

# S K E N È

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“Well-Staged Syllables”:  
From Classical to Early Modern English Metres  
in Drama

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi

*Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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MONICA CRISTINI\*

## WEATHER#: Developing New Theatre Ecologies Through a Virtual Venue<sup>1</sup>

Abstract

*WEATHER#* is a multimedia performance based on the musical opera composed by Elizabeth Swados in 2014; its aim is to raise knowledge and awareness on climate change and human impact on the natural world. The new production presented in January 2021 develops the original work by using several artistic languages and performative forms in order to create a new and accessible social environment of cultural sharing, and to promote discussion about climate issues. Without following a narrative form, *WEATHER#* combines chants, dances, and monologues played in several languages in a *kaleidoscopic* shape, creating a path through the various aspects of the climate change. The performance encompasses a great variety of stories, scientific descriptions, and mythological narrations in a 360-degree virtual space, divided into eleven rooms in which the audience can both attend and interact with the performance. The outcome is a new theatrical venue, shared by performers and audience, and among the members of the audience. This novel vision of the virtual and performative context creates a new social environment and implies a rethinking of both making and experiencing theatre. The physical boundaries of the theatrical space are trespassed and opened to a limitless environment. This peculiarity leads also to a reconsideration of the relationship between artists and spectators in a new and open theatre ecology.

KEYWORDS: theatre ecology; social environment; climate change; 3D theatre; virtual space

I feel that weather is off.  
I feel that there is something wrong, something deeply wrong on there.  
I feel that certain seasons come too soon and stay too long.  
I feel storms come when they don't usually come.  
I feel that the cold is a new kind of cold... like steel.  
The weather is mad at us.  
The weather is yelling at us.  
So, I wanted to yell back to the weather.  
(Swados 2001)

<sup>1</sup> This article originates from research that is part of the project *La MaMa Experimental Theatre: a lasting bridge between cultures* – MariBet, funded from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Program under the Marie Skłodowska-

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In January 2021 La Mama Umbria International and Associazione Bisse based in Spoleto, Italy, presented an ongoing project comprising a virtual space where theatre, dance, music and the visual arts join together to talk, develop interest and create awareness about the climate change issue. The project, called *WEATHER#*, is based on one of the last works the American composer and theatre director Elizabeth Swados wrote in 2014 as a music opera. It was presented as part of a programme launched by La Mama Experimental Theatre of New York, called *La Mama Earth*, devoted to climate change. The work, whose texts were written by the Italian poet Filippo Consales, is considered a dramatic *oratorio* that uses music and theatre to raise public awareness on this urgent issue, in Elizabeth Swados' belief that if just one person would be touched, then the world could be changed.

In Italy, Swados's opera was originally staged as a choral musical work at the Teatro Romano di Spoleto in the context of the Teatro Dei Due Mondi Festival 2014. Music and arrangements were curated by the music director Claudio Scarabottini, who worked on the melodies and the chords outlined by Swados.

*WEATHER#* has now been elaborated into an online immersive experience through an international collaboration involving partner organisations and artists from Italy, France, the UK, Korea, the US and Mexico. The new production, which the authors describe as a *multimedia online odyssey*, has enriched the original work by using several artistic languages and performative forms to create a new accessible social environment of cultural sharing, and to promote discussion on climate issues. "With sounds and rhythms that mix the atmospheres of Western music and world music, the composition collects a great variety of stories, scientific descriptions, newscasts and mythological narrations that tell of storms, destructions, rebirth and beauty".<sup>2</sup>

The project is headed by the music director Claudio Scarabottini and theatre director Jared McNeill, who is part of the La MaMa group of artists and worked for years with Peter Brook. Artistic supervisor is Andrea Paciotta – Associate Professor at the Seoul Institute of the Arts, the institution that provided the multimedia space design, and director of CultureHub Europe, an association focused on the use of telepresence and telematic technologies for educational and artistic purposes – and Adriana Garbagnati acts as project manager.

