

# *A Green Design Parliament: Thinking, Talking, Learning, and Designing Sustainably with the Society of British Theatre Designers*

*Presented by members of the SBTD  
Hannah Harding and Blue Bradfield*

**WATCH THE VIDEO HERE: [https://youtu.be/DgAx\\_OjsmQ0](https://youtu.be/DgAx_OjsmQ0)**

*Hannah* and *Blue* shared introduction to the video (live)

Hello all and thank you so much for tuning in today! We are here on behalf of the Society of British Theatre Designers, Sustainable Design Group. This presentation was created by me and Blue in collaboration with Hamish who is also here on the call and will be there at the Q&A at the end. I'll pass you over to Blue now to show you the video.



*Design for Glimpsing Air Pockets by  
Mona Kastell*



*Design for Stuck by Andrea Carr  
Photo by Kasia Rucinska*



*Then/Now by Minty Donald*

**Hannah:** Environmental sustainability in theatre has grown organically almost like an ecosystem of people and performances. It has expanded due to the urgency of climate change. Within the United Kingdom, design has started to engage with sustainability. For example, artists such as Minty Donald, Mona Kastell, and Andrea Carr have used site specific, and material-based theatre techniques.

**Images** - Mona Kastell: <https://www.monakastell.com>, Andrea Carr: <http://www.andreacarr.co.uk>, Minty Donald: <https://performanceecologyheritage.wordpress.com/portfolio/minty-donald/>



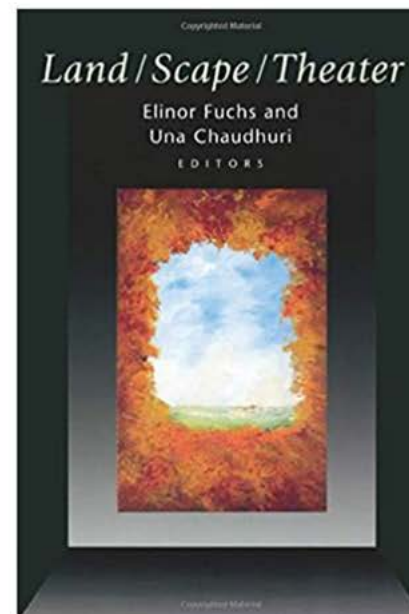
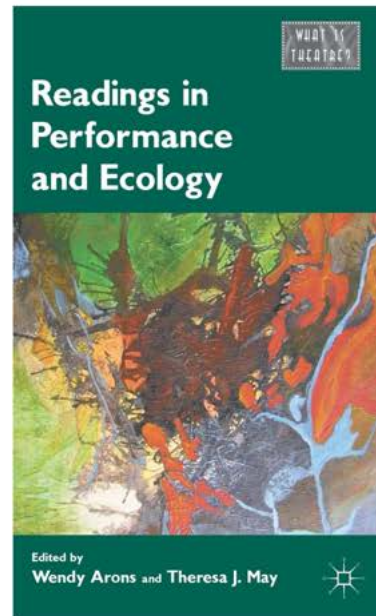
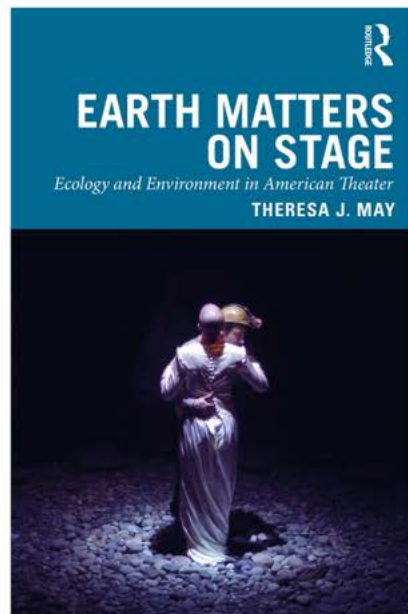
# Julie's Bicycle

CREATIVE • CLIMATE • ACTION



*Logos sourced directly from each organisation*

**Hannah:** Some companies, such as Pigfoot and Green Opera, aim to reduce their carbon footprint, or avoid waste. Consultants, like Julie's Bicycle and Creative Carbon Scotland, organise events and they calculate the footprint of different arts organisations. Movements and groups, such as Culture Declares and Staging Change, have started networks between theatre communities that are interested in sustainability.

