

# WHAT THEATRE CAN DO ecOLOGICALLY

THOUGHTS ON THE empathic  
ecOCRITICAL DIMENSION OF PLAYTEXTS

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides a critical awareness of a major controversy at the intersection of ecology and theatre, namely the notion that the theatre medium is inherently anthropocentric, due to its primary focus on human subjects and culture, and its use of the environment as a secondary player or mere background. By probing into a work of the dramatic canon not associated to ecology in normative terms (*The Homecoming* by Harold Pinter, 1964), and a contemporary work that directly addresses climate change (*Lungs* by Duncan Macmillan, 2011), the article reveals how they both contribute towards the ethical–political–aesthetic dimension of ecology suggested by ecophilosopher Félix Guattari.

## KEYWORDS

Ecocriticism, Ecophilosophy, Ecodramaturgy, Canonical Theatre, Landscape Theory

## RESUMO

Este artigo oferece uma reflexão crítica sobre uma importante controvérsia na confluência entre a ecologia e o teatro, nomeadamente a noção de que o meio teatral é inerentemente antropocêntrico, devido ao seu enfoque na cultura e sujeitos humanos, e na sua utilização do ambiente como ator secundário ou mero pano de fundo. Ao investigar uma obra do cânone dramático não associada à ecologia em termos normativos (*The Homecoming* de Harold Pinter, 1964) e uma obra contemporânea que aborda diretamente as alterações climáticas (*Lungs* de Duncan Macmillan, 2011), o artigo revela como ambas contribuem para a dimensão ético–político–estética da ecologia sugerida pelo ecofilósofo Félix Guattari.

## PALAVRAS–CHAVE

Ecocrítica, Ecofilosofia, Ecodramaturgia, Teatro Canónico, Teoria da Paisagem

# WHAT THEATRE CAN DO ECOLOGICALLY

## THOUGHTS ON THE EMPATHIC ECOCRITICAL DIMENSION OF PLAYTEXTS

In the past thirty years, we have witnessed a significant advance of ecotheatre through many plays written and produced on environmental topics, as well as the rise of ecoactivist performances in a number of forms. This was likely prompted by Erika Munk's plea in a special issue of *Theater* (1994), when she challenged playwrights and theatre critics to approach ecological concerns, decrying their "silence on the environment as a political issue" and their "neglect of the ecological implications of theatrical form" (5). With the launching of a "green theatre" movement, a heated debate on terminology ensued, over concepts ranging from "ecotheatre", "ecoperformance" and "ecodramaturgy" to "interspecies performance" and "climate theatre" (May, 2022: 131). In spite of these developments, the theatre medium is still considered inherently anthropocentric, due to its primary focus on human subjects and culture, and its use of the environment as a secondary player or mere background, both in playtexts and performances. Compared to other art mediums, as Carl Lavery (2016: 231) remarks, "theatre's long obsession with the *anthropos*, with expressing the human psyche in dialogue form" has led environmental thinkers to dispute its ecological value.

Considering our current awareness of the deep interconnectedness between environmental and social configurations, I want to challenge this notion by revealing how we can discover an ecophilosophical dimension in virtually any theatre text/performance. As David Harvey (1993: 25) argues, "All critical examinations of the relation to nature are simultaneously critical examinations of society," and therefore all "socio-political projects are ecological projects," because "some conception of 'nature' and 'environment' are omnipresent in everything we do". Hence, in terms of the theatre medium, I argue that works that are not directly concerned with current ecological issues in the strict sense, because they apparently deal merely with social and interpersonal relations, are always and nevertheless ecocritically positioned. In the same manner, ecotheatre works that explicitly address ecological issues, perform/enact and evoke particular social, macro- and micropolitical perspectives. In Harvey's (1993: 25) words, "ecological arguments are never socially neutral any more than socio-political arguments are ecologically neutral".

