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Abstract

The contribution focuses on the play *Kyoto* by Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, which premièred in 2024 at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, in a co-production by Good Chance and the Royal Shakespeare Company and transferred to the West End in 2025. In contrast to its environmentally conscious predecessors in contemporary British drama, in which the subject of climate change is predominantly treated from a bottom-up perspective, the play *Kyoto* dramatises the ten-year negotiation process of the so-called Kyoto Protocol of 1997, which took place at the highest global decision-making level: the United Nations Climate Change Conferences.

Although Murphy and Robertson's exposure of the conflicting interests of global players in environmental politics could be attributed to the entire recent "turn" in British political drama that "lays emphasis on argumentation and reflection rather than quick action" (Redling), immediate critical responses to *Kyoto* propelled the play into a genuine "thriller". The interest of this paper is to examine the play's "strategies of representation" – particularly its attitude to language – and to discuss the links it establishes between drama, debate and public opinion. These links are, namely, characteristic of a perennial dramaturgical matrix that has found in *Kyoto* one of its most darkly humorous specimens, attuned to the "deliberative ecology" that is both the singular promise for saving the planet and the crucial obstacle to doing so.

Keywords: *Kyoto*, environmental plays, deliberative dramaturgy

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The Deliberative Ecology of *Kyoto*

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The focus of my paper is the play *Kyoto* by the young British playwrights Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, which was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon and the Swan Theatre in 2024.¹ It then transferred to the @sohoplace theatre in the West End in 2025, after which it had its US première at Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse Theatre. The play, which dramatises the ten-year negotiation process that led to the so-called Kyoto Protocol – agreed in 1997 after a series of United Nations climate conferences – received predominantly positive reviews in its country of origin and was praised for its “entertaining” presentation of a potentially very dull topic, crowned by a “tremendously zippy production” (Lukowski) by Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin. The audience was cast as delegates to the conference, with some even seated at the circular conference table designed by Miriam Buether, side by side with the performers. The production, however, was not as warmly received in the United States, where it felt like “three long hours” and did not “move” the critics (Seff), perhaps partly due to its criticism of American policy, that is, the portrayal of all Americans, as one critic put it, not only as “villains” but also as “a bunch of very unattractive idiots” (Hofler).

My choice of this particular play to discuss the topic of “environment and the performing arts” was not primarily inspired by the level of attention *Kyoto* received in the anglophone world – evidenced by Christiane Amanpour's CNN interview with Joe Murphy and the lead actor Stephen Kunken, which attests to the play's high profile – but rather by its somewhat unusual approach to the challenges that such a global issue presents to art, drama and theatre in particular, especially in light of ongoing discussions about the desired features, aims and scope of “ecodramaturgy” (Woynarski). It should therefore be emphasised that *Kyoto*, as a play, partakes of two significant recent developments in British theatre: on one hand, it is one of several recent environmentally conscious British plays (see Angelaki; Hudson; Watson); on the other, it is also part of a recent “turn” in British political “drama of ideas” by a younger generation, such as Joe Penhall's

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Blue/Orange (2000), Lucy Pebble's *Enron* (2009), D. C. Moore's *The Empire* (2010), and Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* (2011). According to Ellen Redling, all these plays "lay emphasis on argumentation and reflection rather than quick action", following in this respect well-renowned playwrights such as David Hare. Later, we may add, James Graham with *This House* (2015), J. T. Rogers with *Oslo* (2016), and Irish playwright Owen McCafferty in *Agreement* (2023) also did so – all of them through explicit references to processes of negotiation and/or public political debates.

