

A Review of *Towards an Ecocritical Theatre: Playing the Anthropocene*

By Mohebat Ahmadi

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In *Towards an Ecocritical Theatre: Playing the Anthropocene*, Mohebat Ahmadi offers an in-depth exploration of the intersection between theatre and environmental consciousness. Ahmadi argues that ecocritical theatre allows performance to be used to reflect and respond to our current ecological challenges. This book delves deeply into ecocriticism, examining how theater can not only entertain but also challenge societal norms and stimulate eco-awareness. Throughout the text, Ahmadi skillfully navigates the complex relationship between human activity and the natural world highlighting how theatre has the potential to not only raise awareness about environmental issues but also inspire meaningful change. By deconstructing a range of contemporary theatrical works, Ahmadi demonstrates how different stagings engage with ecological themes, encouraging audiences to consider the role of theatre in addressing environmental crises. Through a rich analysis of various plays and performances, the author convincingly argues that theater has the power to inspire change and promote a more sustainable future.

In Chapter 1, *Where Ecocriticism Meets Theatre in the Era of the Anthropocene*, Ahmadi introduces the concept of ecocriticism and discusses its application to theatre then delves into an examination of the Anthropocene, a concept that emphasizes humanity's impact on the planet and its ecosystems. Through an effective unpacking of this term, we are offered a nuanced understanding of the ways in which human activities have significantly impacted the Earth's ecosystems. Detailed analyses and insightful commentary demonstrate how theatrical performance can provide a platform for grappling with the ethical, social, and ecological implications of the Anthropocene. Ahmadi skillfully connects this idea to theatre, exploring how performance can shed light on pressing environmental issues and encourage audience members to reflect upon their own role in shaping the world. This chapter lays the foundation for the book's exploration of "how theatre is informed by, and informs, problems of scale and agency in an era of human-induced alterations to the environment" (p.3).

In Chapter 2, *Setting the Stage for the Natural Turn and Agential Bodies: Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* and *Far Away**, Ahmadi analyzes both plays through a material ecocritical lens which draws emphasis to their non-anthropocentric perspectives. *The Skriker* explores non-human figures as active agents and the human body as a material entity. Ahmadi

investigates the non-anthropocentric portrayal of earthly life, highlighting the agency of non-human entities in the play within an ecocritical framework. *The Skriker* incorporates the materialist concepts of trans-corporality and toxic bodies which adds the layers of biological, chemical, and environmental components to be considered in the Anthropocene. *Far Away* can be seen as a reflection of the ways in which human societies are intertwined with ecological systems and the consequences of such on the environment. Ahmadi uses both plays to present an ecocritical examination of the intricate web of relationships between human societies and the broader ecological contexts in which they are situated as presented on stage.

Chapter 3, *Setting the Stage for the End of the World: Stephen Sewell's It Just Stopped and Andrew Bovell's When the Rain Stops Falling*, is an exploration of how Australian theatre has reacted to environmental concerns. These plays display denialism and apocalyptic thinking as responses to environmental concerns. Ahmadi asserts, "theatre based on themes of family, nation, and politics can be productively reread from an ecocritical perspective to demonstrate theatre's potential for challenging the presumption that humans are inherently separate from nonhumans" (p. 112). *It Just Stopped* by Stephen Sewell, when interrogated from an ecocritical perspective, examines the intersection between human society and the ecological world showcasing societal disintegration resulting from environmental upheaval. Andrew Bovell's *When the Rain Stops Falling* offers an inquiry of the deep interconnections between human lives and the environment, as well as the ways human actions reverberate through the nonhuman world when interpreted through an ecocritical lens. Ahmadi contends that the urgency placed on ecological factors in these plays removes humans from the center of the focus giving climate change and its impact greater emphasis.

In Chapter 4, *Setting the Stage for Material Expressions Across Planetary Boundaries: E.M. Lewis's Song of Extinction and Chantal Bilodeau's Sila*, Ahmadi demonstrates how both plays allow for balanced storylines between humans and non-humans, moving away from the traditional anthropocentric format of plays. *Song of Extinction* intertwines themes of loss, extinction, and the interconnectedness of all living things human and non-human. This play emphasizes the diversity of life on Earth, while also highlighting the emotional and psychological effects of environmental degradation. "We can refer to these juxtapositions as the play's ecodramaturgical structure. Through its form, the play argues that humans are no longer defined by territorial and geographical criteria but have become planetary citizens with responsibility for conserving the Earth" (p.115). Bilodeau's *Sila* probes the effects of climate change and environmental shifts on both human and non-human communities in the Arctic. Ahmadi outlines how audiences are encouraged to consider the ethical and moral implications of human activities on the natural world through the shifts in ecological thought examined in each work that range from climate change to mass extinction.

Chapter 5, *Setting the Stage for Possibilities of Collaborative Survival: Jordan Hall's A Brief History of Human Extinction and Miwa Matreyek's This World Made Itself and Infinitely*

Yours, Ahmadi reflects on works that move beyond performance and into eco-activism. One such example is the dark comedy *A Brief History of Human Existence* which examines the ways in which human activities have contributed to ecological crises, ultimately leading to the extinction of various species, including humans themselves. Through a combination of animation, projection, and live performance, *This World Made Itself* and *Infinitely Yours* create a unique immersive theatrical experience that explores the natural world and humanity's place within it. Ahmadi's ecocritical focus on the works emphasizes that audiences are prompted toward environmental stewardship and the preservation of the planet's biodiversity through the themes explored in the plays.

The final chapter provides an overview of the book's findings that forward existing ecological frameworks of theatre. By placing emphasis on theatrical works that address environmental concerns and reframing pieces through an ecocritical lens, Ahmadi pushes for theatre to magnify the challenges of the Anthropocene with humans and non-human beings viewed as parallel forces. Ahmadi's framework subverts the current centering of theatre through the human perspective to one that considers and illuminates the non-human world and engagement with the Anthropocene.

Ahmadi's interdisciplinary approach sets this book apart, as she draws from fields such as environmental studies, cultural theory, and performance studies to enrich her argument. This multifaceted perspective adds depth to the discussions, presenting readers with a comprehensive view of the connections between art, ecology, and human existence. By deftly weaving together diverse strands of thought, Ahmadi succeeds in delivering a holistic exploration of ecocritical theatre that is both academically rigorous and accessible to a wide audience. If there's one minor criticism, it would be that some parts of the book may be overly technical for readers without a background in theatre or environmental studies. However, Ahmadi does an admirable job of providing explanations and context throughout the text, ensuring that even those new to the subject can follow along.

Ahmadi's timely and relevant book offers valuable insights into the potential for theatre to act as a catalyst for environmental activism. By examining case studies and real-world examples, she effectively illustrates how theatre can provoke critical dialogue and foster a deeper understanding of ecological issues. In doing so, *Toward an Ecocritical Theatre: Playing the Anthropocene* amplifies the transformative power of art, positioning theatre as a space for envisioning alternative ecological futures instigating social change, and creating a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the natural world.

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