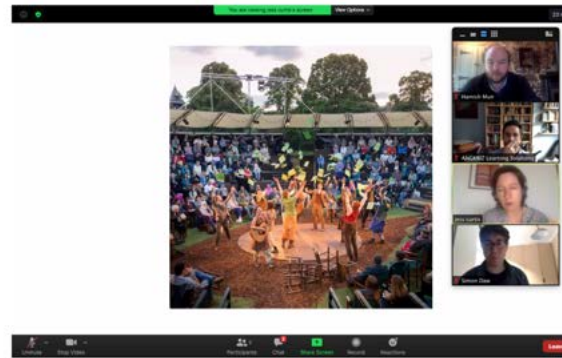


**Hannah:** Scholarship has continued to grow also, following on from Una Chaudhuri's influential essay in the 1994 Theatre journal "There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake": Toward an Ecological Theatre'.



*SBTD roundtable in the Staging Places event  
Photo by Alex Brenner*

**Blue:** In February 2020, the society of British theatre designers hosted a sustainability roundtable conversation at their staging places event at the V&A in London. These events emerged during a restructuring of the SBTD with the question ‘what would actually be useful for designers?’, letting designers with a range of experience and knowledge have informal conversations about the future. We discussed how designers could practice more sustainably. The conversation was full of passion for changing the industry. We talked about finding new materials, measuring carbon footprint and avoiding waste. This V&A events helped form many working groups in the SBTDs, but it was post event drinks where our Sustainable Design Group really took shape. We moved to regular meetings online during the UK lock-down due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we stayed passionate and connected which helped the group grow and develop naturally.



*Presentation on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. Screenshot by Hamish Muir*

*Move away from visual tools towards dialogue, verbal feedback, debate, discussion and demos.*

*Frame sustainability as an inclusive, creative opportunity rather than a constraint to theatre.*

**Blue:** Zoom became our primary tool for design communication. The group flourished online, being able to connect with a range of people, nationally and internationally. The staged talks are unforced and contrast a sense of the local with a sense of the global. The talks are a form of performance, as there is a greater awareness of the voice, given that there is no longer the ability to use movement, architecture, gesture and body language. We, as members of this project, had to adapt to a new environment, and move away from visual tools towards dialogue, verbal feedback, debate, discussion and demos. In the group, design is produced from a chamber of voices that play with ideas and the form in which those ideas arise. Experimentation, playfulness, speculation and incomplete thoughts have become a key aspect of how we approach some of the issues.

**Hannah:** We do not have all of the answers, and some answers need further testing, but by staging a design conversation, we wish to refine the solutions by sharing our experiences. Fundamentally, we wanted to frame sustainability as an inclusive, creative opportunity rather than a constraint to theatre.



*Blue:* During our initial group meeting a big issue we talked about was the fear of failure when it comes to being sustainable. Being discouraged to try if you think you can't do things perfectly. This has become a theme in many of the projects we do. We want to have conversations about the sustainability issue in theatre, to learn from each other's failures and successes and help guide each other going forwards. We want to have a place where we can collect the research and ideas about sustainability in theatre, to help people make more informed decisions so the prospect of being sustainable isn't so scary.

# *Sustainable Studio*

*Looking at what went well, what could be improved if done again or just asking for advice on a current show.*

*Sharing ideas, knowledge and failures to learn from one another.*

**Blue:** One you've stopped studying it's very easy and saddening to miss the community you had, the collective problem solving with the people in your studio. Especially in design you can become quite isolated from your colleagues. The rise in online meeting has meant we recreate this community studio feel with our Sustainable Studio events. Once a month someone presents a project either current or past and we discuss the sustainable aspects of it. Looking at what went well, what could be improved if done again or just asking for advice on a current show. It has been a great resource for sharing ideas and knowledge as well as learning from one another, and sharing our failures at being sustainable is a useful learning experience. It's also great when members of other areas such as production managers join, as it's another viewpoint we might not have considered. Theatre is collaborative and so when discussing the future, you also have to collaborate and share.



