

EPOCH THEATER

The Climate Crisis on the German Stage

Impressum

Epoch Theater: The Climate Crisis on the German Stage

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From *Blue Skies,* Deutsches Theater Berlin. Photography by Jasmin Schuller.

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EPOCH THEATER

The Climate Crisis on the German Stage

A photography exhibit curated by Brendan O'Donnell and Sabine von Mering and produced by the Center for German and European Studies at Brandeis University in Waltham, MA with support from the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and the Heinrich Böll Foundation Washington, D.C.

WELCOME

(A) LOOK AT GERMAN CLIMATE THEATER PRODUCTIONS

Sabine von Mering

At the United Nations General Assembly on September 24, 2026, Nepal's Prime Minister Balendrah Shah, at 36 the youngest head of state, gave an impassioned speech urging the international community to address the climate crisis that had led to the devastating "Himalayan tsunami" four weeks prior. The "death and destruction of epic proportions", he said "was a warning to the world" and that "climate change does not recognize borders'. He reminded the global community that Nepal contributes less than 0.1% of global greenhouse emissions, and that the climate catastrophe it experienced now forces "a poor country to borrow money to fix a problem it did not cause." He called the Himalayas "part of the planet's life support system" and urged wealthier countries who had contributed the most to the problem of climate change to step up and provide not only support for "relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction" but also take responsibility and provide reparation to build resilience "to ensure that disaster does not become a permanent condition."

Heatwaves, wildfires and wildfire smoke, perennial drought, flooding, storm surges, and a looming historic El Niño are real-life reminders that the climate crisis is far from a distant threat. It is here and impacting us all. Despite well-funded efforts to discredit the scientific consensus linking human activity and global warming, it has only strengthened, with more than 99.9% of peer-reviewed studies now affirming that human activity is driving global warming. Yet, according to recent surveys by Yale Program on Climate Change Communications, 65% of Americans rarely or never talk about climate change with their family and friends, and 81% rarely or never hear about it in the news.

Although global warming threatens the essential systems we require to survive on planet earth, it is receiving less attention in 2026 than in years prior. This exhibition of photographs from German theater productions centering on the topic of climate change aims to help change that, because we know that conversations about it are the necessary first step towards awareness, advocacy, and action.

Live theater is far less popular in America than in Germany. Fewer than 10% of Americans regularly attend live stage plays. That figure is significantly higher, around 35-40%, in Germany, where theaters receive public subsidies and most cities and even smaller towns have their standing ensembles. Since Americans can't easily go there, however, we at the Center for German and European Studies at Brandeis University and the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Washington, D.C. thought it would be nice to bring German theater to you. So we emailed theaters in cities all across Germany and asked them to send us photos of productions related to the climate crisis. We had no idea whether we would hear anything back, so were truly blown away when dozens of theaters responded. Due to space constraints we could only incorporate a small number of these powerful images from twelve productions into our exhibit. Additional images are available at the links in our bibliography, and we wish to express our deepest gratitude to all who responded so generously to our request.

Each image in our exhibition represents a frozen moment in a dramatic story about global warming written by an author or a team of authors, and staged between 2020 and 2024 in different cities across Germany. Though they provide merely a glimpse into the totality of German climate theater productions, they give you a sense of its creative breadth and depth and cosmopolitan outlook. Be that through adaptations from Greek drama like Alexander Eisenach's *Anthropos Antigone* or the reimagined Oracle of Delphi in Fink Kleidheu's *Der Nabel der Welt. Where the Eagles Meet* or Johan Simon's version of Spanish-Mexican filmmaker Luis Buñuel's film *Der Würgenengel* and other world premieres like Amir Gudarzi's *Wonderwomb* or Lothar Kittstein's 216 Million. From German productions of translations of American playwrights T.C. Boyle's *Blue Skies* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *We Are The Weather* to Marlene Gmelin and Detlef Schmelz's collectively performed puppet theater *~°C+ Ein paar Grad plus, die Klimakonferenz. Eine Fabel für unser Klima* about a drowning UN Climate Conference in New York City to Simone Sterr's *99 Schritte zum Meer* about the missed chances to rein in climate change despite decades of warnings. There is a lot to see and grapple with.

Our hope is that you will let the production photographs alert you, perhaps haunt you, but most importantly move you to care, because climate theater, as my colleague Tom King writes, is not just about urgent messages. These performances "are also vehicles of transformation, training individuals to rehearse alternative futures in the here-and-now, to engage across their disparate identifications and interests, and to move in a shared direction determined by commitments to solidarity."

Such solidarity is urgently needed now. The United States, still the highest per-capita emitter, is the only one out of 195 signatories to have withdrawn from the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Even the oil-rich gulf states are still committed to the process. Recent years have seemingly buried the climate crisis under a whole host of other crises, from global pandemic to war and threats to democracy. While the climate crisis is interconnected with them all, it has one beautiful advantage: well-known and even affordable solutions. We invite you to learn more about them in the back of this catalogue.

"Now is the winter of our discontent."
"O, for a muse of fire."

- thus begin Shakespeare's historical tragedies *Richard III* and *Henry V,* written during the final decade of the sixteenth century, but these lines could just as easily express the despair and hope of our own moment as we confront the climate crisis in 2026. One of

the many beauties of theater is its universality. It speaks to us all whenever we are. The most famous German play, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) drama 'Faust', does so, too. Its "Vorspiel auf dem Theater", a kind of prelude, opens with a friendly quarrel between an idealist poet, a business-focused producer, and a clown, who argue about the true purpose of theater. While the poet aims to create a sublime work of art, and the clown just wishes to make people laugh, the producer is mainly concerned about the audience and its expectations. He warns "although they aren't used to the best", they "have read an awful lot" and are now "sitting there, relaxing in their seats, with raised eyebrows, expecting to be amazed". Most importantly, he is convinced that people come to the theater above all "to watch…to see", to be captured by the beauty of the staged experience. Which he poses as the challenge the three of them must meet. Whether or not you are someone who is "used to the best" and whether you read a lot or not – we hope you are ready to be captured!

That theatrical performance has an important role to play in people's education has a long tradition in German theater history. Already in 1784, Goethe's poet friend Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805 - you may know him from his 'Ode to Joy') had called the theater a "moral institution" and argued that the stage takes up the sword of justice where secular law fails, using fantasy and history to cultivate empathy, virtue, and emotional intelligence in the audience. As Brendan O'Donnell explains below, in the 20th century, Bertolt Brecht took this idea a big step further. Given that Brecht, who fled Germany in 1933 and spent six years in exile in California 1941-47, is perhaps the name most familiarly associated with German theater in the US today, we decided to organize the exhibition around Brechtian concepts.

Although Bertolt Brecht was one of the earliest and most outspoken antifascist critics of Hitler's National Socialists, and had fled first to Denmark in 1933 and then to the United States in 1941, he eventually returned to Europe following his subpoena by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 to avoid being blacklisted in the US. He settled in East Germany and established the Berliner Ensemble, which is still one of the most prominent German theaters today. Brecht's life thus mirrors our time in multiple ways as well.

While Brecht's understanding of theater involved critical thinking to inspire social change, the poet in Goethe's prelude to Faust was more interested in moving hearts and minds: "That which issues from the heart alone / Will bend the hearts of others to your own". To achieve this, the producer, you could also call him a "showman", urges actor and poet to dream big:

> *"You know, on our German stages,*
> *Everyone tries whatever they like;*
> *So on this day, spare me*
> *Neither the sets nor the machinery.*
> *Make full use of the light of heaven, great and small;*
> *You may lavish the stars;*
> *There is no shortage of water, fire, or rocky cliffs,*
> *Nor of animals and birds.*
> *So, within this cramped wooden theater,*
> *Unfold the entire circle of creation,*
> *And journey with measured haste*
> *From heaven through the world to hell."*

Though Faust does indeed end up in hell at the end of Faust I, Goethe, always ahead of his time, already understood the value of a sequel. In Faust II, the hero ends up in heaven instead, thanks in part to young Gretchen, the girl he had seduced in Faust I, whose spirit intervenes on his behalf. As the Chorus Mysticus concludes: all earthly, transient things are merely symbols of a higher, divine reality, and the "Eternal Feminine" (Das Ewig-Weibliche) leads humanity upward.

Our exhibition of photos from German climate theater productions can't guarantee you a place in heaven, but as you will see, the productions featured here have spared no effort to inspire you to "move heaven and hell" for a better future. They invite you to deep moral reflection, and urge you to dream big: to not be intimidated by the scale of the problem, but to choose to become part of the scaling up of the solutions instead.