A main question in this debate is whether ecology denotes a branch of knowledge that strictly deals with organisms relating to one another and to the biophysical environment in which they live, or else can be understood in a transversal interdisciplinary sense that situates our social-political-economic lived experiences and actions in ecological terms. In this sense, I want to invoke Félix Guattari's (1995: 119-20) suggestion that we need to link *environmental* ecology to social ecology and to *mental* ecology, so as to articulate an "ecophilosophy" or ecocentric ethics:

The ecological crisis can be traced to a more general crisis of the social, political and existential. The problem involves a type of revolution of mentalities whereby they would cease to invest in a certain



kind of development, based on a productivism that has lost all human finality. Thus the issue returns with insistence: how do we change mentalities, how do we reinvent social practices that would give back to humanity – if it ever had it – a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival, but equally for the future of all life on the planet, for animal and vegetable species, likewise for incorporeal species such as music, the arts, cinema, the relation with time, love and compassion for others, the feeling of fusion at the heart of cosmos?

Guattari (1995) proposes the development of three intertwined ecologies: 1) an ecology of the mind-body, of individual subjectivity, of the micropolitical/ethical choices made at the smallest scale; 2) a social ecology, demanding collective change at a macropolitical scale; 3) an environmental ecology, respectful of the agency and inherent value of more-than-human species. Such a comprehensive ecology stems from an anti-dualistic view of culture/nature, from a notion that the materiality of “nature” is not the opposite of “culture,” but rather its larger context.<sup>[1]</sup>

An ecocentric ecological ethics does not relate to the environment alone, but rather extends to social and mental-bodily relations among humans, involving an embodied empathetic resonance at the macrocosmic and microcosmic scales with an earthly sanctuary that protects and connects us, and which is invested with our care and imagination. Likewise, it entails a connection to those trends of ecofeminist thought that reveal a much-needed interconnectedness between environmental and social injustices, that link ecological diversity with the recognition of women’s embodied differences

[1] As ecofeminist Carol Bigwood (2007: 94) notes, the ancient pre-Socratic Greek word for “nature”, *Phusis*, was “understood as the coming to be and passing away of all that is. It emphasizes nature as movement, growth, and decay”.

within their urgent fight for empowerment and autonomy. Philosopher Luce Irigaray (1996: 37) argues that both the current ecological crisis and the global spread of abstract capital are a macrological consequence of the suppression of nature by a monological patriarchal culture. In a monosexual culture, the masculine is the norm; within it, women only exist as mothers, not as women. Woman is a “natural” other, and even when she is culturally assimilated as (hu)man, attaining equal rights in parity with men within a patriarchal system, she is assimilated as the same through castration, becoming “a man minus the possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man” (Irigaray, 1985a: 27). Following Irigaray’s arguments, ecofeminist Val Plumwood notes how the instrumentalization of nature and that of women run closely parallel, making the exploitation of women a continuing stage of the suppression of nature. Much of the degradation of the earth’s environment can be traced to life-denying elements throughout human history. “Humans, especially male humans”, have “erected towering illusions of human superiority, and disembodiment” thus “denying their embeddedness in and dependency on nature”; within this continuing “scientific fantasy of mastery, the new human task becomes that of remolding nature to conform to the dictates of reason” (Plumwood, 2003: 99).

Once we associate all three ecologies, “it follows that all performances, one way or another, are articulated with ecological concerns, whether we acknowledge that or not” (Kershaw, 2002: 119). Although this does not imply that all theatre is ecotheatre, it certainly suggests that all theatre can be experienced ecocritically. In effect, according to Theresa J. May’s (2021: 4) definition, ecodramaturgy, “is a theater praxis that centers ecological relations by foregrounding as permeable and fluid the socially-constructed boundaries between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, individual and community.”

Significantly, May (2007: 96) also observes how there is “a growing rift between a vital literary ecocriticism on the one hand, and a discursive thread of ‘ecological’ performance studies on the other,” and how theatre studies should provide “a bridge” between these two segregated and exclusive discourses. I suggest that such a bridge should foster an embodied-empathic-dramaturgical approach to playtexts, in order to enable an experience of their space-time dynamics and sensory landscapes. In effect, according to neuroscientific findings on embodied cognition, reading is a highly embodied activity not only because “we need our senses in order to be able to perceive things,” but also because “our bodies act as sounding boards for our mental simulations of story-worlds and of characters’ perceptions, emotions, and actions within those virtual worlds” (Mossner 2017: 3). That is why any playtext may open dialogical interactions with both individual and collective theatre creators, whenever performed as a spatially and bodily lived experience through their imagination.