As already mentioned, the original plan to present the work as a live performance had to be abandoned because of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time, in the winter of 2020, McNeill was collaborating with Andrea Paciotta

ka-Curie, grant agreement No 840989. My gratitude goes to Adriana Garbagnati, Jared McNeill and Claudio Scarabottini for the interviews and collaboration, La MaMa Archive and La MaMa Umbria International for their collaboration during my research.

<sup>2</sup> *La Mama Umbria: WEATHER#*, [www.lamama.org/shows/weather](http://www.lamama.org/shows/weather) (Accessed 5 August 2021).

at CultureHub Europe. This experience led McNeill and Scarabottini to create something new that could answer urgent questions connected to the relationship between performers and spectators. The most pressing concern was to devise new strategies for bringing younger people closer to the theatre and the arts in general by creating a venue that could be more accessible than a theatre. The issue of climate change was then dealt with, with a particular focus on what scientists consider the deep interaction between nature and culture (Kershaw 2021). So, how can performance and theatre be a means for changing people's attitudes towards climate and environmental matters. This aspect is crucial in gauging the relevance of artistic engagement in the efforts to solve the climate crisis, a challenging test of its capability to exert a true influence on the collective consciousness (Apple 2020).

How those who in the arts can take on this crisis in a manner that not just informs, but illuminates, awakens, and activates on a visceral and experimental level so that we feel it in our bodies and souls?

...

Is it even possible for an artwork or an artist-advocate to sufficiently and effectively influence the collective conscience to substantially change the way we live? (Apple 2020, 59-61)

Furthermore, Scarabottini and McNeill had to deal with other creative issues raised by the lockdown, such as how to tell a story in a virtual space, or how to find a living contact between singers and musicians who are not allowed to perform together in the same room.

What emerged from all these questions was a multidisciplinary project that envisioned a new theatrical paradigm for live online performances in a virtual space that would include audience interaction. During the creative phase, the challenge was to build an experience around the performance and not just to present its video reproduction; to create a new relationship to theatre in a 3D environment where "theatre can become the site of a much-needed ecological consciousness" (Chaudhuri 1994, 28) and a means to foster a change in our relationship with the natural world, encouraged by the critical act of seeing and experiencing.

The project offers a virtual space where people can meet to talk about climate change, spectators can experience different contents, suitable for both adults and children, outlining the climate crisis at different levels; multiple examples are shown of the relationship between the arts and the natural environment. The underlying idea is to create a virtual venue for facilitating the kind of social interactions that usually take place in a live theatre performance.

## 1. Novel Creative Strategies and Paradigms



Figure 1. *WEATHER#*, *Anelito*, the room. Screenshot. Courtesy La MaMa Umbria International

The project takes place in a virtual space consisting of eleven rooms named after the titles of Swados' songs, each devoted to a specific climate issue (fig. 1). The spectator enters a 3D room and chooses among some contents available in different languages. The main item is a brief video of the musical work made up of contributions that the artists who took part in the project sent to the director, where the music is the basis of a story about a specific climate issue or event, and allegorical embodiments of the atmospheric events are part of the narrative. While Swados brought the physicality of the atmospheric elements into the music, modelling it like a clay statue, Consales provided the lyrics focusing on the personifications of the meteorological events.

But the creation of these videos, which narrate different subjects linked to each other by the music, presented some problems, such as the quality of the recordings. Given the lockdown conditions in which they were realized, the technical level was uneven as the videos came mostly from the direct initiative of the artists, who employed a hodgepodge of different cameras and settings, from open spaces to recording studios. Therefore, to create an aesthetic uniformity across all the works, and given the impossibility to direct them all in person, McNeill prepared a list of key indications.

The result is a kaleidoscope of images: a meeting of many different cultures, languages and music, the latter played on acoustic and electric instruments both belonging to the Western musical culture and to the folk tradition of the



countries involved. An exchange and a collaboration, along with the combination of different art forms, that achieved Ellen Stewart's main objective of culture sharing, a purpose she pursued since the foundation of Cafè La MaMa in New York City (1961).