I'd like to close with special thanks to my team, especially Sonja Catano, who coordinated the exhibit from start to finish, and to Carina Domat and Katherine Bulthuis, our student assistants, for their help in the outreach phase. Thanks most especially to Brendan O'Donnell for his enthusiastic embrace of this collaboration and to the twelve photographers whose work is featured in the exhibition: Jasmin Schuller (*Blue Skies* at Deutsches Theater Berlin), Felix Grünschloss (*Wir sind das Klima* at Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe), Marlene Gmelin and Detlef Schmelz (~℃+ *Ein paar Grad plus, die Klimakonferenz* of the puppet theater PendelMarionetten in Ingelfingen-Hermuthausen) Matthias Jung (*216 Millionen* at Theater Bonn), Jan Bosch (*Wonderwomb* and *Ilnur Albatros* at Hessisches Landestheater Marburg), Mariann Menke (*99 Schritte zum Meer* of Bremer Shakespeare Company), Armin Smailowic (*Der Würgeengel* [The Angel of Death] of Schauspielhaus Bochum and *Der Schimmelreiter/ Hauke Haiens Tod* at Deutsches Theater Berlin), Giannis Antonoglou and Jennifer Fey (*Der Nabel der Welt. Where the Eagles Meet* of German-Greek Theater Cologne), Jörg Metzner (*Wie ist das Wetter?* of Theater Strahl Berlin), and Katrin Ribbe (*Anthropos Antigone* of Staatstheater Kassel). Thanks also to the team at the Brandeis University library, Mary Calo and Matthew Sheehy, for welcoming us back to their space, and to the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and the Heinrich Böll Foundation for their financial support without which this would not have been possible.

Sabine von Mering, Ph.D., is Professor of German and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Director of the Center for German and European Studies at Brandeis University (brandeis.edu/cges), co-editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Grassroots Climate Activism* (2025) and of the special issue of the journal *German Politics and Society* on "Cultures of Climate Action in Germany" (2026), translator of: *Beginning to End the Climate Crisis. A History of Our Future* (2023), and a long time climate activist with 350Mass.

EPOCH THEATER AT BRANDEIS

Toni Shapiro-Phim

The late historian Howard Zinn wrote in his book The Artist in Times of War that "the arts are the locale for a kind of guerilla warfare in the sense that guerillas look for apertures and opportunities where they can have an effect." The photographs that Brandeis University is privileged to welcome—and the extraordinary theatrical productions in Germany that they present to us—step directly into such openings, and, in some cases, create those openings themselves. They shatter the numbness of a vast crisis.

In doing so, these works of art create possibilities for amplifying the horrific reality of climate change, which is the consequence of human activity, while also inspiring action necessary to confront and counter its violence, as they foster an envisioning of what might be, what could be, and perhaps most urgently, what must be, instead.

For the violence of climate change is upon us. It is affecting our neighbors around the corner and across the globe, and the planet as a whole. We are watching the devastation of this war in real time. Avarice and indifference to suffering are the assailants. The German climate theater pieces to which we are introduced, with their aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, and political potency, invite us to engage with what is before us with compassion and courage, turning an existential catastrophe into something we can see, mourn, and respond to together.

Brandeis University is honored to host an exhibition that asks this of us.

As an institution founded on the conviction that education must be inseparable from social responsibility—and with a deep and enduring commitment to social justice, service, and constructive social impact—we are especially grateful for the opportunity to foreground beauty, intelligence, ingenuity, and community in the face of short-sightedness, cruelty, and greed. Although the arts can be a force in oppression (think of their use by authoritarian rulers, for example), in this exhibition, we highlight art that is advancing a just world.

In closing, I return to the notion of war, and to another quotation. This time, I share an excerpt from the poem "Misnomer" by Denise Levertov:

They speak of the art of war
but the arts
draw their light from the soul's well
and warfare
dries up the soul and draws its power
from a dark and burning wasteland.

Wars, including the climate crisis, deplete, destroy, narrow, and extinguish. The arts here, by contrast, draw upon human capacities to connect, to question, to care and care for, and to imagine and bring into being.

So let us consider how we might, as Sabine von Mering notes above, "in solidarity" face the fear, loss, uncertainty, and exhaustion of this fight. Let us draw resolve not from despair, but from the "light from the soul's well" that the arts of theater and photography offer.

Toni Shapiro-Phim, Ph.D., is Professor and Chair of Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation, and Director of the Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts (in the Center for Community Partnerships and Civic Transformation/COMPACT), at Brandeis University. A cultural anthropologist and dance ethnologist, she is co-editor of both the book *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*, and a special issue of *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* entitled "Listening as common ground: oral history performance for transitional justice." Her many other publications and community-based projects focus on the relationship of the arts to war, genocide, displacement, migration, gender-based violence, and human rights and peacebuilding.



216 Millionen
Staged by: Theater Bonn
Photography: Matthias Jung
Premiere: September 2024

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

EPOCH THEATER: The Climate Crisis on the German Stage

Brendan O'Donnell

This exhibition brings together photographs documenting contemporary theater productions in Germany that engage the climate crisis through the legacy of Bertolt Brecht and the methods of epic theater. Rather than presenting climate change as catastrophe alone or as a distant abstraction measured through graphs, targets, and forecasts, the exhibition approaches climate as a social relation: historical, material, political, and staged.

The selected productions draw from Brechtian strategies not simply as aesthetic references, but as tools for perception. Epic theater sought to interrupt passive spectatorship: to make the familiar appear strange, expose the structures underlying everyday life, and transform the audience from consumers of narrative into observers of systems. Climate change presents a related challenge. We encounter weather, infrastructure, consumption, migration, labor, and extraction, but rarely the systems that bind them together.

Theater photography introduces another kind of interruption. Performance disappears; the photograph remains. Removed from the continuity of dramatic time, gestures, bodies, landscapes, and objects become available to be seen again—and, potentially, seen differently.

The exhibition is organized not chronologically, nor by company or production, but through four "episodes" drawn from principles within Brechtian performance: Interruption, Gesture, Ensemble, and Adaptation. Each proposes a different way of looking at both climate politics and theatrical form.

Interruption draws from the Brechtian break: the refusal of seamless narrative and emotional absorption. These photographs capture moments in which theatrical continuity fractures through projection, direct address, exposed machinery, abrupt shifts in tone, or visible stage construction. Such interruptions echo the disruptions of climate crisis itself, but they can also expose supposedly "natural" systems of extraction and consumption as contingent and constructed.

Gesture focuses on the Brechtian Gestus: the social gesture through which relations of power become legible. Here, the body becomes an archive of climate politics. A posture, a look, a repetitive movement, a collective choreography can reveal forms of labor, precarity, resistance, exhaustion, care, and dependency. Climate change appears not only as environmental condition, but as something inscribed onto bodies and social relations.

Ensemble turns toward collectivity. Against the individualized narratives that often dominate climate discourse, these works foreground coordination, interdependence, and shared presence. Ensemble does not imply harmony; Brechtian collectivity is often unstable, conflicted, and unfinished. These productions instead direct attention toward the infrastructures, institutions, solidarities, and forms of common action through which climate politics takes shape.

Adaptation examines how bodies, landscapes, and institutions reorganize themselves under conditions of environmental transformation. Here, adaptation is not simply resilience or technocratic management, but a lived condition shaped unevenly by power, labor, geography, and historical responsibility. The productions ask who is expected to adapt, under what conditions, and to what.

Across these four episodes, the exhibition asks how theater—and particularly the Brechtian tradition within German performance culture—might help render climate change perceptible as a historical and political condition rather than merely an environmental one. The photographs do not document solutions. They document acts of staging: attempts to make visible relationships that otherwise remain diffuse, normalized, or hidden.

In this sense, the exhibition does not seek immersion. It seeks attention. Like epic theater itself, it invites viewers not only to witness the world, but to recognize that it has been made and, therefore, might be made otherwise.

Brendan O'Donnell is Program Director for Climate & Environment at the Heinrich Böll Foundation Washington, DC.

FOUR EPISODES

Interruption

Gesture

Ensemble

Adaptation

I INTERRUPTION

"Less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality."
Bertolt Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre*

The eye follows the actor. It has been taught to. The story depends upon it. The rest of the stage waits. The painted wall. The rope disappearing into darkness. The tape marking where someone will stand. The stagehand who enters before anyone notices. Nothing is hidden. Only overlooked.

Brecht distrusted a theater that concealed its own making. Not because illusion was dishonest. Because it made history appear as nature. A scene unfolded. The audience watched what happened. Less often, they asked why it happened this way—and whether it might have happened differently.