With the aim of providing a critical awareness of a major controversy at the intersection of ecology and theatre, this article performs an embodied-empathic-dramaturgical approach to two playtexts: 1) an ecocritical reading of a work of the dramatic canon that is far from being associated with ecology in normative terms (*The Homecoming* by Harold Pinter, 1964), but which nonetheless evokes an ethical-political and aesthetic experience of ecology through its exploration of human relationships; 2) an ecocritical reading of a contemporary work that directly addresses climate change and thus belongs to the ecodramaturgical canon (*Lungs* by Duncan Macmillan, 2011), but which similarly focuses on the mental ecology and micropolitics of individual human beings. By articulating a continuity between mind-body and space-time, and reflecting upon the affective and embodied reciprocity between characters and environment,

I argue for an ecophilosophical and ecofeminist dramaturgical analysis of theatre works, performed not through their representation of green spaces or “natural” landscapes, but in terms of their nature/culture interactions.

Concerning ecodramaturgy, some theatre critics and practitioners hold that past forms of drama and theatre (e.g. German-Romantic, Symbolist and Absurd) already express an emergent sense of ecological and environmental anxiety that today has become so perceivable (C. Lavery and C. Finburgh, eds., 2015; Corrêa, 2011 and 2021). Others argue that ecotheatre should essentially place non-human beings and entities at the center of the action: alluding to “mid-century modernist dramas of alienation, stories of the ‘little man’ lost in the vast machinery of the corrupt state,” Chaudhuri (2007: 517) claims that “the politics of that drama, because of their exclusive focus on the individual, are largely irrelevant to ecoperformance”.

Within an ecophilosophical ecofeminist perspective, I propose that theatre works “focused on the individual” are immanently environmental and therefore susceptible to ecocritical readings. An eco-centric dramaturgical reading focused on the mental ecology and micropolitics of individual human beings may help bring back to our current critical discourse the notion of subjectivity and of its impact upon both social and environmental circumstances.

## THE HOMECOMING

### AN ECOCRITICAL READING

Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1964) is evidently not about climate change. However, much before what is now conveniently designated as "climate change," we were already witnessing an ecologically deadly pursuit of imperial expansion, territorial destruction, unrestrained exploitation of resources, mass slavery, consistent oppression of women, mistreatment and abuse of animals. Etymologically, "ecology" stems from the Greek word *oikos*, which stands for household or dwelling. Such a linkage, between a living being's intimate domestic space and a branch of study generally associated with the earthly environment on a vast scale, may provide important insights towards an ecocentric ethics. It suggests that diverse, and homeostatic systems of interactions between living beings and their environments must be sought not only macrocosmically but also at the microcosmic level among related individuals within their dwelling space or *home*.

Homecoming is a recurrent trope in Pinter's theatre, but home is neither a haven nor a felicitous space in his plays. According to Chaudhuri's (1995: 94) account of modern theatre's "geopathology",<sup>[2]</sup> if Anton Chekhov is writing at the brink of a shift in man's attitude towards nature, in Pinter this shift seems finally complete, given that his homes are "hermetically sealed off from nature". I suggest that Pinter's homescapes are suffocating environments above all because there is no ecological diversity. Invariably, in the play actually entitled *The Homecoming*, home is revealed as a strained hostile space smacking of aggression, secrecy, and control. Because it is built

[2] Chaudhuri coins the term *geopathology* to refer to the "sense of ill-placement" that defines every character and relationship in modern drama.

upon a denial of sexual difference and devoid of alterity to the masculine norm, this dwelling is inevitably monological and authoritarian, inhibiting sustainability in its male-female interactions, and thereby in the relations between parents and children.