Sourced from the Carbon Literacy Project  
<https://carbonliteracy.com/trainer-consultant/>

*“An awareness of the carbon dioxide costs and impacts of everyday activities, and the ability and motivation to reduce emissions, on an individual, community and organisational basis.”*

**Blue:** While we are learning about practicing sustainability, we also are learning how to teach sustainability, which is another form of feedback present within the group such as Carbon Literacy, defined as “An awareness of the carbon dioxide costs and impacts of everyday activities, and the ability and motivation to reduce emissions, on an individual, community and organisational basis.”

The Carbon Literacy Project is an organisation that is helping educate individuals and organisations about climate change and carbon footprints and opening discussions about what people can do to help. They provide a day of training for individuals and industries. However, there has been no training tailored for the creative design area of performing arts. Although companies such as Opera North have training we feel it doesn't cover the issues designers are tackling. So, as The Sustainability group we decided we should create this tailored training. We are currently researching and working on it and hope by the end we will have regional mentors spread around the UK.



Sourced via Twitter @Ecostage1

*They wish for more people to pledge to be environmentally conscious when creating theatre, not just designers but any role in the production process.*

**Blue:** This sustainable group also has close links to our sister project 'Ecostage'. 'Ecostage' was launched in 2015 and is currently being re-envisioned by a group of ecologically minded designers. Its' aim is to be a go-to place for practical guidelines and ecological values, that helps all performing arts practitioners make their practices more sustainable. The group will continue to develop new projects and to explore ways in which sustainability can push theatre into exciting, new directions. They wish for more people to pledge to be environmentally conscious when creating theatre, not just designers but any role in the production process. A production on any level is a collaborative endeavour as is the struggle to be more sustainable.

Within our large group we have created smaller groups that focus on different issues we wish to explore in the design process.

Material No...	Material Type	Alternative to	Material Qualities	Theatre Uses	Sustainable Qualities
1 Eko Ply - recycled plastic board	New Material / Hybrid Recycled	Sheet Timber	Shiny Water-Resistant Smooth Opaque	Flats Cladding Structure Outdoor Events	Biodegradable
2 Biodegradeable Foam Board	Paper / Card	Foam board	Lightweight Glue-able Easy to cut Opaque	Sculpting Model Making / Props	Biodegradable
3 Green Cell Foam - corn based	Plastics and Foams	Non-biodegradable polystyrene	Delicate Lightweight	Model Making / Props	low energy in manufact...
4 BIOHM: Mycelium and Organic Refu...	Wood/natural fibre New Material / Hybrid	Sheet Timber, MDF			
5 Urban Tree Felling	Wood/natural fibre	Wood	Structural Grained Opaque Paintable	Flats	low energy in manufact... Raw material sourced lo...
6 Hemp cladding	Wood/natural fibre	Sheet Timber			

### Materials List and Costume Network

**Blue:** One of these groups is looking at the materials we use to construct our sets and model boxes. We have been looking at materials that are made of recycled materials as well and those made of more renewable resources. It has been interesting to see what is available as well as the limitations these materials create. For example, biodegradable foam board is great as it is a material we use often, although it is currently limited in colour and thicknesses which will dissuade people from using it. We wish to create a materials list, the prototype seen on screen. This is so designers and construction teams can easily assess alternative material ideas. We also wish to use this to database to explore local manufacturers and suppliers, as the combined emissions of transport is a big contributor to the negative impact of a material. There are many factors in which a material can impact the environment so we want to provide as much information so people can make the best decision. Our next step is going to be to sample materials, we want to see how they would function for a designer or builder as well as how durable and weatherproof they are. Along with this material list we have also started a group looking into costume and the materials and techniques used.

We had a great International meeting with designers around the world, looking at materials and techniques they are using to confront the global environmental crisis. There were some great ideas and we should keep the discussion going worldwide.

## *What is the Designer?*



*We want there to not be only one way to be a designer.*

**Hannah:** Just as we are here today before all of you, the scope of the SBTD sustainability group goes far beyond. As a group there is an underlying consideration of what the role of the set designer is. This “role” encompasses so much, and the lines of our creative territory are often unclear. As recent graduates, Blue and I know that the extent of this “role” was not typically unpacked within the drama school or university curriculum, and it is often a struggle when trying fit into the normative career progression.

