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Excerpt
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Introduction

Prologue: a kind of storm

As I sat down at my desk in front of a window that overlooks the urban back gardens, pitching to write this first sentence of *Theatre Ecology*, there was a loud thunderclap and rain poured suddenly down. Until that moment I hadn't much noticed the signs of the gathering storm: lowering sky, light fading, air growing heavy with humidity, trees beginning to stir their branches, birdsong quietening, the small flock of pigeons standing perfectly still on the slope of a slightly glistening tiled roof. The storm delivers a single flash of lightning, but all I see is the whole sky for an instant turned to bright silver and it's gone, except maybe the drenched leaves for a nanosecond held a response to its brilliant efflorescence. A couple more thunderclaps and the whole process slips into reverse. The pigeons fly off, the trees become stiller, the air dries out a little, light returns as the sky lifts and there's even a hint of sunshine on a distant sandstone wall. But it will be a while before the birds chirp up again as the usual weather routines return.

What had I just witnessed again for the umpteenth time in a life of over six decades? This was the scene when the doped-up hippie charter-captain of the borrowed million dollar yacht almost ran us onto the Hawaiian coral reef, when the Volkswagen beetle got caught by a Mexican river in full flood that swept us away, when we trudged up the backbone of England as a challenge to cystic fibrosis, when the racing bike lost traction and slid over the edge of the high rocky ridge, when we lay on the bed in the lighthouse hotel with the curtains opened to the raging night. And as I tapped out that last sentence today's storm started up again as if to remind me such dramas are not just a human affair, this time – I swear it – with more energy and vigour than before. Then I pitched: there have also been in my past the high storms of myth and religion and literature and art, of the minds and brains of the brilliant and the insane, of history and politics and wars and genocide and terrorism, of the heart's passion and desire and love beyond all bounds. And so as the storm outside my study window gathered more force I had retreated again to human culture, to seek shelter where there isn't really much at all, where the elements are just as wild and unpredictable, as dangerous and as magnificent and as wondrous in their ways as those of the so-called natural world.

For years now I have been charting a course up the narrowing straits between nature and culture. A decade and a half ago the prospect seemed wide open in an imagined global political synthesis of the red and the green.[1] Seven years on and I was reaching for an ecology of performance by crawling through an utterly blacked-out maze made by a Colombian theatrical wizard.[2] Just recently I was still on my hands and knees, but this time under the broken branches of high-up ancient woodland as a Force-8 gale howled and the torrents of rain hurled down and swirled around ears and splashed up to thighs in a havoc of whipped-up wetness. As the saying goes, the going got tougher, but then as the straits became really dire their hardships paradoxically opened up, if not exactly to a wonderful lightness of being, then perhaps to a bit of a new becoming in ecological pathologies of hope.

The chapters of this book were once in the strictest sense *essays* about that progress, just attempts to read the runes of a planet threatened by a dominant and dangerous species of which I have no choice but to admit to membership. Even in the moments when I ironically think, tapping away at this machine, I'm a born-again cyborg. The chapters were, all but one, written for particular occasions in the weird international trade of my posthuman half-academic life, just as a way of trying to be as fully in touch as possible with whatever broader environments I found myself pulled towards. Now they have been partially rewritten to draw out the senses of that attempted embrace of nature–culture as the straits got narrower, as the state of the planet grew daily more precarious, as the global storm clouds lowered deeply and grew much darker. But still I trust these writings carry some prospects of hope, however tenuously held. Because in welcoming the thunderstorm and its lightning today I note it was far, far more than a metaphor for moments in a life now nearly gone, or for human civilisations at their best and worst. Its silver flash was also, aeons ago, possibly the prompt that startled up all the amazing dramas of life on this enigmatic Earth.

[1] Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 255–6.
[2] Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 214–16.