*The Homecoming* exposes the interior of an all-male family household as an extremely troubled place. In both his stage directions and dialogue, Pinter lets us know that the "rear wall" of the living room was knocked down years ago, after the mother (or sole woman in the family) died. The resulting large open area of the living room resembles a boxing ring where five men – three brothers, a father, and an uncle – dispute their virility. More to the point, this homescape is a sinister butchery space where five male domestic animals lust after a female, or where five butchers routinely slash one another using "the chopper and the slab" (Pinter, 1991: 47). Director Peter Hall (1974: 8) recalls how for the first production of the play, Pinter's description of the set was spatially "enormous," with a staircase "twice as tall as an actual staircase would have been":

The area they were fighting over, which was the father's chair and the sofa where the seduction takes place, and the rug in front, was an island in the middle of antiseptic cleanliness – that scrubbed lino, acres of it. And the journey from that island where the family fought each other, across to the sideboard to get the apple, was very perilous, and this was all quite deliberate – a few objects in space, and a feeling of absolute chilliness and hostility.

Pinter's idea of a large barren space conveying an atmosphere of collapse and claustrophobic abandonment was overlooked in the production of the play by Artistas Unidos at Lisbon's National Theatre in 2014, as well as in a production at the Cort Theatre of New York

City, which I saw in 2007. In both cases, the living room was over-decorated with naturalistic detail (pitchers, glasses, mirror, carpet, record-player, etc.), indicating how directors tend to focus on characterization and dialogue, overlooking the uncanny scenic features, spatial articulations, and non-naturalistic corporeal interactions of Pinter's works. As Elin Diamond (1985: 140) argues, Pinter's family dramas are non-naturalistic *surreal* representations of family pathology: "*The Homecoming* reflects life in a cracked mirror; in one fragment we recognize the familiar actions of family drama, in another fragment the same image is grotesquely distorted, parodied."

*The Homecoming* is infused with images of butchery. Max, the patriarch, is a former butcher, and heir to a family of "number one butchers," with "continental connections" to other "top-class groups of butchers" (Pinter, 1991: 39). He was trained by his father in the trade while still a child: "I learned to carve a carcass at his knee. I commemorated his name in blood. I gave birth to three young men! All on my own bat" (Pinter, 1991: 40). Although his three sons have not followed the family business, their occupations are linked to carnage: Joey is a part-time demolition man training to be a boxer, who carries the lust for blood into the square ring; Teddy, the scholar, dissects human existence in his critical works; and Lenny runs a network of prostitution, setting up his stalls of women in "a number of flats" in Soho, and in the seediest streets of London (Pinter, 1991: 72-78).

Within the butcherly landscape of *The Homecoming*, there is a persistent evocation of blood. Further, all the humans in the play are likened to domesticized animals. Max is a predator, who made his "way into the world" by "going all over the country to find meat" (Pinter, 1991: 48). He "gave birth" to three bastard sons, and is presently the family cook: "a dog cook... cooking for a lot of dogs"

(Pinter, 1991: 11). His sons and brother are "bloody animals" who walk in the house every time of the day and night, expecting to be fed and watered (Pinter, 1991: 16): Lenny and Joey are "bitches;" Teddy is a "lousy stinkpig;" the older and decaying Sam is a "grub," a "maggot" (Pinter, 1991: 18-19). Early in the play, Max boasts of having "an instinctive understanding of animals," particularly of racing horses and fillies; by the end of the play, he determines that his daughter-in-law Ruth is a "stayer" filly. Humans in *The Homecoming* are likened to exploited and brutalized animals, to tamed and imprisoned living beings. Through such "domestic animal" imagery, the play brings to light its anthropocentric context, of a culture that envisions the nonhuman free world as brutish, so as to justify its own dehumanizing treatment of it. In effect, however, it is its ethos of enslavement, confinement, and deprivation that brings about bestial belligerence. As playwright Edward Bond (2013: v, xi) reasons, there is a great contrast between the aggressiveness of the free animal and the unnatural violence of the caged one, and the latter's vicious and panicky brutality resembles that of the socialized human race.