It is not only the pandemic that has affected the number of opportunities, it is the growing number of students that are not reflected in the positions available for entry-level candidates. We want there to not be only one way to be a designer. There should be a diverse, organic range of opportunities as much as there should be a diverse, organic range of people who take up those opportunities.



# *Our Careers are Viable.*

*Adapting methods and tools that we know in order to instigate actionable change.*

*Understanding the role of designer means that we can understand how that role can decrease a production's environmental impact.*

**Hannah:** So just as our education needs to present set design for theatre as a “viable” career option and our industry must further facilitate and reflect this belief, courses and the arts itself must also consider the importance of embedding sustainable design practices into their structure.

We are working towards adapting to a world filled with waste and increasing environmental instability. The SBTD sustainable design group is working to build knowledge of ecologically minded practices rather than dismantle the past. It is about adapting methods and tools that we know to instigate actionable change, rather than starting totally from scratch and shaking a role that is already under such constraints. With a designer so often spread so thin, we need the clarity. Understanding the role of designer means that we can understand how that role can decrease a production's environmental impact.

***Post-COVID we must alter modes and styles to adapt to a changing industry, to show that design is not only a sustainable career option on a personal level (mental health, fair pay and working hours/conditions) but also environmentally sustainable.***

**Hannah:** This is what the SBTD group champions. Post-COVID we must alter modes and styles to adapt to a changing industry, to show that design is not only a sustainable career option on a personal level (mental health, fair pay and working hours/conditions) but also environmentally sustainable.



**Hannah:** With more people working from home the theatre industry seems to have become much more geographically accessible. With new technologies and the zoom-era very much upon us, we can connect to audiences we would not normally be able to. This has advantages and disadvantages for engaging with sustainable theatre. As an online group, we avoid carbon footprints that would be created if we met in person. We can also connect with a variety of different regions and all they have to offer (materials, sites and even local practitioners) which is important when thinking about greener practice. Rather than outsourcing from huge distances across the UK, we can find those connections that are closer to home. The local, and describing the local, has been a key theme within the discussion of the SBTD, and Zoom allows for some of the specific details concerning different communities to be voiced.

However, we cannot disqualify the demand that Zoom and other online platforms place on communities with very little arts funding, even the assumption of technology and WIFI connectivity isolates those without access to these services. We are not perfect in this respect, but we are continually researching, learning and adapting to the evolving industry - finding ways to reduce our imprint on the earth at the same time.

# *A Green Design Parliament*

*It is the time to start conversations, bring in new voices to diversity and feed our creative ecosystem.*

*Although in the UK especially we are still standing and the light is still on, we won't stop our efforts to support and build upon our creative ecosystem - both the people and the natural world encapsulated within it.*

**Blue:** With the designer, and the arts industry itself under incredible constraints - the pandemic, financial and access issues, and the climate crisis, now is the time to reflect on our practices. It is the time to start conversations, bring in new voices to diversity and feed our creative ecosystem. An ecosystem is a dynamic entity. We produce such a variety of performances and as the individuals making those performances, but we can always learn more.

**Hannah:** We hope to further expand the reach of the SBTD and the sustainable design group and the work that it does to educate others on more ethical and ecologically minded ways of working, and to gain even more voices working towards this shared purpose. Through thinking, talking and learning, ecosystems can recover from destruction, and although in the UK especially we are still standing and the light is still on, we won't stop our efforts to support and build upon our creative ecosystem - both the people and the natural world encapsulated within it.

# Acknowledgements

Members of the SBTD design group include:

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**Nadia Malik** - SBTD committee member/Future graduate skills

**Will Hargreaves** – Future graduate skills

**Alison Neighbour** - Carbon literacy training

**Andrea Carr** – Ecostage

**Ruth Stringer** – Ecostage

**Mona Kastell** – Ecostage

**Hannah Myers** – Ecostage

**Michaela Field** - Ecostage

**Stella Cecil** - Costume network

**Jess Curtis** - Costume network

**Blue Bradfield** - Materials database

**Hannah Harding** - Materials database

**Hamish Muir** - Materials database

**Simon Daw** - Materials database

Staging Places Exhibition: <https://stagingplaces.co.uk>

Society of British Theatre Designers website: <http://www.theatredesign.org.uk>



*Sourced via Twitter @weareSBTD*

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