So he interrupted. A title before the scene. A song that refused the story. An actor who stepped outside the role. Not to stop the play. To stop certainty.

Climate change presents a similar difficulty. Not because it is invisible. Because it rarely appears as climate. It appears as smoke. As floodwater. As a hillside after fire. As a river that no longer reaches the sea. As an insurance policy quietly withdrawn. The event is visible. The relation is not.

Photography slows this moment. The theater interrupts the story. The photograph interrupts the interruption. It refuses to let the moment pass. A gesture remains suspended. A seam in the scenery refuses to disappear. The machinery shares the frame with the actor. Time becomes available for inspection.

Brecht compared the actor to someone describing an accident in the street. The witness does not simply tell what happened. A chair is moved. A hand points. A body changes position. The accident acquires conditions. It ceases to look inevitable.

Perhaps that is all interruption does. Not explanation. Not persuasion. Only this: it restores the possibility that things might have been otherwise.

The photographs gathered here do the same. They do not interrupt the performance. They interrupt our habits of seeing. For a moment—history becomes visible again.

ABOUT THE EPISODE TEXTS
Written and designed by Brendan O'Donnell for *Epoch Theater*, the four Episode texts were created as 16 x 20-inch exhibition panels. The original designs are reproduced on the facing pages; their texts are re-typeset here for readability.





Wir sind das Klima
Staged by: Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe
Photography: Felix Grünschloß
Premiere: October 2021



Blue Skies
Staged by: Kammer (Deutsches Theater Berlin)
Photography: Jasmin Schuller
Premiere: September 2024





Der Schimmelreiter/Hauke Haiens Tod
Staged by: Deutsches Theater Berlin in cooperation with RambaZamba Theater
Photography, this page and opposite: Armin Smailovic
Premiere: April 2024

II

GESTURE

“The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another is what we call the realm of gest.”

Bertolt Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre*

Before anyone speaks, something has already happened. Someone waits. Someone else does not. One body moves toward the center of the stage. Another remains close to the wall. A hand reaches. The answer comes a moment later. The audience has already begun reading. Not the individual. The relation.

A body never arrives alone. It arrives with its work. Its obligations. Its privileges. Its injuries. The weight it carries. The weight it expects someone else to carry. None of these can be photographed. Yet all of them become visible. Not in the face. In the posture. In the distance between two people. In the way one waits while another does not have to.

Climate change is often pictured without bodies. A hurricane seen from space. A glacier retreating. A graph. A satellite image. Necessary images. But incomplete ones.

Climate is measured in the atmosphere. It is lived in the body. In a worker stopping because the afternoon has become too hot. In a child carrying water farther than last year. In someone deciding whether to leave. In someone discovering they cannot.

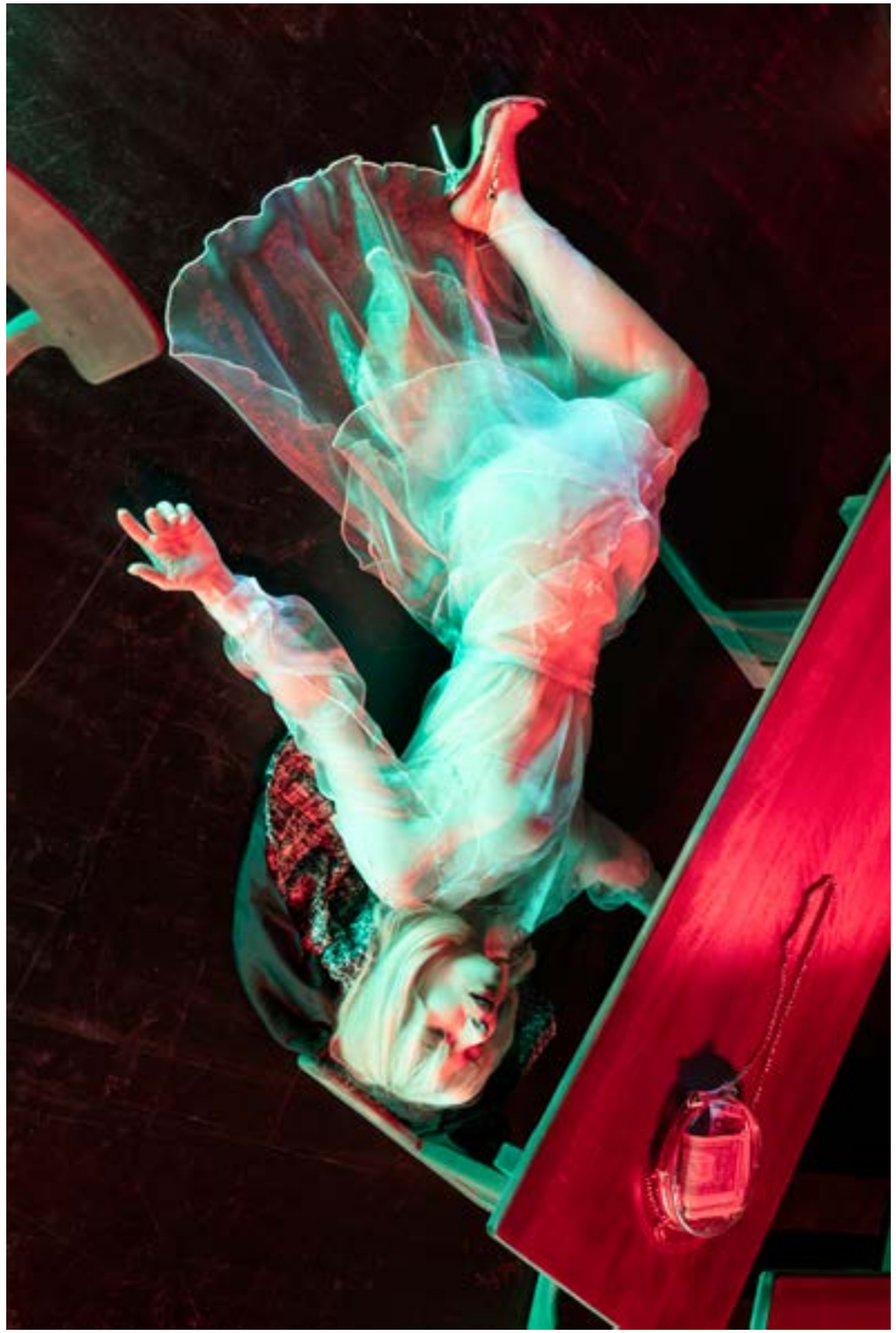
Photography asks us to remain with these moments. Longer than the theater allows. A hand stays raised. A shoulder continues carrying its weight. Two figures remain separated by the same distance. Nothing moves. Everything becomes legible.

Brecht had a name for this. Not the gesture itself. The relation it revealed. *Gestus*. The moment when a society becomes visible through a body. Power has one. Labor has one. Dependence has one. Care has one. So does exhaustion. Defiance. Hope.

The photographs gathered here preserve these moments. Just long enough for them to become readable. Not as portraits. As relations.

If every body carries a history—what history has this body learned to carry?





Der Würgenengel
Staged by: Schauspielhaus Bochum
Photography: Armin Smailovic
Premiere: March 2023



Blue Skies
Staged by: Deutsches Theater Berlin
Photography: Jasmin Schuller
Premiere: September 2024



Der Nabel der Welt. Where the Eagles Meet.
Staged by: German-Greek Theater Cologne
Photography: Jennifer Fey
Premiere: October 2024



Anthropos Antigone
Staged by: Theater Strahl Berlin and IYASA (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe)
Photography: Katrin Ribbe
Premiere: February 2023



~°C+ Ein paar Grad plus, die Klimakonferenz. Eine Fabel für unser Klima
Staged by: PendelMarionetten
Photography: Marlene Gmelin & Detlef Schmelz
Premiere: May 2024

III

ENSEMBLE

“The individual can only be understood within the processes in which he is involved.”

Bertolt Brecht

Before the actor enters, others have already been there. A costume has been stitched. A wall has been built. The lights have already changed. Someone waits in the wings. Someone else will clear the stage before the audience has reached the street. The play belongs to more people than it first appears.

Brecht distrusted the hero. Not because individuals do not matter. Because they explain too little. He asked another question. Who else is on stage?

The answer is rarely found by looking harder at the actor. It appears at the edge of the scene. In the musician waiting for a cue. The carpenter who built the wall. The chorus that has not yet entered. The audience that completes the performance. Meaning does not belong to a single figure. It emerges between them.