The central image of family in *The Homecoming* is that of a butcher's. Images of flesh are foregrounded, as if all human bodies were like carcasses, usable and disposable. On two occasions, the patriarch Max threatens to "chop" one of his progeny's "spine off," making him "drown in [his] own blood" (Pinter 1991: 8, 36). Home is exposed as a site of violence, abuse, and bestiality, where the interactions between progenitors and their offspring is essentially destructive. The insinuation that fathers and uncles sodomize children is strikingly indicative of the patriarchal system of values that pervades the play.

For the men of this family, the two sole women of their world — their deceased mother/spouse (Bessie), and Teddy's wife (Ruth) — are

routinely described either as respected mothers or dangerous whores. Like meat, women are a common good, to be shared among the family males. As both father and sons express, a nice “feminine girl” should be “wide open” and “go the whole hog” to deliver the “gravy” (Pinter 1991: 66-69). Men’s mindscapes in *The Homecoming* are unequivocally misogynous, expressing a fixated desire to viciously destroy women’s bodies, and envisaging female natural functions as filthy and repulsive. Affection is something brotherly, patrilineal, homosocial; women are a natural enemy, a hated (even if useful) other.

Such an association of woman with nature, although revealing of how patriarchal culture has oppressed both femaleness and non-humans, can also become strategically empowering. By impersonating an oversexed woman of the misogynist imaginary, Ruth intimidates and threatens her male in-laws: claiming to have been “a model for the body” (Pinter 1991: 57), she draws attention to her disturbing sexual attributes. By the end of the play, the family’s proposal is to keep her at home for sexual and motherly services, while placing her on a prostitution “game” so that “she can earn the money herself – on her back” (Pinter 1991: 73). Ruth consents, as long as she is given a flat with three rooms and a bathroom, a personal maid, a supply of wardrobe, among other conditions of “everything” she may “need” in a contract signed “in the presence of witnesses” (Pinter 1991: 77).

“She’ll make us all animals,” cries Max halfway through the play (Pinter 1991: 68). At the end, after her husband Teddy leaves for the airport, Ruth has all the men in the house dependent on her. Such empowerment is highlighted in the play’s final image, showing Ruth enthroned in the patriarch Max’s chair, with all the men grouped around her: Sam lying comatose on the floor, Joey kneeling with his head on her lap, Max crawling towards her, stammering and groaning,

whilst Lenny stands watching at a distance. Not surprisingly, Max expresses anxiety over Ruth’s sinister female power in the play’s final lines: “she’ll do the dirty on us... She’ll use us, she’ll make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it!” (Pinter 1991: 81). Paradoxically, even though Ruth has made a deal to sell her body, once she terminates her marital contract with Teddy, she gains not only unprecedented power within the patriarchal family unit, but also autonomy of the self. In effect, Pinter considers that Ruth “is the nearest to a free woman that [he has] ever written – a free and independent mind” (Gussow 1994: 71).

Pinter’s portrayal of Ruth’s empowerment through an affirmation of her feminine sexual attributes – after all, she cunningly takes on the role of the whore, the patriarchal impersonation of desire – strikingly relates to the strategy of “mimicry” advocated by both Irigaray and feminist critic Elin Diamond in *Unmaking Mimesis* (1985). In order to destroy the patriarchal mechanism that constitutes women as objects and commodities, they propose that women, in an initial phase, assume the feminine roles of the masculine logic deliberately and *visibly*, so as to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thereby transform such roles (Irigaray, 1985b: 76).

What stands out in *The Homecoming* is a sharp critique of patriarchal family structures. As Ronald Knowles (1985: 118) observes, “in speech and action every family relationship is mocked or scorned”. I would add that Pinter also demystifies the patriarchal family institution through sensory landscapes that can be read ecocritically. As Lavery and Finburgh (2015: 23) argue, “one way of understanding what an ecological theatre might be, is to approach it as a signifying system that places anthropocentrism in crisis by defamiliarizing our habitual ways of seeing and behaving”.