From the poetic standpoint, however, one should immediately state that in its address of the incommensurability of the ecological "hyperobject", *Kyoto* is far from unsettling traditional drama and the inherited registers or conventions of performance, as Una Chaudhuri suggests that the "drama of bad ideas" – as she wittily calls all plays facing the horror of the climate future – does or should do. On the contrary, the play seems to belong more to a fairly typical, if not light-hearted, theatre repertoire. It has a certain appeal because, despite its heavy degree of information delivery – as even some American critics admit – it still manages to reach the cinematic heights of an "electrifying political thriller" (Stewart), full of twists and turns that create a breathtaking viewing experience. But there is more: as if to counter the dystopian atmosphere of most contemporary British plays addressing environmental crisis from a bottom-up perspective and focusing on disastrous outcomes such as floods, storms, famine and social conflict (see Watson), the play, some British critics claimed from the outset, brought "unexpected wit" and "evoked laughter", proving to be "extraordinarily funny" (Barton). Judging from the interview the authors gave to Kate Kellaway, the play even claims to inspire optimism, despite its debunking of illusions about perhaps incremental but nonetheless significant progress in global environmental policy. Convinced that "there is a way forward together", the writing duo stated in the interview that they "wanted the audience to feel there is hope".

My argument will therefore focus on three crucial polemical points, each addressing the correlations between dramatic form, content and the ideological stakes of their successful interpenetration. This approach will lead me to situate *Kyoto* within the broader context of contemporary (post)dramatic theatre practice and its ethico-political, if not explicitly activist, tenor. Firstly, although, as I have already pointed out, *Kyoto* is not among the most daring eco-dramaturgical experiments but rather a commercially oriented theatre project – if not a product for middle-class consumption – I have chosen it to discuss the urgent topic of "ecology and the performing arts" because I have recently been interested in identifying crucial features that could mark the aforementioned new "deliberative turn" in contemporary dramaturgy and connect it with what I recognise as a perennial dramaturgical matrix. By the latter, I mean a subgenre of "deliberative drama": specifically, drama that either represents or initiates a process of collective discussion that ultimately leads to political action

or decisions on matters of public interest. Historical examples of this subgenre are not hard to find and range from Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Aristophanes' *Assembly of Women*, through Marivaux's *Colony*, Büchner's *Danton's Death* and Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, to more recent works such as Joël Pommerat's *Ça ira. Fin de Louis* (2014) and even the hit film *Conclave* (2024).

Kyoto, I will argue, differs from most contemporary environmental theatre pieces because, just like the truly immersive performance *World Climate Conference* by Rimini Protokoll from 2014 or the piece *COP – Make it Work!* by Bruno Latour and Philippe Quesne from 2015, the play refuses to address climate change from the position of a passive and powerless observer or even victim – immobilised by their helplessness in the face of this overwhelming, uncontrollable and unrepresentable “sublime” – and instead chooses to question the use of active and maximally efficient human management of this threat, even if only in the form of a deliberative practice that takes place at the highest level of global decision-making. However, in contrast to the mentioned postdramatic preludes by Rimini Protokoll and Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers to the actual 2015 Paris Climate Conference – both of which endeavour to involve the audience in the ultimately all too unmanageable “reality” of the delegates negotiating an agreement that corresponds to the major goals of their respective countries – *Kyoto* is not only a fictional but also a historical play.

For all the critics' praise for the immersive nature of its first performance, it is clear from reading the play that it follows a much more traditional path of dramatic docu-theatre – from a thoughtfully researched and written play to acted production – which is about the audience not inhabiting the role of people who are actually in a position to change global climate policy, but imagining it, taking a step back and “reflecting on it”. I refer here to the ongoing discussion about the relative progressiveness of dramatic and postdramatic theatre, particularly Hans-Thies Lehmann's emphasis on “the real and our reflection upon it” as a reaction of the audience that characterises attendance at postdramatic performances. Precisely the same formulation is adopted by Benjamin Bennett to argue that this kind of reaction simply requires an underlying narrative and a literary meaning. Therefore, in his view, this leads Lehmann to a conundrum in which “postdramatic theatre, in order to be precisely what it is, must become dramatic theatre all over again”, since “the theatre's strict realness, taken by itself, is not something that can operate in history without first being processed, without being given some form of communicable extension beyond the few moments in which we happen to apprehend it directly” (Bennett 205–206).