Climate change asks the same question. A neighborhood floods. Who else is on stage? The river. The storm drain. The zoning board. The insurer. The engineer. The family that moved there fifty years ago. The family that could not.

Elsewhere, a screen glows. The mine disappears. Copper crosses an ocean. Water cools a machine. A transmission line crosses another landscape. Someone is promised work. Someone else is promised protection.

The eye finds a face. Then another. Then the space between them. Gradually composition replaces character. The photograph becomes less a portrait than an arrangement. Who stands together. Who remains apart. Who has entered. Who has not yet arrived. Who is missing altogether.

The frame keeps expanding. So does responsibility. The ensemble is not harmony. It is dependence. Conflict. Coordination. Absence.

The photographs gathered here do not ask us simply to see more people. They ask us to widen the frame. Until the figure becomes a relation. The relation, an arrangement. And the edge of the photograph no longer looks like the edge of the possible.





Wonderwomb
Staged by: Hessisches Landestheater Marburg
Photography: Jan Bosch
Premiere: September 2022



Der Würgeengel
Staged by: Schauspielhaus Bochum
Photography: Armin Smailovic
Premiere: March 2023



~°C+ Ein paar Grad plus, die Klimakonferenz. Eine Fabel für unser Klima
Staged by: PendelMarionetten
Photography: Marlene Gmelin & Detlef Schmelz
Premiere: May 2024



99 Schritte zum Meer
Staged by: Bremer Shakespeare Company
Photography: Mariann Menke
Premiere: September 2021



216 Millionen
Staged by: Theater Bonn
Photography: Matthias Jung
Premiere: September 2024

IV ADAPTATION

"Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are."
Bertolt Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre*

Every performance changes. A line is spoken differently. A cue comes too early. An entrance is delayed. The audience may not notice. The actors do. The theater has always depended upon adjustment.

Climate change has made adaptation one of the defining words of our time. It sounds practical. Necessary. Almost neutral. A seawall is raised. A house is lifted. A crop is replaced. A neighborhood relocates. The landscape changes. The word remains the same.

But adaptation is never evenly distributed. One shoreline is protected. Another is surrendered. One family rebuilds. Another leaves. One city plants trees. Another loses electricity. Water follows gravity. Displacement follows history.

Brecht distrusted necessity. Not because change could be avoided. Because necessity has a habit of disguising decisions.

A scene is rewritten. Who rewrote it? A character exits. Who asked them to leave? The stage changes. Who moved the scenery?

Climate adaptation asks the same questions. Who decides what will be protected? Who decides what can be abandoned? Who pays? Who waits? Who moves? Who is expected to?

These questions do not begin with the disaster. The shore was already divided. The neighborhood already valued. The infrastructure already built somewhere and withheld somewhere else. Adaptation begins inside arrangements that have histories of their own.

Photography lingers before these arrangements become inevitable. A wall under construction. A home being emptied. A landscape that is no longer what it was and not yet what it will become. The image refuses completion.

Perhaps adaptation is not a destination.

We have become accustomed to asking: How will we adapt? It is an important question. It is not the first one.

Who is being asked to adapt? Who is doing the asking?

Repair begins there. Not with rebuilding. With recognition. Not with recovery. With relation. Not with forgetting. With history.

What has been arranged can be arranged otherwise.





Wie ist das Wetter?
Staged by: Theater Strahl Berlin and IYASA (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe)
Photography: Jörg Metzner
Premiere: May 2023



Anthropos Antigone
Staged by: Staatstheater Kassel
Photography: Katrin Ribbe
Premiere: February 2023



216 Millionen
Staged by: Theater Bonn
Photography: Matthias Jung
Premiere: September 2024



Der Nabel der Welt. Where the Eagles Meet.
Staged by: German-Greek Theater Cologne
Photography: Giannis Antonoglou
Premiere: October 2024



~°C+ Ein paar Grad plus, die Klimakonferenz. Eine Fabel für unser Klima
Staged by: PendelMarionetten
Photography: Marlene Gmelin & Detlef Schmelz
Premiere: May 2024

PRODUCTIONS

The photographs in the preceding Episodes bring works from across German theater into thematic conversation. The following pages return to the productions themselves, offering context for the performances from which these images were drawn.

BLUE SKIES *Based on the novel by T.C. Boyle*

What if the end is closer than we care to acknowledge? And yet no one is paying attention?

Cat and Todd lead a comfortable life in a large beach house in Florida. As a sales rep for a major rum company, Todd travels frequently, making his money at promotional parties where alcohol flows freely—enough to provide Cat, a mostly unsuccessful influencer, with a carefree life. If only it weren't for rising sea levels and increasingly frequent storm surges, which leave ugly rust spots on their Tesla. Cat's brother Cooper, an entomologist in California who is watching his research subjects disappear before his eyes, warns her that things can't go on like this. Ultimately, two tiger pythons in Cat's beach house also play their part in the looming catastrophe, and the inevitable apocalypse becomes a foregone conclusion.

In his novel, T.C. Boyle tells the story of a society caught between a naive "business as usual" attitude and apocalyptic paralysis through the lens of a bicoastal American family. Alexander Eisenach adapts the novel for the German stage—minus the live snakes.

DEUTSCHES THEATER BERLIN
Kammer
Premiere: September 28, 2024

Director Alexander Eisenach
Set design Daniel Wollenzin
Video Oliver Rossol
Costumes Bettina Werner
Lighting Marco Scherle
Dramaturgy Johann Otten

Cast

Mareike Beykirch, Julischka Eichel, Felix Goeser, Manuel Harder, Katrija Lehmann, Alexej Lochmann, Jeremy Mockridge, Evamaria Salcher

Musicians

Sven Michelson, Niklas Kraft

Photography

Jasmin Schuller







"The ship of dreams simply sails on."

"Das Schiff der Träume fährt einfach weiter."

Wir sind das Klima *Adapted from Jonathan Safran Foer, We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*

Can changing what we eat change the climate? Jonathan Safran Foer begins with the everyday act of eating and expands outward, connecting individual choices to industrial agriculture, greenhouse-gas emissions, political institutions, and the difficulty of acting on knowledge we already possess. His argument is deliberately intimate: no single breakfast will save the planet, but ordinary decisions acquire consequence when multiplied across societies.

Patrick Wengenroth and the ensemble turn Foer's self-questioning text into a theatrical conversation. Statistics and argument meet humor, irony, music, contradiction, and the performers' own uncertainties. Rather than presenting personal responsibility as a simple solution, the production places it alongside the structures that shape which choices are possible in the first place.

Between individual action and systemic change lies an uncomfortable space. Wir sind das Klima remains there, asking not simply what one person can do, but how individual gestures gather—or fail to gather—into collective action.

Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe
Premiere: October 15, 2024

Director Patrick Wengenroth
Set design Chris Koch
Costumes Friederike Hildenbrand
Lighting Joachim Grüssinger
Dramaturgy Eivind Haugland

Cast

Ute Baggeröhr, Frida Österberg, Gunnar Schmidt, Thomas Schumacher, Jannik Süselbeck

Musicians

Jiohannes Mittl, Matze Kloppe

Photography

Felix Grünschloß





"The world is waking up. And change is coming. Whether you like it or not."

"Die Welt wacht auf. Und Veränderung ist im Kommen, ob Sie es wollen oder nicht."

~°C+ Ein paar Grad plus, die Klimakonferenz. Eine Fabel für unser Klima

[~°C+ A Few Degrees Above Zero, the Climate Conference. A Fable for Our Climate]

PendelMarionetten
Premiere: May 2024

Direction & Photography
Marlene Gmelin & Detlef Schmelz

New York is disappearing beneath relentless rain. Gondoliers ferry delegates to a UN climate conference while, elsewhere, insects flee landscapes emptied by agriculture and frogs in drought-stricken Sudan discover that their water rights have been sold to a Swiss company. Eventually, the rising water reaches the conference itself.



PendelMarionetten renders climate politics as a fable, using the miniature world of marionette theater to bring together circumstances that usually appear far apart: migration, water, agriculture, corporate power, diplomacy, and ecological loss. The scale is small, but the relationships it reveals are planetary. Humor and absurdity draw the audience into a world whose exaggerations become increasingly recognizable.

Puppets also make agency strangely visible. Their bodies are moved by forces outside themselves; every gesture carries the trace of an unseen hand. In this miniature world of climate politics, the strings are there for everyone to see.







