practice. These are some of their responses.

## Testimonials

### *Josh Parr- Director (sponsored by the Young Vic)*

I went into the Artists Climate Lab with all kinds of anxieties, many of them silly and just my own head being a tad mean to me. I didn't know what to expect. If I am being honest, I was just glad to have had the opportunity to be around other artists for a whole week and be allowed the time to have space to think and discuss. Little did I know it would turn out to be one of the most influential experiences of my life.

I was instantly shocked and surprised by the severity of the issue at hand, in my head I was thinking 'where have I been for the past 20 years?' and wondering how none of what I was learning, in that moment, was being taught in schools, when arguably it is the main crises of our planet. Without facing up to Climate Change all other causes will be pointless as there won't be a planet to live on. I was also struck by the intersectionality of Climate Change and how ingrained it is to most of the issues we face as a human race. My mind was well and truly blown. Every night I went to bed grateful for the knowledge which was being passed on to us all in that room.

I think it's important for this to be common knowledge, if people were more aware of this I don't think that there is a chance that governments of countries could continue to ignore the most severe issue we face and would then finally pull their fingers out and do what needs to be done so that we don't all go extinct. Another thing would be the huge Climate Change injustices that go on around the world! We were introduced to the work of Polly Higgins who is an incredible person. She is trying to get a law passed for Ecocide. Ecocide, as I understand it crimes against the planet - Polly is campaigning for it to be passed as the fifth crime against peace. She spoke about small island states that are in grave danger of drowning due to the rising sea levels because their island is barely above sea level. I could not believe it. How had I not seen this all over the news?

The Artists Climate Lab has had a huge effect on me, I'm thinking of ways to be as sustainable as possible when I consume, it's very difficult to be conscious of this 24/7 but nonetheless it's possible. Another thing that came up a lot was

the problems with living and working within a capitalist system and thus living with a capitalist mind frame, this is something that I am going to change in my practice. How do I make work that is less capitalist, looking at it holistically, from the way I work in the rehearsal room to who has access to the shows I am directing?

***Isley Lynn- Writer (sponsored by the Donmar Warehouse)***

When I tell people, I took part in a week-long residential artists' climate lab, they assume it was depressing. I assumed the same when I was invited to attend, to be honest – the kind of depressing for anyone like myself who already cared about Planet Stuff but definitely didn't do enough, and was a bit afraid of being confronted with that. What I didn't expect was that it would be so reassuring. Not that everything will be fine – it really, really won't. But before the consortium I thought I was more ignorant, more misinformed, more naïve than I turned out to be – the week was great at adding to the knowledge I already had, and confirming my understanding about what was at the heart of these issues, and what we need to do to combat them. For example: that individual and communal action is necessary, but that it needs to be directed at power, not at our own sense of guilt for forgetting to compost a tea bag or two.

As a playwright, my instinct is to look for a neat, dramatic story I can tell on stage which communicates my personal takeaways from the week in a way that allows the audience to experience the same journey I felt during my time there (I was particularly happy with how well we took care of each other, and ourselves, during days where every hour was accounted for and crammed full of hard facts and creative thought). I still want to find that story. The most interesting part, though, was being placed in genuine collaboration with people of other disciplines. Again, from a playwriting perspective, I'm often the driver of any project, and the other people in the room are there to serve my "vision". Here there was no such hierarchy, and not a defined time or place with which to share ideas, but more a constant, organic, social cross-pollination which led to some genuinely radical ideas for art which takes this problem by the horns and does something serious with it. We've already found time to meet again and continue scheming, and I can't wait for these relationships to genuinely change the world; I never really believed that art could actually do that, despite everyone in our industry pretending it does.

Now, after a week with these artists focussing their talents on the most pressing subject of our time, I'm starting to come round...

***Abigail Graham- Director (sponsored by the Unicorn Theatre)***

I was told I was going to learn about how to make rehearsal practices sustainable and be given time and space to think about ways in to making work which tackles Climate Change. What I got from the week was much more than that.

Hawkwood exists in harmony with the environment. Their garden is only walled on two sides so as to give back to the land and community. At Hawkwood there is a 400-year old Sycamore tree, it looked a bit bare. 'We trim the 400-year old sycamore to make the roots stronger.' This made me think of our capitalist obsession with growth and how maybe sustainability in life is preferable to growth. In the amazingly bio-diverse organic garden, Bernard the Head Gardener told us 'We stimulate the plants to find what they need.' This made me think that rehearsal rooms are mini ecosystems, how the best work is made when we trust our collaborators and give them what they need to do their jobs well.

On our second day we came up with a way of having discussions that didn't just favour those with loud voices, confident enough to cut people off mid-point. And this changed everything. It meant our space became a fair space. Everyone felt safe to speak. We were active allies. We challenged power. It felt gently revolutionary. I've brought a bit of this into the rehearsal room – just asking that everyone allows people to finish their point, and the person speaking passes the baton when they are done.

Capitalism asks us to ignore how our products are made – how many of us would buy things from our favourite online retailers if we knew the full extent of the exploitative working conditions, pollution and environmental damage our £3 t-shirt costs? So by that logic, would you still applaud a piece of theatre with a left wing feminist message that is made in a right wing patriarchal way? Would you still see work about an indigenous population if you knew that nothing had been done to make sure it was giving more to the community than it was taking?

Climate Change is not a helpful phrase. Climate Justice is more accurate. The direct impact of big corporations exploiting the planet increases emissions which leads to glaciers melting, floods, heat waves, forest fires, droughts, poverty, famine, war and climate refugees; It's the same old colonial bullshit – take from the land and don't worry about the people who live there. Capitalism places more value on the lives of rich and powerful people than it does on others. Climate Justice is an intersectional issue. It affects the poorest and most vulnerable people. The industrialisation of the West has a direct correlation with the suffering of the South. We are an eco-system and eco systems are most valuable and resilient when they are most diverse. With that in mind, I'm trying to be more conscious about where I spend my money – the less I give to big corporations, the less powerful they are. Oh, and I've stopped eating meat.

Capitalist patriarchy is beginning to crack, we are at a unique moment in history. How exciting to be part of the generation that changes things.