In this regard, despite inviting the audience to take delegate passes with lanyards, to assume the role of a representative of their allotted country, and to sit in the recreated theatre of the UN General Assembly next to the actors playing the delegates, the

play *Kyoto* should be described as thoroughly Aristotelian, without any pejorative connotation attached to the label. By “Aristotelian” I mean that the play presents – to quote Andreas Englhart’s bemused admonition in the face of contemporary German posthumanist environmental theatre – “actors in roles that involve action”, for “those who act bear responsibility and, if they have acted wrongly, carry the burden of guilt” (53). The characters in *Kyoto* are faced with such age-old ethical decisions: they are not, as in the two aforementioned interactive performances, empty masks for well-meaning so-called ordinary citizens or Latour and Quesne’s *science-po* students, who, in their capacity as audience, are supposed to blindly follow the given instructions and accept their role-playing in the world of a simulated future climate conference, but fictional beings interpreted by professional actors. These beings live in the world of an actual historical conference where they represent actual people thoroughly conditioned by their ethical decisions and others’ expectations – people, in fact, who could have either deliberately delayed and derailed the negotiations on reducing the carbon footprint or they could have encouraged the adoption of policies that would have led to a cleaner environment and a fairer share of the obligations related to climate change and its devastating consequences.

Hence my interest in the “human ecology” of *Kyoto*’s dramatic situations, that is, in the interactions that constitute its specific social “ecosystem”, with its rules of behaviour, its inclusions and exclusions, and its capacity to reconstitute or reformulate pre-existing micro-social norms – a kind of capacity, incidentally, that was denied to the audience in the supposedly highly interactive works I mentioned earlier. That is why even the most benevolent commentators on Rimini Protokoll’s *World Climate Change Conference* noted that during the production, “the experts occupy a large part of the performance time, as most of the workshops are in the form of lectures”, and that, although “the spectators are invited to participate in the assembly through a role, as a delegate of one of the member countries”, the overwhelming “emphasis is on the didactic aspects of the performance”, so that spectators are “sitting quietly and listening to the information being relayed to them”, while “communication with members of their group is rushed through the intermissions in the corridors, without giving them time for any real friction or confrontation” (Machairidis 18–19).

In the fictional world of *Kyoto*, however, in one of the play’s pivotal moments, it turns out that a group of delegates from undervalued, powerless nations within the UN – who are, of course, potentially the most affected by rising sea levels – are not only compelled but also empowered to exercise this ability and form a historic alliance of small island states in order to challenge the behind-the-scenes machinations of influential global actors who are portrayed as relentless champions of their own economic and ideological interests at the expense of the avowedly “insubstantial” number of people living in the Caribbean and Pacific islands. As theories of democratic deliberation have

recently revised some of their central assumptions precisely with regard to a distinct “dramaturgy” of deliberation (Ercan and Hendricks) and a “deliberative ecology” – implying the identification of “fluid”, “complex”, “dynamic” and “unpredictable” features that affect “webs of interdependence”, which “simultaneously support and constrain” social entities “at a given moment in time” (Mendonça et al. 334), it is more than appropriate to look at how *Kyoto* shows that attempts to deal with the prospect of natural environmental catastrophe should (also) be seen through the lens of this second kind of “ecology” – the one that hopefully enables people to work together to prevent the worst. In view of the fact that recent developments in the United States have unfortunately shown the extent to which the evasion of responsibility for the environment is ensured by a blatant disregard for democratic procedures, if not by the abolition of the idea of democracy as such – that very form of political life, from which the institution of theatre has emerged – it is perhaps quite interesting, among other avenues of investigation, to look at the play that addresses precisely the inextricability of the democratic debate not only from the desired salvation of the environment but also from the operative elements of a theatrical representation. It is not surprising that, in this context, some critics recalled the political metaphor of “the world stage” as an age-old, sometimes even “clumsy”, rhetorical device, which fits perfectly here because it becomes both “figurative and literal” (Barton).