A Long, Successful Journey

The idea for this puppet show originated around 2010. The project description for "~°C+" states: "Climate change is an issue that people tend to ignore. Only occasionally do people pause to reflect and realize that things cannot go on like this—especially when they feel the effects firsthand during a heat wave or a flood. But what can one person alone actually accomplish? Most people lack the imagination to even picture it. In the play ~°C+ a Few Degrees Above Zero, The Climate Conference, small-scale images of a world are created that first amaze and make you laugh, but then leave you with a lump in your throat. We're convinced that this is how we can touch the audience on an emotional and spiritual level and perhaps prompt them to reflect on their own actions."

Wonderwomb

Written by Amir Gudarzi

Hessisches Landestheater Marburg
Premiere: September 17, 2022

Director Eva Lange
Set design Carolin Mittler
Music Katrin Vellrath
Costumes Agathe MacQueen
Dramaturgy Christin Ihle

Cast

Saskia Boden-Dilling, Sven Brormann, Mechthild Grabner, Lisa Grosche, Fanny Holzer, Silvia Schwinger, Ulrike Walther, Mia Wiederstein

Photography

Jan Bosch

Oil is everywhere in *Wonderwomb*: beneath landscapes, inside markets and wars, in roads, mattresses, chewing gum, tankers, money, and finally the sea itself. Amir Gudarzi's play moves among apparently separate events—a tanker attack, financial speculation, ecological destruction, conflict, and displacement—until their connections begin to emerge.

Rather than following a single linear story, the production creates something closer to an oratorio of simultaneity. A chorus of the dead speaks alongside the living; events occurring "here" and "there" become entangled through a substance that fuels both everyday life and global systems of power. Blue becomes black as oil enters the sea, making visible a connection that ordinarily travels through distant supply chains and financial exchanges.

Wonderwomb does not collapse these different places into a single story. It allows them to remain distant while revealing the material that passes between them. What appears to happen elsewhere may already be part of where we are.





"I, Plankton, before death.

He, a shark, before death.

They, dolphins, before death.

We, fish, before death.

We, dinosaurs, before death.

We, having become one—a black unity—after death.

A unity called oil".

"Ich, Plankton, vor dem Tod.

Er, Haifisch, vor dem Tod.

Sie, Delphine, vor dem Tod.

Wir, Dinosaurier vor dem Tod.

Wir, eine Einheit geworden, eine schwarze Einheit, nach dem Tod.

Eine Einheit, Oel genannt."

216 Millionen

Written by Lothar Kittstein

[216 Million]

The title comes from a World Bank projection: by 2050, as many as 216 million people could be internally displaced by the effects of climate change. But *216 Million* refuses to leave displacement as a number. Performers who have found new homes in Germany bring experiences from Afghanistan, Iran, Haiti, and Guinea onto the stage, placing personal testimony alongside a very different spectacle: another international climate conference.

There, politicians, experts, activists, artists, and an oil magnate speak urgently about solving the crisis while becoming increasingly absorbed in their own ambitions and conflicts. Borrowing from Maxim Gorky's *Children of the Sun*, Lothar Kittstein and Volker Lösch juxtapose institutional language with lives already shaped by violence, heat, storms, borders, and exile.

The production turns a projection back into people. In doing so, it shifts the question from what climate change might produce in the future to whose experiences are already permitted to count as evidence in the present.

Theater Bonn
Premiere: September 13, 2024

Director Volker Lösch
Set design Valentin Baumeister
Costumes Flavia Stein
Lighting Max Karbe
Dramaturgy Jan Pfannenstiel

Cast

Sophie Basse, Kayci Feyzi Nadia Feyzi Pizzar Stanley Pierre Alois Reinhardt Imke Siebert Sadou Sow Lydia Stäubli Paul Michael Stieler Daniel Stock

Photography

Matthias Jung





"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights – So begins the Universal Declaration of Human Rights... But what is left of it?"

"Alle Menschen sind frei und gleich an Würde und Rechten geboren – So beginnt die Allgemeine Erklärung der Menschenrechte... Doch was ist davon übrig geblieben?"

99 Schritte zum Meer

Written by Simone Sterr

[99 Steps to the Sea]

A woman inherits a seaside hotel built by her father and attempts to transform it into a climate-neutral inn. The irony is already embedded in the project: the money comes from her husband's work in lignite mining. Around her, different generations imagine different forms of response. Her brother pursues a climate lawsuit before the European Court of Justice; her daughter looks outward toward a global future. Meanwhile, the sea keeps moving closer.

99 Schritte zum Meer places the climate crisis inside a family history. Economic inheritance, environmental responsibility, law, idealism, and everyday survival become difficult to separate. The production begins from an unsettling premise: the problem is not simply that we lack knowledge. Scientists have described the consequences of rising emissions for decades.

The distance named in the title is measurable: ninety-nine steps. Harder to measure is the distance between knowing something, accepting its implications, and allowing that knowledge to change how we live.

Bremer Shakespeare Company
Premiere: September 24, 2021

Director Ralf Siebelt
Set design Heike Neugebauer
Music Jojo Büld
Costumes Rike Schimitschek
Video Matthias Hederer, Iris Holstein

Cast

Peter Lüchinger, Michael Meyer, Petra-Janina Schultz, Markus Seuß

Photography

Mariann Menke

Dinosaurs: *Take it easy, little worm. This landscape right here already existed when we were on our last legs. And that was 65 million years ago. It won't be around much longer, thanks to you and your so-called progress. You might be right. But a little respect for what came before you—and what will exist without you—is certainly in order. The seabed is not simply another landmass that we own in order to extract resources.*

Dinosaurier: *Mach mal halblang Würmchen. Diese Landschaft hier, die gabs schon, als wir in den letzten Zügen lagen. Und das ist 65 Millionen Jahre her. Lange geht das nicht mehr, dank Dir und deinem sogenannten Fortschritt. Geb dir ja Recht. Aber etwas Achtung für das, was vor dir war und ohne dich sein wird, ist schon angebracht.*



Der Würgeengel

[The Angel of Death]

Written by Lothar Kittstein

Written by Lothar Kittstein

Schauspielhaus Bochum
Premiere: March 3, 2023

Director Johan Simonsl
Text Angela Obst

Cast

Moritz Bossmann, Anne Cathrin Buhtz, Marius Huth, Sandra Hüller, Roman Kanonik, Mina Skrövset, Tabea Zoi Sander, Laura Wasniewski, Christopher Bruckman, Alexander Wertman

Photography

Armin Smailovic

In Luis Buñuel's surrealist film, an elegant group gathers for an evening in a villa and discovers, inexplicably, that no one can leave. The doors remain open, yet the guests stay inside. Waiting becomes confinement; hunger, cold, conflict, and scapegoating follow.

Johan Simons takes up this strange situation with a handful of shipwrecked travelers and a great deal of music. The production turns toward a contemporary world in which one crisis appears to follow another—or perhaps the same crisis keeps returning in different forms. As in Buñuel, the obstacle is difficult to locate. There is no locked door, no single force preventing escape, yet the characters remain caught within a pattern they seem unable to break.

Der Würgeengel searches for an interruption to that repetition. Its unsettling possibility is that what holds us in place may be most powerful precisely when we cannot quite see it.





"What, then, are the invisible barriers that prevent us, against our better judgment, from taking action against climate warming, war, and other crises?"

"Was sind denn die unsichtbaren Schranken, die uns wider besseres Wissen hindern, gegen Klimaerwärmung, Krieg und andere Krisen tätig zu werden?"

Der Nabel der Welt. Where the Eagles Meet

Written by Fink Kleidheu

German-Greek Theater Cologne
Premiere: October 4, 2024

Director Kostas Papakostopoulos
Set design Zezo Dinekov
Composer Tasos Stamou
Lighting Tasos Stamou
Costumes Zezo Dinekov
Makeup Birgit Riedl
Graphic Design Andreas Tsortanidis
Video John David Seidler

Cast

Lisa Sophie Kusz

Photography

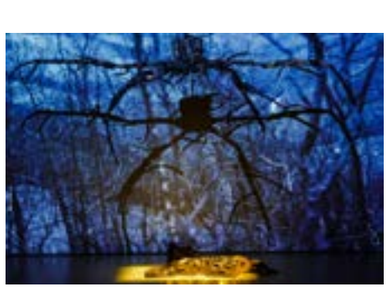
Giannis Antonoglou & Jennifer Fey

Pythia, the ancient oracle of Delphi, has seen the future before. Now she arrives in Germany as a climate refugee, fleeing the fires of her Greek homeland. The prophetess who once interpreted the will of the gods confronts a contemporary world of extreme heat, wildfire, flooding, and ecological instability—and a civilization that has accumulated extraordinary knowledge without necessarily becoming better at listening.