Also, the peculiar freedom from fixed patterns of Swados' music made it possible to link together highbrow and lowbrow traditional music and folk rhythms. Thanks to the participation of several artists, the opera was enriched with the music and performances of different countries, such as Pansori, a Korean theatre performance, Slavic ritual dances, and oriental and Arabic music and songs.

The performances stage climate issues in the frame of a daily life that the audiences find familiar: a choice based on the need to raise the spectators' awareness of the imminence of ecological disaster, and the imperative not to wait until the house burns down. (Apple 2020). The preliminary objective was to make environmental disruption tangible and to lead people to see that climate issues are an integral part of their lives. In McNeill's and Scarabottini's approach, art is a bridge and a communication channel between history or scientific narration and the spectators, a means that can effectively influence the collective consciousness in order to change the way people live.

Both artists and spectators from different parts of the world reacted differently to the work, showing a preference for this or that video, and feeling that some subjects were closer than others to their lives and experience. In fact, on the basis of what each artist feels is most urgent in her or his country, the performances provide different answers to the problems of climate change, and all the works are shaped in different styles mirroring the various moods. This peculiarity has contributed to creating the distinctive aesthetics that characterize *WEATHER#*.

The videos are of different kinds: with a reference to constructivism, some of them are like collages, created by recycling old images into a new work. Their aesthetics can be associated with the CAMP sensibility or the American sitcoms of the 1960s as for instance in the song titled *Newscast*, which satirizes a couple watching TV in bed, overwhelmed by a barrage of news items and images on weather catastrophes.

Others, like *The Giant and the Mermaid*, are animated cartoons created to tell a story, or videos matching situations from different parts of the world and their respective answers to the common problem of climate change. This is the case with *Dodola* (fig. 2), whose title is taken from an ancient Slavic rain god. In this work, a Western contemporary dance alternates with a Korean Pansori performance based on vocal improvisations. This video is matched with some extra contents made up of two documentaries about weather events: a tutorial for children about making rain, and a video showing Eastern European folk dances devoted to the god *Dodola*.



Figure 2. WEATHER#, Dodola, screenshot of the main video.  
Courtesy La MaMa Umbria International

Therefore, in its several dimensions, *WEATHER#* brings the natural environment into the virtual venue through the arts. Instead of offering an “enchanted immersion in ‘environment’ or ‘nature’” (Lavery 2021, 1), this work transfers the natural world into an artistic, artificial dimension by using theatre, music, dance and graphic design performances as effective media to connect people to environmental events and make them aware of their personal responsibility. Viewers can roam around the virtual room as if they were in a museum, closely observing the different works and immersing themselves in the aesthetic experience. The climatic events shown and narrated in the videos spark a dialogue with the solutions advanced, in a 3D environment that envelops and engages viewers, inviting them to reflect on the climate crisis.

The project, initially conceived as a traditional theatrical performance but reformulated for a virtual space, meant to develop a new and as yet undefined dramaturgical strategy. The creative process had to be adapted to the lockdown condition and the impossibility of an in-person production. McNeill defines this new practice, and its concomitant aesthetics, as the new neo-realism of the Covid era, in which all artists must find alternative paths of creative practice to reproduce the fictional and ephemeral dimension of theatre, dance and music. At the same time, during the first creative phase, he chose not to impose his own artistic vision but rather gave the artists complete freedom to express themselves and to make their own aesthetic choices.

In incorporating the video contributions of the more than fifty international artists and musicians, McNeill restricted his directorial authorship to editing the final videos, choosing to use a green screen, adding graphic elements to create a

surreal atmosphere that reflected the urgency to save our natural environment, and inviting the audience to experience this urgency directly by attending the performances in the 3D space.

While the dramaturgical process was in part elaborated along with this experimental project, it also resulted from the new rules imposed by the Covid-19 emergency. The question now is to see if the new tactics for implementing the creative process will be adopted in the future or if artists will go back to their pre-pandemic practices. They are facing a new kind of relationship with each other but also with their audiences, in which they must redefine the manner of performing in the space of a virtual environment.