Although the two previous postdramatic experiments on audience involvement in the procedural mechanisms of COPs were, to some extent, guided by the same idea, I argue that it is precisely the anti-representational attitude these experiments promote that prevents them from truly engaging with the above-mentioned constancy. If one accepts the critical accounts of the participatory shortcomings of these “assembly performances”, as Dimitrios Kyriakis Machairidis termed these events, and, as Michael Haas argues, their reckless disregard for their own energy expenditure, these two projects appear to have provoked what Benjamin Bennett, in his overall critique of the inherently contradictory principles of post-dramatic theatre already mentioned here, called a “totalitarian” reaction of the audience to their artistic initiatives – a kind of automatic consensus to the rules of their game (193–218). Moreover, it is only logical, since no *personal* involvement on the part of the audience was desired; only the playing of a sociopolitical role was intended. According to Machairidis, “the interest in this specific role is that it is not composed through personal or psychological characteristics, but through socio-political ones attributed to the country to which it belongs” (18).

My second point, therefore, is that *Kyoto* relied precisely on this latter aspect of human behaviour, which was so unwelcome in the two immersive experiments, as any personal involvement could, of course, disrupt the planned course of the interaction. As I will show shortly, *Kyoto* dispensed with didacticism in all its representations and

“unreality”, and confronted the audience with the very human, psychologically complex and emotionally guided embodiments of the opposing positions by having the actors perform the necessary impersonations. That is, they demonstrated the performative style and body language of the participants in the deliberations, showing how they “leave their seats and step onto that stage” and thus “signal everything about their virtue” (Barton) – in other words, how they present and enforce their arguments, how they reach various listeners through their passionate advocacy of their causes, and how they subsequently win over their audience. Deliberation is never only about the content that is being discussed, nor only about the role that is assigned in the given political landscape, but also about the personal character of the performance and the constitutive unpredictability of its outcome. In the case of the aforementioned pre-enactments, however, the experts were absorbed in their tasks, appearing *only as performers* of what Stephen Hilgartner called “science on stage”, while the audience, supposedly invited to participate wholeheartedly in the deliberation process, never truly had any influence on its pre-configured development.

My third point relates, therefore, to the concept of democracy and the paradox of form and content *Kyoto* makes us confront when we compare the play’s topicality to the democratic aspirations of postdramatic deliberative dramaturgy. To be sure, the intergovernmental level of decision-making during climate change COPs does not imply democracy as a form of government, but it does imply a democratic process – debate and voting as a prerequisite for the formulation of a policy in question. Given the current theoretical and artistic critique of democratic procedures and the rejection of the goal of political *consensus* as undesirable *stasis* in favour of what Jacques Rancière, in a slight variation on Derrida’s messianic invocation of a *démocratie à venir*, calls *dissensus* – a kind of constant unsettling of the boundaries of the political in order to include more and more people in it – the difficult question of *Kyoto* is the following: what about issues like climate change, which literally cannot wait for a *démocratie à venir* and which simply urgently need a global *consensus* of those responsible? While formally deploying the dramatic conflict that any truly democratic deliberation must entail, *Kyoto* also demonstrates the potential perniciousness of such an open-ended approach to democracy for the only viable strategies for achieving environmental goals: it uses the traditional dramatic form of “frictions and confrontations” of the interested parties in order to precisely show how the procedural aspect of the ongoing deliberations can be abused and distorted to endlessly postpone the realisation of a much-needed agreement into the indefinite and increasingly uncertain future so that the dark forces of fossil fuel lobbyists and profitable industries can carry on business as usual.