Drawing on Fink Kleidheu's text and research undertaken in Greece's fire-damaged Evros region, the production combines performance, video, and music. Myth and documentary material share the stage. Pythia's prophetic voice becomes at once ancient and contemporary, tragic and cynical, looking backward across millennia while speaking from a possible future.

The oracle once gave form to what could not yet be known. Here, the signs are already around us. The uncertainty lies less in what is coming than in what we do with what has already been seen.





"In search of answers, we turn to what was once the 'navel of the world'... but from the silence over the land, nothing remains but the crackling of the fires."

"Auf der Suche nach Antworten wenden wir uns an den damaligen ‚Nabel der Welt'... doch von der Stille über dem Land bleibt nur das Prasseln der Feuer."

Anthropos Antigone

Written by Alexander Eisenach

Creon has a plan for humanity's future: reconstruction, growth, geoengineering, and the continued extraction of the planet's resources. Antigone refuses. In Alexander Eisenach's reworking of Sophocles, the ancient conflict between state law and a law understood as older and more enduring becomes a struggle over the seabed, deep-sea mining, and humanity's claim to dominion over the Earth.

Created in cooperation with scientists and research institutions, *Anthropos Antigone* places scientific knowledge within the structure of tragedy. The production asks what happens when evidence is abundant but political action remains inadequate—and when resistance begins to challenge not only particular decisions but the legitimacy of the rules themselves.

Sophocles' Antigone insists that Creon's authority has limits. Eisenach extends those limits beyond the human community, toward obligations that may precede our laws, exceed our lifetimes, and belong to beings, landscapes, and futures that have no voice within our political institutions.

Staatstheater Kasselr
Premiere: February 4, 2023

Director Alexander Eisenach
Set design Daniel Wollenzin
Video Oliver Rossol
Costumes Lena Schmid
Music and Sound Sven Michelson
Lighting Oskar Bosman
Dramaturgy Katja Prussas

Cast

Lisa Natalie Arnold, Clemens Dönicke, Sarah Franke, Hagen Oechel, Emilia Reichenbach, Sandro Šutalo

Photography

Katrin Ribbe





"The seabed is not simply another landmass that we own in order to extract resources.

The seabed is our soil, and this soil is not mining territory.

This soil holds the remains of those who lived millennia before us.

We are part of them. Our future grows out of their past. Eternity dwells here."

"Der Meeresboden ist nicht einfach eine weitere Landmasse, die wir besitzen, um Ressourcen abzubauen.

Der Meeresboden ist unser Boden, und dieser Boden ist kein Bergbaugebiet.

Dieser Boden birgt die Überreste derer, die Jahrtausende vor uns lebten.

Wir sind ein Teil von ihnen. Unsere Zukunft erwächst aus ihrer Vergangenheit. Hier wohnt die Ewigkeit."

Der Schimmelreiter/Hauke Haiens Tod

[The Rider on the White Horse/The Death of Hauke Haien]

Adapted from Theodor Storm by Andrea Paluch & Robert Habeck

What if we could become archaeologists of our own present? Wienke Haien searches through the remains of that present for the story of her father, Hauke—the legendary Schimmelreiter, swallowed by the sea with his white horse. Cars might resemble sarcophagi; parking garages, cemeteries. Familiar objects become strange when viewed from a future that no longer understands the world that produced them.

Jan-Christoph Gockel brings Theodor Storm's nineteenth-century novella together with Andrea Paluch and Robert Habeck's later reimagining, allowing different historical moments to look at one another across the stage. The story of a man attempting to master water and landscape becomes a way of examining human foresight, technological confidence, memory, and hubris.

Adaptation here does more than update an older story. It changes the direction from which the present is viewed. Seen as if it had already become history, our own world—and the assumptions built into it—begins to look unfamiliar.

Deutsches Theater Berlin in cooperation with RambaZamba Theater
Premiere: April 26, 2024

Director Jan-Christoph Gockel
Set design Julia Kurzweg
Costumes Sophie du Vinage
Lighting Robert Grauel
Puppetry Michael Pietsch
Music Anton Berman
Video Eike Zuleeg
Dramaturgy Johann Otten, Bernd Isele

Cast

Mareike Beykirch, Manuel Harder, Franziska Kleinert, Hieu Pham, Michael Pietsch, Zora Schemm, Komi Mizrajim Togbonou, Sebastian Urbanski, Almut Zilcher

Musicians

Anton Berman, Moritz Höhne

Photography

Armin Smailovic





"Hauke Haien built a dike so that the village is safe from the water. Then he drowned. His daughter Wienke Haien wants to know why. She asks herself: Is there a murderer here?"

"Hauke Haien hat einen Deich gebaut, damit das Dorf vor dem Wasser sicher ist. Dann ist er ertrunken. Seine Tochter Wienke Haien will wissen wieso. Sie fragt sich: Gibt es hier einen Mörder?"

Wie ist das Wetter?

[How is the Weather]

Written by IYASA & Ensemble

Theater Strahl Berlin and the IYASA theater ensemble from the School of Arts in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe
Premiere: June 15, 2023

Director Anna Vera Kelle
Set design Andreas A. Straßer

Cast

Nqobizitha Ncube, Dorcas Ngwenya, Natascha Manthe and Justus Verdenhalven

Photography

Jörg Metzner

Two cheerful Berlin radio hosts are discussing showers, coffee, and the morning routine when another broadcast breaks through. It comes from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, where the presenters report a very different everyday reality: no water has come from the tap for three weeks.

Created jointly by Theater Strahl Berlin and the IYASA ensemble in Bulawayo, *Wie ist das Wetter?* (How is the Weather?) uses the form of a live radio broadcast to place two locations—and two experiences of a changing climate—alongside one another. The production does not collapse those experiences into a single universal story. Instead, the broadcasts interrupt each other. What seems ordinary in one place becomes newly visible when heard from another.

Climate change may be planetary, but it is never experienced from a single position. Berlin and Bulawayo occupy the same theatrical frequency without becoming the same place. Between them, the apparently simple question “How is the weather?” begins to ask something much larger.



“We don’t have a ‘Planet B’. In the end, one thing is crystal clear: climate change affects us all.”

“Wir haben keinen ‚Planet B‘. Am Ende wird eins sonnenklar: Klimawandel betrifft uns alle.”

Ilnur Albatros. Ein Naturschauspiel

[Ilnur Albatross. A Nature Drama]

Written by Katharina Cromme

Hessisches Landestheater Marburg
Premiere: March 2, 2024

Director Thessa Wähmann
Set & Costumes Phin Mindner
Music & Dramaturgy Ia Tanskanen

Cast

Faris Saleh, Mia Wiederstein, Marie Wolff

Musicians

Anton Berman, Moritz Höhne

Photography

Jan Bosch

Albatrosses are accomplished long-distance travelers, but they are also remarkably devoted companions. They even have a talent for belly landings. Young Ilnur, however, still has much to learn about love and the world beyond the nest. Encouraged by his parents and helped by two unusual, featherless creatures, Mensch and Rahel, he sets out to discover what lies beyond home.

Along the way, Ilnur encounters a turtle named Suppenschüssel (Soup Bowl), curious fish, a troublesome pair of seagulls, and whales that resemble islands. Each encounter offers a different perspective on the world and the relationships that sustain it. Even when his companions and parents are far away, their presence remains with him. Home, Ilnur discovers, is something living creatures carry with them.

But another presence is spreading through the ocean: plastic. It accumulates in the water and in the bodies of the animals who live there, threatening the world Ilnur is only beginning to know. Through his adventures, the young albatross discovers a world shared by animals, plants, and people, and the responsibility they have to protect it.



“Can you tell the other humans that everything feels and wants to live?”

“Kannst du den restlichen Menschen erzählen, dass alles fühlt und leben möchte?”

ESSAY

THE CLIMATE HAS NO STAGE

Brendan O'Donnell

A theater photograph is an uncertain kind of document. It records something that happened, but not quite the thing itself. The performance has disappeared—the movement, the voices, the audience, the sequence of events that made one moment lead to another—and what remains is a fraction of a second in which actors, scenery, light, and objects have been separated from the time that once held them together.

This is usually understood as a limitation. Anyone who has tried to reconstruct a performance from photographs knows how much they fail to contain, yet their incompleteness may also be what makes them interesting. Once removed from the performance, details that once served the story begin to acquire lives of their own: a landscape no longer disappears when the scene changes; a body remains in an improbable position; materials intended to become something else—fabric into water, timber into forest, light into weather—have time to become visible again as themselves. Sometimes we see the forest. Sometimes we see the plywood.