## LUNGS

### AN ECOCRITICAL READING

Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* (2011) is explicitly about climate and environmental change but it approaches such topical ecological themes through landscapes of intimacy and the micropolitics of human relationships. Home in the play consists of a confined space solely inhabited by a woman (W) and a man (M), who argue about whether or not to have a child, mainly because of the environmental impact such a decision entails. In Katie Mitchell's production of the play at the Berlin Schaubühne in 2013, she had the two actors pedaling on stationary bicycles, so as to power the lights for the production and make the performance as carbon-neutral as possible. Mitchell apparently sought not only to translate the couple's environmental anxiety into frantic action, but also expose a concern for the expense of energy typically created by theatrical productions. According to a reviewer, however, "Watching the actors become increasingly beat and out of breath had a certain sweaty beauty, but if the concept sounds weak in theory, it was even more so in performance, exhausted well before the actors were" (Cornish, 2015: 68). Although I never saw a performance of the work,<sup>[3]</sup> I want to suggest an alternative ecocritical reading of Macmillan's work.

In *Lungs*, two actors tell a story unmediated by scene and costume changes, lighting and sound queues: there are just two bodies onstage,

[3] *Lungs* was first staged in Portugal as *Pulmões*, presented at Teatro Municipal S. Luiz in September 2018, produced by Ao Cabo Teatro, directed by Luís Araújo, translated by Fernando Villas-Boas, with actors Maria Leite and Luís Araújo. It was consequently staged as *Pulmão*, produced by Arte 33, Causas Comuns and Teatro Municipal de Vila Real, presented in Dec. 2022, Jan. 2023 and Jan. 2024. Directed by Ana Nave, with actors Benedita Pereira and Tomás Alves.

letting the audience fill in the gaps. In terms of sensory landscapes, the play takes us across various spaces suggested by uninterrupted dialogue: it starts in an "empty space" that we soon realize to be the IKEA shopping mall, a placeless place and bastion of neoliberal capitalism. The action proceeds to the inside of a car (parked in IKEA's garage), which is then driven through urban streets, and once again parked near the couple's home. We are subsequently inside their living room and bedroom, then in a dance club, back to their bed, as they endeavor to make a baby. We return to the car being driven through streets, a picnic in the park at lunchtime on a business day, where they enter a public toilet and unknowingly succeed in getting pregnant. Back to their house, we are now in their bathroom, where the pregnancy test turns out positive. We return for a while to their living room and bedroom, to be led suddenly to a hospital emergency room, due to a miscarriage. Insomniac nights in the bed, followed by a separation due to the man's confessed extramarital sexual cravings. Months after, perhaps years, we witness their meeting in Starbucks (another placeless place) after her mother's funeral, and soon after a return to her bedroom (formally theirs), where they become lovers. At the doorway of a house where he has been residing with his fiancée, the woman announces a new pregnancy. We go back to the initial house where both decide to go through with the pregnancy, but abruptly the action rushes through a succession of spaces, until it arrives at the cemetery. The final image is that of an elderly Woman changing the flowers at the Man's graveside, and proffering a last goodbye.

Quite strikingly, the play's environments are all human-made, synthetic and confining. The couple spends most of their time inside their private urban home, which feels narrow and suffocating; as well as a considerate amount of time inside their car, either motionless or moving. With the exception of the public garden, collective

environments are consume-and-discard placeless models. Although public, no other beings seem to occupy these spaces, apart from some “boy with a Panda” and a crowd of people forming a queue at the cash register in IKEA. Aside from their parents and future progeny there is no mention of other humans and sentient beings in their world. These two humans are alone in their decisions, and seem removed from a community of friends or larger social context. The baby is their own sole project: a plan of begetting a person who will be brought up and molded by their beliefs and genes, the outcome of a claustrophobic, monological and nondiverse nuclear unit.

Ecophilosophical resonances of *Lungs* are even stronger in temporal terms. The two characters are being robbed of time, and this is apparent not only in their exchanges but moreover through the pace and rhythm of the action, which noticeably accelerates towards the end. In the closing two pages, the dialogue conveys a child being born, attending school, leaving home, and checking his mother (W) into a retirement home, following the illness and death of his father (M). As in typical billboards by financial banks (our governing institutions, after all), human lifetime in *Lungs* is measured in discrete stages: adulthood, engagement, mortgage, baby, education, retirement, senior home, death. Because of so much action experienced in such a short duration, the reading of the play moved me with a feeling of the fleetingness and nonsensical absurdity of a human life, as it is so blatantly apparent in our current global culture.