On the surface, *Kyoto* follows an exciting but fairly straightforward narrative in strict chronological order. It begins with the moment when Reagan ends his presidency, having, it seems, also ended ideological bipolarity for good by publicly calling on and

persuading Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. Unfortunately, around the same time, a scientific “discovery” of anthropogenic climate change darkens the bright prospects of unbridled capitalist triumph and the global promotion of “the American way of life”, which will soon prove to be the greatest ideological stake in the face of gloomy experts advocating reductions in gas emissions. The play thus begins to trace a ten-year-long, painful saga of negotiations held during a series of UN climate conferences, a saga finally crowned by a “happy ending”: the final agreement signed in 1997 under the solemn aegis of a “beacon” in human history. However, the audience is in fact confronted with a much more complex temporal and ontological structure that aims at a multilevel dramatic irony. The comically incongruous “Brechtian” narrator of the story – who, as we learn later, is in fact already dead at the beginning of the play – is none other than the demonic defender of fossil fuels himself, the American lawyer Don Pearlman, Reagan’s former energy adviser. He addresses the audience from the vantage point of his metaphysical position in the present moment, which he calls “the age of disagreement”, from which he invites the audience to descend into the more promising 1980s. It is then that Seven Sisters, the Macbeth-like consortium of oil companies, recruits Don to act as a kind of mediator during the upcoming climate conferences, or, to be more precise, to spy on their interests in the guise of the phantom CEO of the Climate Council and advisor to the Saudi Arabian delegate. Pearlman is aware that he is the last dramatic figure with whom an environmentally conscious inhabitant of the earth can identify. He patronisingly addresses the audience with the retrospective knowledge of a reliable witness. He guides them through all the stages of the negotiations, intervening time and again to comment on the unfolding scenes and expose the strategies he has employed to obstruct the agreement. He is the only one allowed to move from the backstage, where he is involved in high-dollar intrigues with the nations involved in the oil trade, to the front stage, where he acts as an extremely shrewd participant in the COP debates, forcefully undermining any setting of concrete “targets” and “timetables” that would commit the powerful nations to reducing their gas emissions. In this way, a double – historical and diegetic – ironic distance is created for the audience, even though they share the same space with the actors acting as UN representatives.

In addition to this obvious analogy between the spaces of theatre production and theatrical representation on the one hand, and the dynamics of covert conversations vis-à-vis public policy on the other, the play also insists on parallels between dialogic interaction and the deliberative practice of policy-making, as it focuses on the medium of language – as a means of communication, representation, manipulation and, not least, as a provisional binding force for the parties involved, following a telling motto from Tom Stoppard’s *The Real Thing*: “I don’t think writers are sacred, but words are. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little.” In contrast to such veneration of verbal tools, one of the Seven

Sisters, when referring to the fatal “targets and timetables”, bluntly declares: “We hate those words”, demonstrating the extent to which a materialistically driven worldview opposes the only viable means not only of discussion and collaboration but, above all, of imaginative, creative, if not utopian, “doing things with words” (Austin), which is the actual foundation of the action-oriented norms of theatrical dialogue. This does not mean, however, that the sinister consortium does not appreciate verbal manipulation, for what they will whisper into Don’s ear as a replacement for the unwanted phrasings is the hypocritical, endlessly malleable “empty signifier” (Laclau) of Western export-democracy, which should be used to beguile their opponents: “Freedom. Freedom to choose” (Murphy and Robertson 20).