CHAPTER 1

On theatre and performance ecology

ON A MOMENT IN THE WOODS

Water gushes down the trunks of ancient trees in streamlets and the wind whips against them, flinging a spray like needles into squinting eyes. The storm blasts strain even the thickest limbs of the oaks into creaky waving, their early springtime leaves making flittering manic crests. Where the wood has been torn apart and fallen in the past huge broken branches reach to an invisible horizon, tentacles petrified in the moment of death. Best to crawl under them on hands and knees, head down close to the deep mulch to dodge the worst of the swirling lashes. Toes, feet, knees, hands, fingers are sodden and pained with cold as you claw a path across the forest floor, ears numb from the wild drubbing of the gale. Then suddenly you hear it, a high-pitched groaning and a whining of some other animal trapped that you must track down. Hard to locate through the raging air but at last you find its source, right ear pressed to a huge splintered branch jammed upright with its top end in the beech it was wrenched from long ago. As limb grates against trunk in the canopy high above, the old wood vibrates to its core, still singing with life so many years after it died. Listening entranced with cheek against the dripping bark I glimpse a man in the gloomy distance walking his dog. He sees an elderly grey-bearded crazy in a bright orange cagoule hugging a broken tree at the heart of an ancient wood high up on a famous Dorsetshire hill in the midst of a Force-8 gale. Despite the distance and the gloom I see his eyes enlarge and his body shake with laughter and his big dog straining against its leash as it howls and barks at me. Giving a half-hearted apologetic wave I'm thinking: dear God what else will I end up doing for the love of theatrical art!

None of the rest of our group of twenty saw the man, so I may have imagined him. After a shivery and quick debrief of the crawling exercise, the last of the day, a couple came to listen to the singing branch. Then it was back in the Transit van to the warmth of the village hall to work out what the Lewesdon Hill gale had produced for *Green Shade*, an eco-installation and durational performance we were devising for the Wickham Theatre in Bristol. That city lies in a bowl carved from surrounding hills and connected to the Bristol Channel by the Avon Gorge. At its narrowest point the nineteenth-century Clifton Suspension Bridge spans the deep ravine. The bridge is 78 metres above the median level of the River Avon, which has the second highest tidal range in the world. The very worst-case scenario for global warming puts the water level at high tide just 10 metres below the roadway of the bridge, making Bristol into a toxic lagoon with maybe twenty of its taller buildings becoming concrete islands. The water would also lap, swirl, break, hurl against the gates of the city zoo in utterly unpredictable extremes of weather. Human animals might just about survive in highly specialised groups in geodesic biomes built on the nearby Downs.

We stripped the Wickham Theatre, an old printing workshop now become a flexible black-box studio, back to the walls. Borrowing from Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Museum of Fetish-ized Identity*,[1] we designated seven areas as habitat-workshops for specialist survival teams, each dealing with water, plants, animals, air, time, energy, filtration. Water had an oil-drum fountain and a splendidly opaque system for processing liquids; plants had a small stairwell with a brightly lit vegetable patch off a food preparation area; animals were squashed into a feather-nested, netted alcove with a window onto an outdoor light-well where sometimes real birds flitted down to eat the scraps placed out for them; energy had a 5-metre-high scaffolding Heath Robinson machine incorporating old bikes where you could lie back and peddle-generate the glow of a small headlamp into life; air survived as best it could in the open middle of the space, an old parachute and Pilates-ball globes its only anchors; and so on. Each of the eighteen performers was in two groups (so thirty-six 'survivors' made up the seven survival teams) and pitched in to make the 'nature' of their habitats and the styles of their work-clothes: no attempt was made to link designs, each team generated its own visual and spatial qualities. The Eden Project in Cornwall provided an understated general framework, the whole space imagined as the experimental engine-room of a much bigger biome community.[2] Three big, suspended, plastic-covered hexagons, plus a few more standing against the walls, suggested work on

[1] Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism and Pedagogy* (London: Routledge, 2005); Website – Guermo Gómez-Peña: www.pochanostra.com (18.11.2006).
[2] Website – Eden Project: www.edenproject.com (20.11.2006).

the structure of the larger-scale shelter. A smaller one was hung high up in the fly tower, a continuous video loop of darkly scudding clouds suggesting a skylight window on the devastated postglobal meltdown world outside, a remnant from the storm on Lewesdon Hill. Another was the Toxic Drizzle Dance, a ritual blast performed to boost up energy when the horror of survival got too much. An ironic pop-operatic number, it had all eighteen bodies falling in perfect unison to the ground, writhing and choking like there was no tomorrow.