The photographs in this exhibition introduce an additional difficulty, since they come from theatrical productions concerned, in very different ways, with climate change and environmental transformation—subjects that have become extraordinarily visible while remaining strangely resistant to representation. We can photograph their consequences with extraordinary precision, but the photographs rarely contain the processes that produced them. A burned forest shows what happened there; it cannot show the carbon accumulated in the atmosphere, the infrastructures through which it arrived, the political decisions that sustained them, or the uneven histories that determine who is most exposed to what follows.

No image contains the history of what it depicts. Climate change simply makes that incompleteness unusually difficult to ignore, because its causes and consequences so rarely occupy the same place or even the same time. What is extracted in one landscape becomes energy or material in another; an emission lasts longer than the decision that produced it; a benefit may be enjoyed by people who never encounter its eventual cost. Even the atmosphere, the thing we most readily imagine as shared, does not distribute its consequences evenly.

So there is something slightly improbable about looking for climate change in the theater. A stage does almost the opposite: it brings things together. People, objects, events, and times that belong elsewhere are placed within a bounded space and asked, temporarily, to constitute a world. The forest fits inside a building. A century passes before the lights come up. A distant catastrophe occurs a few meters from the audience. The stage does not eliminate distance so much as make an agreement with us about it: for a little while, this will stand for somewhere else.

The agreement can be remarkably flimsy. A few boards become a house. Cloth becomes water. Smoke becomes weather. Someone walks onstage and becomes Antigone. We know that the forest is not a forest and, for a time, it is one anyway.

Bertolt Brecht understood both the pleasure and the danger of this capacity. He was less troubled by theater's artificiality than by its ability to make the artificial appear inevitable. Place something onstage, give it sufficient context, allow the actors to behave as though it belongs there, and very quickly it does. Social arrangements can acquire the same apparent naturalness; what was made through history begins to look simply like the way things are.

Brecht's exposed mechanisms, shifts of address, songs, titles, and deliberately unsettled performances preserved a small distance between what exists and the feeling that it had to exist. The familiar was not made unfamiliar merely for the pleasure of strangeness; it was given back some of its contingency.

This is where Brecht begins to seem unexpectedly close to the problem of climate change. A road, a port, a power plant, a particular way of moving or producing or consuming: each is historical, but each can acquire the quiet authority of something that simply belongs to the world.

A stage can be rearranged overnight. History cannot.

To notice that something has been constructed is not to discover that it can easily be dismantled. What appears necessary may have a history, and knowing that history changes, however slightly, the terms under which the present can be imagined.

Walter Benjamin was particularly interested in the moment when an action in Brecht's theater is stopped and, by being stopped, becomes newly available for attention. Something that would ordinarily disappear into the movement of a story is briefly separated from it. It has not necessarily become clearer; it has simply ceased, for a moment, to be carried forward by what happens next.

A photograph of theater performs a particularly strange version of this interruption. It arrests something that was already an arrangement, preserving a world constructed precisely in order to disappear. The actor remains caught within a role that is no longer being

performed; the landscape remains after the dramatic world that required it has vanished. The photograph preserves the illusion and exposes it at the same time.

A theatrical forest makes no claim to being a forest, yet the photograph allows us to move uncertainly between tree and representation, landscape and scenery, environment and construction. It would be too easy to say that the artificial forest reveals that every landscape is constructed; clearly it does not. Trees grow without us.

But the ways landscapes become valuable, expendable, protected, extracted, or remembered are inseparable from human arrangements. A river remains a river while also becoming a border, a reservoir, a transportation route, a habitat, a commodity, somebody's home. These meanings do not replace one another. They gather.

A stage covered in water is not a flood. A performer standing in smoke is not someone whose home is burning. There is reason to maintain these distinctions, particularly



Blue Skies
Staged by: Kammer (Deutsches Theater Berlin)
Photography: Jasmin Schuller
Premiere: September 2024

when images of catastrophe circulate so easily and suffering can become visual material detached from the people who experience it.

And yet resemblance does something.

A piece of fabric can become a river without asking us to forget that it is fabric. Things can approach one another without becoming the same.

Photography makes those relations stranger because it removes them from the performance that once explained them. Years later, the person in the image may no longer appear primarily as the character they were playing, and the set may no longer be encountered as the place named in the program. A hand reaches toward something outside the frame. Smoke hangs around longer than smoke should. The photograph has not forgotten its origin, exactly, but it has acquired a certain freedom from it.

Benjamin understood something about this freedom. His unfinished Arcades Project assembled history from architecture, commodities, scraps of language, observations, and quotations—things brought into relations their original circumstances had not anticipated. He called certain such arrangements constellations.

The word is attractive partly because a constellation does not abolish distance. The stars we imagine as belonging together may be separated by enormous expanses and have no material relation to one another at all. Their shape appears from somewhere else. Change the position of the observer and the arrangement changes with it.

An exhibition is a constellation of this kind, although one made deliberately and therefore carrying its own risks. Photographs taken in different theaters and different years, from productions that never imagined one another, are brought into proximity. Relations appear that were not present when the photographs were made.

We should remain a little suspicious of those relations. Constellations belong to observers. The stars do not draw the figure between themselves; we do. Curating can discover affinities, but it can also manufacture them. The desire to find climate everywhere risks turning every landscape, body, or image of water or fire into confirmation of something we already know.

The photographs are not always so cooperative. Some are funny. Some are beautiful in ways that have little interest in environmental instruction. Some are opaque. Some simply look good. They remain stubbornly attached to particular performances, bodies, accidents, and aesthetic decisions. Their value does not depend upon their willingness to

become evidence.

Art has often been assigned a rather dutiful role in climate discourse: to take knowledge produced elsewhere and make it felt. Numbers become stories, projections become images, scale becomes intimate. There is important work in this. But it assumes that knowledge has already been completed before the artist arrives.

Theater is not always so cooperative either. It exaggerates, invents, misunderstands, seduces. Photography adds another problem: it takes the whole unruly thing out of time.

None of this makes art a better way of knowing. It makes the question of what art knows considerably more interesting.

By the time we encounter these images, the performances have ended, the circumstances surrounding them may have changed, and the climate itself has continued changing. A future imagined onstage may have moved closer; an anxiety that once appeared speculative may have become ordinary. A joke may have become less funny, or perhaps more so. The photograph has remained still while the meaning around it has moved.

For Benjamin, the past was not simply a sequence of completed events receding behind the present. Images and fragments could become legible differently at different moments; something overlooked could suddenly acquire urgency because the present had changed around it.

A theater photograph may be less an archive of what a performance meant than an opportunity for such an encounter. Its makers could not entirely determine what later viewers would see, just as we cannot know what another viewer might find in it years from now. We look backward at images made before events that now alter how we understand them, while looking toward conditions we can model with remarkable sophistication but cannot yet remember. The present becomes a peculiar meeting place between anticipated futures and newly legible pasts.

Neither theater nor photography can give climate change a form adequate to its scale. Perhaps no form can. But adequacy may be the wrong ambition. A frame does not have to claim that nothing exists beyond it. A stage does not have to pretend that the world ends at its edge. An exhibition does not have to assemble its fragments into a whole. It can hold them near one another for a time.

Brecht and Benjamin are useful companions here without needing to determine where the looking leads. Brecht draws attention to the moment when an arrangement begins to



216 Millionen
Staged by: Theater Bonn
Photography: Matthias Jung
Premiere: September 2024

masquerade as necessity; Benjamin to the unexpected life of things separated from the histories that once appeared to contain them. Neither offers a theory of climate change. It would be a mistake to make one for them.

And still, a photograph remains remarkably small.

Perhaps that disproportion is worth preserving. There is a temptation, when confronting something as large as climate change, to demand correspondingly large forms: planetary images, comprehensive models, global narratives. We need these. But there may also be value in staying with something partial long enough to notice that it does not contain what we want from it.

A person occupies part of a theatrical landscape. We do not know what was said before the shutter opened or what happened immediately afterward. Beyond the frame, another actor may be standing only centimeters away. A cable runs somewhere we cannot see. Someone built the wall. Someone will take it down. The photograph does not apologize for any of this. It simply ends, while beyond that ending things continue.