In *Lungs* we feel that we are eavesdropping on a very private conversation between two educated middle-class people who are struggling to accomplish their goal, but seek to be environmentally ethical. Their discussion is frank, at times painful. The subjects discussed and events depicted are upsettingly common, especially among



RESPIRA/LUNGS, DE DUNCAN MACMILLAN, ENC. GRAÇA P. CORRÊA, 2024, INIMPETUS-ESCOLA ACTORES, [F] JOSÉ TERESA MARQUES.



women and men involved in heterosexual relationships. Whereas the woman wants both the sexual act and reproductive venture to be the “extension of an expression of love,” the man is “honestly” “just thinking about the moment,” or rather not thinking at all: “I’m just my cock and my mouth and my hands” (Macmillan, 2011: 26-28). Whenever the woman is highly emotional and at times “mental”, the man strives to be sensible and logical, displaying a “weird male fucking autism” (Macmillan, 2011: 62). Once the man reveals his innermost vulnerabilities, the woman is morally harsh and unforgiving (Macmillan, 2011: 65-67). When the woman confesses being “terrified” at the prospect of pregnancy because of the enormous changes endured by her body and psyche, the man wishes he could be the one to gestate the fetus to full term: “M: You’re going to be a home, an ecosystem... I feel already that we’re not equal somehow, that I can never quite know what it feels like and you’ll know that I can’t” (Macmillan, 2011: 34-35). Conflicts over both actual biological differences and socially constructed gender traits that have been “naturalized” are expressed in the play with ironic detachment through constant vocalized stutters and pauses of stupefaction providing a “preverbal rhetoric that contributes to *Lungs*’ eco-dramatic absurd” (Nisbet, 2023: 150).

Although apparently centered around climate change, *Lungs* interlaces personal, social and environmental ecologies. Both woman and man are environmentally conscious: they recycle, buy fair trade, give to charity and use low energy light bulbs; they vote, march, and want to opt for bicycles instead of cars. As a result, they qualify themselves as “good people”:

**W:** We don’t believe, do we, in good and bad. Right and wrong. (...)  
Don’t believe in evil.

**M:** Not evil no, we don’t condemn people, we try to empathize, to understand, we try (...)

**W:** We are not spoilt, we don’t live beyond not too far beyond our means it’s not swimming pools and sports cars (...) We live pretty simply actually, we spend money on food and books and music and films and holidays sometimes and our mortgage and we don’t just throw it away and yes it would be lovely to give more I do feel like we should, I wish we could give more but it’s just not, we don’t have any more. (Macmillan, 2011: 41, 43)

However, as they well know, such behavior is not enough to prevent social inequalities and ecological degradation.

In effect, throughout the play, we are provided with a sense of increasing and irreparable damage of living conditions due to environmental change. If at first woman and man are but conscious of the need to plant “oxygenating” forests in order to curtail their carbon footprint, because of “the expanding nappies in the landfill and the Baby Gap hoodies flown in from the Congo or wherever” (Macmillan, 2011: 19), further on they are actually experiencing extreme heat without the possibility of turning on the AC, for “everything’s shut down. City can’t cope with it” (Macmillan, 2011: 71). Later, there is talk about “Floods. Droughts. Waves tall as skyscrapers. Uprisings. Riots. Everything at extremes” (Macmillan, 2011: 73). Close to the end we learn that “They’ve suspended all flights. It’s so hot. The planet’s fucked” (Macmillan, 2011: 89). Finally, at the man’s graveside in the cemetery, the woman mourns the disappearance of trees that he planted to mitigate a warming climate:

**W:** I think a lot of people are angry at me. At us. Those of us still around.  
I forget more and more. I don’t know what they’re so upset about.