Spectator–visitors often perched on the edges of the survival-habitats, but mostly they wandered around browsing at will as the show ran for nine hours non-stop during two days. Our practical aim was to devise a performance system that could maintain the same levels of intensity of focus and energy usually found in much shorter shows. All the stuff used in the piece would be recycled and recyclable. We were searching for homologies between the real material conditions and the imaginary world of the production, making the total space a single place. In this sense the project was anti-theatrical, aiming to collapse the differences that theatre by its nature usually works to construct. An environmentally immersive experience was our ideal, like being in a storm on a hill.

The philosophical touchstone for the project was David Harvey's claim that 'if all socio-economic projects are ecological projects, then some conception of "nature" and "environment" is omnipresent in everything we do'.[3] Besides the amazing Eden Project, an early practical inspiration was Biosphere II, the huge glass hangar that replicates some of the Earth's ecosystems in the Southern Arizona desert[4] (see Fig 1, p. 8). These are both remarkable sites, but it could be that they are *pathological* reactions to the degradation that humans wreak on Earth. Biosphere II particularly is a paradoxical intervention in the ecosphere, like its close cousin the theatre holding a mirror up to 'nature' that tends to seal it off hermetically from the 'natural world'. Both Eden and Biosphere II influenced every aspect of *Green Shade* – aesthetic, thematic, ontological – as it aimed to provide an ironic antidote to such ecological desperation. Making a bittersweet anti-theatrical strike against the theatre of man-made biospheres. Trying to use performance like lightning, a destructive force that delivers positive effects.

Lightning figures in *Theatre Ecology* in a number of guises because it is one of the Earth's most theatrical and spectacularly *common* natural

[3] David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 174. This passage recurs at points throughout *Theatre Ecology*, as a reminder of its self-referential truth.
[4] Websites – Biosphere II: www.biospherics.org/ (25.08.2006); www.bio2.com (25.08.2006).

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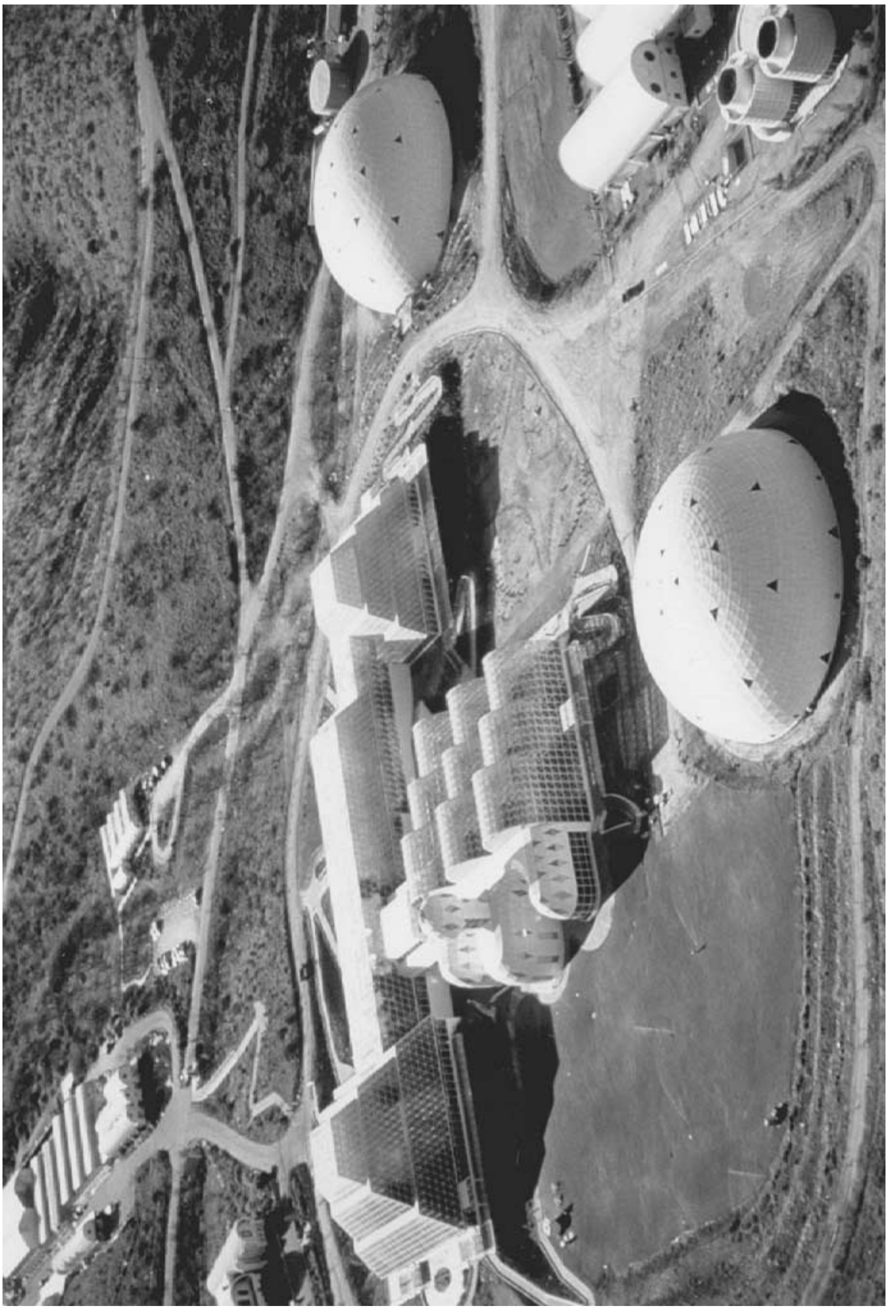