Under the watchful ear of the diabolical intruder – the lawyer Don, sarcastically disguised as the CEO of the Climate Council – the representatives engage in a vaudeville-like exchange of politically predictable jibes reflecting the balance of power in the global landscape, with the United States and China as the main ideological and economic adversaries, Europe, that is, Germany, as the conscientious, crypto-leftist eco-activist, and the aforementioned small island states – the first to disappear from the face of the earth – trying to stand out and protest against the irresponsibility of the powerful. In contrast to the predominantly anti-logocentric and materialistic tendencies of today’s ecological theory and art (cf. Latour; Woynarski), in this play the whole question of agreeing on a common strategy that reduces the risks of planetary catastrophe on the one hand and satisfies divergent economic, social and political interests on the other proves to be primarily a struggle for the right expression, the right word, the right length and structure of a sentence in the declaration. So it turns out that every utterance in the negotiation process must be controlled, “down to the last comma”, as one of the interested lobbyists warns Don Pearlman, while exhorting him to do his best to keep the unwanted phrases “bracketed” for as long as possible, because to “unbracket” them on the instructions of the Convention’s persistent chairman, Raul Estrada, is to ensure their collective acceptance and thus unleash their binding potential for the future. The more heated the debate over seemingly innocuous phrases (should “human influence on global climate” be formulated as “appreciable”? “observable”? “inappreciable”? “significant”? “insignificant”? “substantive”? “insubstantive”? “pronounced”? “moderate”? “identifiable”? “inconclusive”? “incontrovertible”? “unconfirmed”? “meaningful”? “possible”? “material”? “plausible”? “detectable”? “disputable”? “verifiable”? “minor”? “measurable”? “minimal”? “demonstrable”? “doubtful”? “visible”? “arguable”? “noticeable”? “inconceivable”? or “discernible”?) or the change of tense from “would” to “could” to “will”, the more exhausted the representatives become, or the more stubbornly they refuse to give up the negotiation. After numerous exchanges of both friendly and hostile fire, deals are offered or traded, and unpredictable alliances are reorganised under newly emerging diplomatic conditions or blackmail, the chairman’s compromise solutions are suddenly accepted, and the agreement is finally adopted – unanimously.

However, there is another, private area behind the stage of this public, globally influential deliberative stage, namely the dramatic sphere of Don's everyday life, where Shirley Pearlman, Don's wife, is introduced. A conventional, moderately liberal and private rather than public feminist, who is so blinded by the narrow-mindedness of her own identity politics that she rages against the editors of *Time* magazine for putting the title "Planet of the Year" on its front cover instead of "Woman of the Year", Shirley appears to be a naive bystander who follows her husband around the world, mindlessly accepting his cynical explanations of the state of the world in the secret hope that one day he will take her on a well-deserved holiday to a glamorous resort. So far, so bad: we can immediately object to this overtly misogynistic portrayal of a typically clueless wife, if we were not mindful of the true impact of this character, who is, in fact, the only one seemingly destined to remain at the very margins of the debate. As opposed to those who consider the choice of the anti-hero Pearlman as protagonist and narrator to be "a stroke of genius" on the part of the two playwrights,² I would say that the latter applies more to the decision that Shirley becomes increasingly aware of the true scope of the whole environmental issue and is therefore given the last word in the play.

Not only is she the only character who actually evolves during the course of the negotiations, but it is also she who, at the end of the play, callously informs us of Don's death from lung cancer, most likely caused by his careless unwillingness to stop smoking – another symptom, one might surmise, of his indifference to the warnings of science about the effects of not only global but also self-inflicted air pollution. When the character of Don Pearlman patronises the audience at the beginning by using derogatory terms for a certain type of theatregoer, calling them "you theatre, artsy liberal types who pay your bills in empathy" – making fun of the hypocrisy of all upper-middle class alibis – it is precisely Shirley, the model, conscienceless, frivolous *bourgeoise*, who rounds off the irony of the play in her final monologue, not only by once again making an implicit connection between the UN building, the theatre and the world, but also comparing herself to the female lion, which, as the audience learns, lives twice as long as the male:

I wonder what that female lion does for half her life?

Beat.

She turns to the audience.

Why am I listening to someone I don't know, talking about someone I don't like?

The world is full of people we don't know, and people we don't like. I look around at the world today, and I'm terrified. We're all drifting further and further apart, speaking completely different languages, and the interpreters have well and truly left the building.

² I refer here to a blog by the couple Stephen and Ellie writing under the heading of Berkeley Square Barbarian, and published at <https://www.berkeleysquarebarbarian.com/2025/03/12/kyoto-the-play-review/>, accessed 5 Jan. 2026.

Meanwhile, the cherry blossom in Kyoto falls earlier each and every year.

But you know... Even though America didn't ratify the protocol, Raul had organised it in such a way that it would come into force with or without them. Most countries met their targets. Many even exceeded them. It was a small step towards –

She looks up.

The cherry blossom is falling.

Blackout.

The End. (Murphy and Robertson 132)

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