I miss talking to you. Here I am talking to myself. Your forests have gone. I don't watch the news any more, it all just gets worse and worse. Everything's covered in ash. (Macmillan, 2011: 90)

In ecocritical terms, I suggest that *Lungs* is an extremely courageous, direct and interventionist work explicitly dealing with human overpopulation, or with “the last real taboo” (Macmillan, 2011: 37) in ecological thought and change. As the woman states,

I could fly to New York and back every day for seven years and still not leave a carbon footprint as big as if I have a child. Ten thousand tonnes of CO2. That's the weight of the Eiffel Tower. I'd be giving birth to the Eiffel Tower. (Macmillan, 2011: 36)

Although it does not prescribe behavior, *Lungs* launches a very controversial environmental topic. For it is a pressing matter of ecological balance for women all over the world to have children by choice rather than by chance. In the United States alone, 45 percent of pregnancies are unintended; throughout the whole world, nearly half of all pregnancies, totaling more than one hundred twenty million each year, are unintended (UNPFR, 2022). Securing women's fundamental rights to autonomy and self-esteem, as well as their access to high-quality contraception, abortion and family planning services, would have an extremely positive impact on climate change. It is about time we question the overwhelming demographic explosion of our species, and cease to consider it “natural”. In the words of the play, “We must be very certain, arrogant even, to want to create another person out of our genes and to teach it and to bring it up” (Macmillan, 2011: 41) amid our current environmental emergencies and appalling social-political-economic contexts.



RESPIRA/LUNGS, DE DUNCAN MACMILLAN, ENC. GRAÇA P. CORRÊA, 2024, INIMPETUS-ESCOLA ACTORES, [F] JOSÉ TERESA MARQUES.

Despite widespread agreement that it is the main factor in climate change, human overpopulation remains an extremely controversial topic in the ecological debate, diverting the focus to the shift away from fossil fuels and the development of new technologies. Not only does the idea of limiting human procreation go against cultural and religious mores in most societies, thus making governments refrain from supporting unpopular policies, it is moreover against the grain of neoliberal capitalist “economic development”. Development-as-growth implies a never-ending increase in the production of goods and services: it needs an increasing supply of consumers, or an everlasting demographic progression. Although it is now obvious that development-as-growth leads to irreparable environmental damage and will ultimately make earthly conditions unlivable for humans, this economic ideology reigns supreme. As ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2003: 101) eloquently remarks,

In the ecological parallel to the Titanic story, we have reached the stage in the narrative where we have received the iceberg warning, and have made the remarkable decision to double the engine speed to full speed ahead and go below to get a good night’s rest. A change of course might be bad for business; we might have to slow down, lose time. Nothing, not even the ultimate risk of the death of nature, can be allowed to hold back the triumphant progress of the ship of rational fools.

## CONCLUSION

According to Macmillan (2017), *Far Away* by Caryl Churchill (2000) was the play that made him want to try writing for the theatre: “I hadn’t seen it produced but it was so complete on the page, I wanted to try to do that”. Likewise, Macmillan’s *Lungs* is “so complete on the page” that it has led me to stage it,<sup>[4]</sup> confirming how performing a playtext in one’s mind-body generates affective resonances and empathic flows. Seeking a bridge between literary ecocriticism and ecological performance studies, as May recommends, I suggest that we should encourage ecophilosophical aesthetic-ethical experiences of playtexts that stimulate imagination as an ecological force and give rise to new ways of spectating.

In the same way that socio-political arguments are not ecologically neutral, ecological arguments are not socially neutral. In terms of the theatre medium, works that apparently deal merely with social and interpersonal relations (such as Pinter’s *The Homecoming*) are nevertheless ecocritically positioned; and works that explicitly address ecological issues (such as Macmillan’s *Lungs*), evoke particular social, macro- and micropolitical perspectives. These ecocritical readings point towards what theatre might be able to do ecologically: to generate awareness of ecological issues whilst portraying humans and their everyday ethical choices, within an ecocentric and comprehensive view of ecology that situates our social-political-economic lived experiences and actions in ecological terms.

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[4] I recently directed a production entitled *Respira*, consisting in my own adaptation of *Lungs* for 13 performers. It was presented in December 13–16, 2024, at Espaço Hangar Lisboa (Inimpetus Acting School).



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