## 2. Building a New Theatre Ecology

The theatrical event is a complex social interweave, a network of expectations and obligations. The Exchange of stimuli – either sensory or ideational or both – is the root of theatre.  
(Schechner 1968, 42)

*WEATHER#* is a project that provides an innovative solution to the problem of *alienation* between artists and audience in a virtual context by creating an environment in which they can meet and interact in a virtual space. By moving across the online 3D space and interacting with the several visual and musical contents of the work, the audience can experience the stories and the scientific or cultural references behind them. Each room of the space presents several contents: the main video based on one of Swados's songs; scientific documentaries about the subject related to the room; videos showing rituals and ceremonies of different cultures, linked to the climate issue; and tutorials for children.

In the 3D venue, spectators can effectively attend the performances as well as the projection of documentaries or other kinds of contents. They can also read poems, song lyrics and comments written on the virtual walls of the room.

The aim is to create an immersive experience of the climatic emergency. Having entered the virtual venue, the spectator can move and explore the different contents supported by Swados and Scarabottini's music and songs, participating to a new kind of event and experiencing a new and novel relationship with other members of the audience, with the performers and with the compositions themselves. Here, the 3D format, with its potential to involve viewers in a virtual reality, exploits the ability of the visual arts, of music and theatre to communicate with the public both intellectually and emotionally. Through the experience of the performative event, the viewers who roam around the theme room directly involve themselves in the narration and are encouraged to react personally. On the other hand, the context built around

the show, through the documentaries, tutorials and materials associated with the main videos, provides tools to stimulate a critical outlook on the climate issue, a more conscious relationship with the environment, and ideas on how to bring about change. By giving life to this new theatrical mode of ecology involvement that unites artists and audience in a shared space, the director and his collaborators have provided a possible answer to how a performance, and art in general, can impact people's attitudes towards climate issues.

This is just the starting point of an ongoing larger project that provides other forms of interaction. The objective is to link this virtual eleven-room presentation space to a 3D interactive space called *Arium* (fig. 3). Already online on the website, it is an environment people can enter by just logging on and encountering or creating events and performances. Scarabottini, McNeill and Paciotto are currently working on it to enable spectators to attend virtual live performances and effectively interact with each other and with the artists. Performances will be realized by means of a green screen and a specifically designed suit for tracing and mapping the performer's movements, so as to give life in real time to the online event.



Figure 3. *WEATHER#*, *Arium*, screenshot. Courtesy La MaMa Umbria International

This approach can create a new theatre ecology with a new performance and spectator experience thanks to the total, immersive involvement in the virtual space and a different kind of relationship generated by the real-time presence of the participants, along with the quintessentially virtual dimension of a 3D simulation. This process will imply a new system of communication and the likely elaboration of a new set of rules in the acting–answering timing of the

players: the performers and the spectators. A novel kind of interaction in the performance space will be experienced, giving life to an original theatre ecology. The final objective transcends the work itself: the aim is to create a space capable of hosting artistic developments while promoting encounters and the sharing of experiences. A true *ecosystem* with its own way of producing and receiving, along with the interacting artistic communities (Marranca 1996).

The La Mama Umbria project also developed a more sustainable approach to artistic practice. While working on climate change issues, the group decided to concretely apply a virtuous behaviour through the creation of a new production protocol, which can be considered a sort of practical code that underpins both the entire project and each of its performances, a code that in a certain sense contributes to defining the theatre ecology itself.

WEATHER# is part of a broader project that the Regione Umbria and the city of Spoleto are sponsoring to develop new sustainable processes in the ecological, economic, political and social sectors, to respond to climate change and promote a positive way of relating to the natural environment. The directors of this multimedia performance have taken an artistic and educational approach to this subject, in order to face the climate crisis in a practical way by developing a new formal production protocol. Assisted by a team of ecology and climate experts, they have developed a new sustainable production procedure in which all the elements and processes involved respond to the ecological consciousness, from a limited use of paper, energy and fuel to the adoption of eco-friendly vehicles. The protocol was certified in Italy and is being examined by the European Commission. It was discussed in a conference hosted by the Spoleto Festival Teatro dei due Mondi in June 2021,<sup>3</sup> an event that adopted the same green protocol that will be available to all the artists who decide to implement it.

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