Figure 1 Biosphere II, Arizona, USA – 1991. The giant ecological ark as construction was nearing completion. For scale note the cars in the background. Compare the plan on p. 301. Photograph: Gill Kenny.

performance events. Also, under certain conditions, lightning produces a weirdly paradoxical effect. It creates an instant fossil of itself. Sometimes when it strikes quartzose sand or soil it makes a hollow glass tube that is root-like in appearance, reproducing the branching path of the electrical charge as it travels into the ground. Called fulgurites or petrified lightning, these structures can be 5 metres long or more.[5] What are these instant performative objects, and what might they teach us about theatre and performance ecology? This is a complicated question, but, if you'll forgive the pun, we can short-circuit a long discussion by thinking of the material aspect of fulgurites, the glass itself, as a *negative* trace of lightning, which makes the hollow tube that it enfolds the *positive* remains of the lightning event. The glass is *negative* in that it is *not* the lightning, though it materially shows the parameters of its past path. The tube can be considered a *positive* trace, because it is *not not* the lightning in that it immaterially indicates more fully than the glass the route of the flash. If it were possible to use the tube as a mould by, say, filling it with molten silver then breaking it away, the flash would be manifest. In other words, fulgurites are paradoxical objects, simultaneously *negative-and-positive* in respect of the past performance event that produced them.

This book explores how theatre/performance and ecology may work to the same principles that make lightning and fulgurites interdependent and mutually illuminating. It explores how ephemeral human events – just like lightning-flashes, waves lapping against a beach, trees swaying in a storm – can have lasting effects because they always leave more or less durable traces that frequently are fundamentally paradoxical. So while it was certainly quite mad of the elderly bloke to go hugging a tree in gale, might it yet have been a madness touched by a little flash of eco-sanity?

COMING TO A PRETTY PERILOUS PASS

It may seem slightly odd to begin a book on *Theatre Ecology* with a show about ecological disaster staged in a theatre stripped back to its walls. As the punters came in the back way through the big, sliding workshop doors, having just passed under a powerful air-wash shower, they were usually clearly taken aback by the spectacle of a large, busy, at first sight chaotic, faintly futuristic workshop populated by weirdly garbed drones. All the usual architectural trappings of banked seating, proscenium arch

5 From the Latin *fulgur*, 'thunderbolt'. See Website – Wikipedia, Fulgurite: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fulgurite (02.11.2006).

with fire curtain, drapes or flats creating a stage area were gone. Now the superimposed fly-tower and cobbled-on parts of a fixed lighting grid pointed up the fact that the oddly shaped space punctuated by concrete pillars had *not* been built as a theatre. The 'theatre' became skeletal, spectral, no more than fragmented traces of a civilisation that had brought about its own demise.