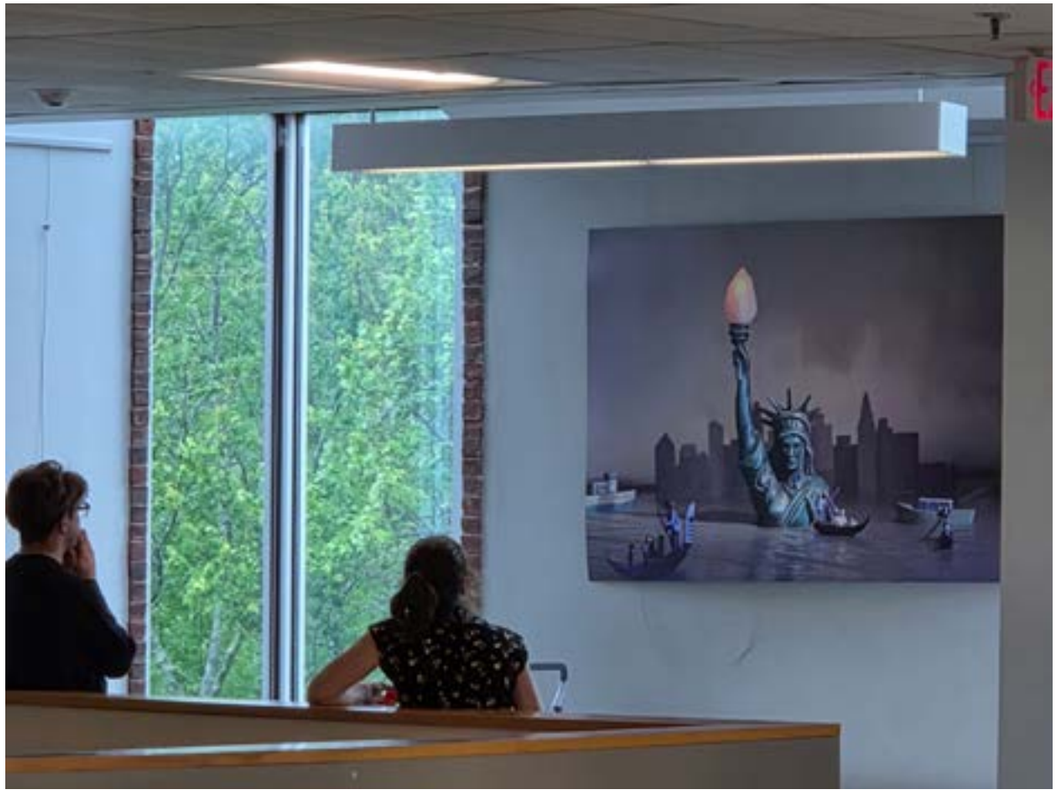
There is a temptation to imagine that enough distance might eventually give us the whole. From the back of the theater we see the stage; from above we see the landscape; from a satellite we see the storm; from a model we see the atmosphere changing across decades. Each widening of the frame reveals something the smaller one could not, while suggesting, perhaps, that somewhere there is a position from which all these partial views might finally resolve.

But the position keeps moving.

The photographer was somewhere. The audience was somewhere. We are somewhere now. And climate change, unlike the worlds constructed on these stages, does not remain before us. It passes through the institutions that exhibit these photographs, the cities in which we encounter them, the materials from which they are made, and the lives we return to when we leave.

Perhaps this is where the stage finally gives way—not because the world is too large to fit upon it, but because there is no position entirely outside the scene.

We are looking from within.



Epoch Theater

The Climate Crisis on the German Stage

Farber Library Mezzanine at Brandeis University
415 South Street, Waltham, MA 02453

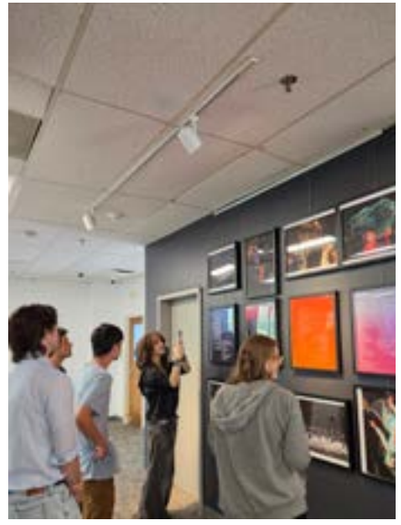
Fall 2026

Opening August 19, 2026

Curation Brendan O'Donnell and Sabine von Mering

Exhibition Administration Sonja Catano

Additional exhibition-related events and webinars available at https://www.brandeis.edu/cges/



Take Action to Protect Our Climate

Here are a few ways to get started.

In Germany

Fridays for Future
https://fridaysforfuture.de/

GermanZero
https://germanzero.de/mitmachen

NABU (Naturschutzbund Deutschland e.V.)
https://www.nabu.de/

BUND (Der Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland)
https://www.bund.net/

Vostel
https://vostel.de/blog/umweltschutz-projekte/

Ökologische Freiwilligendienste
https://www.bundesumweltministerium.de/buergerservice/bildung/oekologische-freiwilligendienste

In the United States

Third Act
https://thirdact.org/

350.org
https://350.org/

Citizens' Climate Lobby
https://citizensclimatelobby.org/

Moms Clean Air Force
https://www.momscleanairforce.org/

Extinction Rebellion
https://rebellion.global/

Mothers Out Front
https://mothersoutfront.org/

Further Reading & Resources

German Resources

Claudia Kemfert et al., *Unlearn CO2. Zeit für ein Klima ohne Krise*. (Ullstein, 2025)

Friederike Otto, *KlimaUngerechtigkeit. Was die Klimakatastrophe mit Kapitalismus, Rassismus und Sexismus zu tun hat*. (Ullstein, 2023)

Wie Theater zum Klimaschutz beitragen, und warum Du das auch kannst (2026). https://www2.theapolis.de/de/news/2843-wie-theater-zum-klimaschutz-beitragen-und-warum-du-das-auch-kannst

Theater verbindet Welten. https://www.engagement-global.de/de/theater-verbindet-welten-kunst-fuer-eine-klimagerechte-zukunft

Die Mimosen. https://www.theater-die-mimosen.de/umwelt-klima-natur-in-szene

German Resources Available in English

Maja Goepel, *Rethinking Our World. An Invitation to Rescue our Future*. (Scribe, 2023)

Karen Hamann et al., *The Psychology of Collective Climate Action: Building Climate Courage*. (Routledge, 2025)

Luisa Neubauer, Alexander Repenning: *Beginning to End the Climate Crisis. A History of Our Future* (Brandeis University Press, 2023)

More About Art and Climate Change

Chantal Bilodeau: Ten Short Plays about the Climate Crisis. (2025)

Maja Fowkes, Reuben Fowkes, Art and Climate Change. https://www.thamesandhudsonusa.com/books/art-and-climate-change-softcover

Madeline Meyer: "From Blackbox to Proscenium. How Theatre Can Address Climate Crisis." https://medium.com/sustainability-depaul/from-black-box-to-proscenium-how-theatre-can-address-climate-crisis-1145ec5fd80b

Theatre Without Borders. https://theatrewithoutborders.com/climate-lens/

Climate Change Theatre Action. https://www.climatechangetheatreaction.com/about/

Other Resources

Kai Heron et al, Radical Abundance. *How to Win a Green Democratic Future*. (Pluto Press, 2025)

Ayana E. Johnson, Katherine Wilkinson: All We Can Save. https://www.allwecansave.earth/

Bill McKibben, *Here Comes the Sun*. (W.W. Norton, 2025)

Sabine von Mering et al., *Routledge Handbook of Grassroots Climate Activism* (Routledge, 2025)

Sarah Wilson: *I eat the Stars. How to live fully and beautifully in a collapsing world.* (2026) https://sarahwilson.com/ieatthestars/

Irreplaceable.org. https://irreplaceable.org/

Join the Shift.Earth. https://jointheshift.earth/

National Emergency Briefing (UK). https://www.nebriefing.org/

Project Drawdown. *https://drawdown.org/*

Vice President Al Gore's Climate Reality Project. https://www.climaterealityproject.org/

Podcasts

Climate Actually. https://www.climateactually.com/

A People's Climate. https://www.thenation.com/content/peoples-climate/

Much Ado About Climate Change. https://www.americaadapts.org/

Documentary Films

Robert Kenner: *Merchants of Doubt* (2014)

Cyril Dion, Melanie Laurent: *Demain/Tomorrow* (2015)

Fisher Stevens: *Before the Flood* (2016)

Damon Gameau: *2040* (2019)

Jim Rakete: *Now. If You Fail, We Will Never Forgive You* (2021)

Rich Felgate: Finite. *The Climate of Change* (2022)

Abby Martin: *Earth's Greatest Enemy* (2026)

Sara Dosa: *Time and Water* (2026)

Ändere die Welt: sie braucht es!

Change the world: it needs it!

Bertolt Brecht

Die Maßnahme [The Measures Taken] (1930)

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