The ambivalence of theatre in face of a calamity for humanity is a major concern of this book. I am interested in the various parts it has played as a prominent place for public gatherings in the run-down to global disaster that seemed to get steeper by the day in the first decade of the third Christian millennium. In what ways has the theatre been unavoidably embroiled in the ecological mess that is climate change? What could the theatre not help itself doing to stem or strengthen the causes of the environmental calamity that scientists started clamouring about? What was intrinsic to the theatre's myriad links into its social, cultural, political, economic, historical and, yes, environmental milieu? What were the 'natures' of theatre and associated performances in times when influential voices increasingly predicted the 'end of nature'?[6] These are hard questions as none of the main existing methods for the analysis of theatre – semiotics, phenomenology, cultural materialism, feminism, psychoanalysis, historiography and so on – paid much, if any, direct attention to the ecological qualities of the theatre phenomenon. Neither did mainstream studies of ecology, so far as I could tell when I first started seriously groping for answers to such questions in the early 1990s. So the title of this book has a deliberate ambivalence. It references both an object (or objects) of investigation, *theatre* ecology (as in '*human* ecology'), and the processes of theatre's unavoidable ecological engagement and/or disengagement regarding the environment, theatre *ecology*.

Theatre Ecology as a project therefore is broadly *homologous* to the ambivalence of theatre in the environment of the ecological era, sharing similar or related structural qualities. And just as the performances of *Green Shade* were haunted by theatre, so this book is ghosted by its history as part of global events leading to ecological nightmare for humans. This is literally the case, as the originals of its chapters were written, then presented and published internationally, between 1999 and 2005/6. But it is true in other ways as well. Most significant of these has been a continuous involvement with disciplinary debates about the

[6] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature: Humanity, Climate Change and the Natural World*, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2003 [1989]).

'natures' of performance and with creative research projects.[7] These were a major context, a crucial milieu for my investigations of theatre ecology, and they have brought the project to a curious and paradoxical pass. My research into *performance* and ecology, some of which is presented as part of this volume, has led to analyses regarding the coming calamity for humanity that provide a testing environment for my arguments about theatre ecology. So it is necessary that a part of this introductory chapter to *Theatre Ecology* take the form of some provisional conclusions about *performance ecology* and the causes of a global addiction to performance on the part of human-animals in the age of ecology.

To cross that paradoxical pass requires five fundamental arguments by way of ecological route maps, which I sketch out in the rest of this chapter. First, concerning the emergence of the 'performance paradigm' in performative societies. Second, on the contradictory qualities of the performance paradigm and the double binds of performance addiction. Third, concerning serviceable definitions of theatre and performance ecology in the search for antidotes to that addiction. Fourth, outlining significant approaches to thinking through theatre ecology. Fifth, concerning the necessity of a paradoxology of performance in getting to grips with the paradoxes of theatre and performance ecology. Those arguments are followed by a brief survey of some analytical writings and creative practices relevant to theatre ecology, and finally suggestions for alternative orders for reading the texts that constitute *Theatre Ecology*. This closing option is fundamental to the reader's freedom in criss-crossing the pass between theatre and performance ecology via paths that, with luck, might lead to a little eco-sanity. For as Heraclitus said: Unless you expect the unexpected you will never find truth, for it is hard to discover and hard to attain.

PERFORMATIVE SOCIETIES AND THE PERFORMANCE PARADIGM

In the final decades of the twentieth century performance became to culture what water is to nature, an element indispensable to life. In some respects this was not altogether new, as ritual performance traditionally had provided a spring for human survival. But by the third millennium new global forms of political, economic, mediatised and technological change together engendered the 'performative societies': societies that are

[7] My principal performance as research projects 2000–5 were: *The Iron Ship*, SS *Great Britain*, Bristol Docks, 2000; *Mnemosyne Dreams*, SS *Great Britain*, Bristol Docks, 2002; *Green Shade*, Wickham Theatre, University of Bristol, 2004; *Being in Between*, Bristol Zoological Gardens, 2005.