

Provocations for Commissioning and Writing Plays in the Context of Climate Crisis

(Climate Conversations, Donmar Warehouse 2022-23)

For commissioners and dramaturgs:

- Is the term 'new writing' the best term, or does it perpetuate capitalist notions of 'new, new, new' rather than more natural cycles of reuse and reimagining? Also ties in with Eurocentric (and/or capitalist) conceptions of knowledge, which emphasise 'genius' and/or uniqueness/singularity, compared with understandings of knowledge in many other cultures, ancient and modern, where knowledge is understood as more of a web, building on, or connecting with, past understanding.
- Be conscious of the spectre of Shakespeare, "The Great White Bard". He was writing at the birth of capitalism: the start of Empire and the start of man-made climate change. Don't hold him up as a perfect model of a writer - a 'British genius'; remove our 18th century cultural nostalgia. He was simply a human artist, not a god. His work was messy and experimental. The elevation of play-texts to untouchable literature is related to the way that Shakespeare's writing was used (without reference to performance or theatre) to promote ideas of English superiority around the world.
- Hold an initial conversation with a newly commissioned playwright, explaining about our climate-careful priorities. The agenda:
 - Invite them to take notice of their dramaturgical choices (see below)
 - Remind them that we live in an era of critical uncertainty regarding the climate, which increasingly involves unprecedentedly rapid changes to how people live, and that this is the context of life today across the world.

- Ask them if they want us to provide any resources to support their growing awareness of the climate crisis TODAY? (The conversation moves so fast; can we help keep them up to date?)
 - Share the theatre's policies and info pack on its processes relating to environmental responsibility: both in terms of the building generally, and specifically in relation to production (could take the form of a regularly updated webpage)
 - Invite them to think about the way they can support a green agenda, regardless of how far their play engages directly with climate crisis – eg through a statement at the start of the text about what they would like any production to be mindful of (cf Dawn King's *The Trials*)
 - If they are interested in engaging more directly with our context of climate crisis, make sure they understand that the breadth of possible kinds of writing is much wider than the idea of a 'climate crisis' play seems to suggest (see below for examples)
- Are notes meetings run in an equitable and fair way, with clear agendas and expectations, so that the writers feel safe and can flourish? Are the writers in control of the conversation?
 - Are workshops and R&Ds run in climate-careful ways? In particular think about inclusivity – how people are made to feel welcome – and openness to different ways of working. Approach R&D as enabling an evolution of the work rather than a test.
 - When might co-creating/co-writing be a better commissioning model?
 - Who are we commissioning? Is it a representative slate of multiple life perspectives?
 - Who might the audiences be for this play? If they're new to you, how will you reach them? Think about class as well as all protected characteristics. What barriers can you remove to attendance?

For writers under commission:

- **We need to notice our dramaturgical choices.** Don't work habitually, work intentionally. What might the unintended consequences of your 'normal' choices be? What ideas or structures might they perpetuate? Who might they exclude? Specifically in relation to climate, how might it contribute to a normalisation of disengagement from climate (creating the fallacy that to even write about climate crisis is already a form of activism, rather than a reflection of contemporary experience). Remember all dramaturgy (time-space relations in the work, including its relation to audiences) encodes power relations: are you tacitly endorsing the inequitable power relations of our culture (that contribute to climate crisis)?
- For example:
 - **Structure/Form:** how does the form you write in express the themes you are addressing? Be aware of what classical dramaturgies do by way of centring on individuals, inner psychology as the locus of power, and the exclusion of the natural world from any social consideration. 'The Hero's Journey' is complex: it can perpetuate a single-saviour narrative (often white male). Remember this is a Eurocentric construct. Privileged individualism isn't useful anymore - collective action, wider participation, is a more galvanising story. Form is power and politics. With that in mind, activate your choices.
 - **Character(s):** who are we celebrating, platforming, noticing? What does this say about the politics of today? How can we write about networks and communities (cf *The Band's Visit*). Remember innovation and meaningful action never actually achieved alone
 - **Theme:** a play doesn't need to be about the climate crisis (as a topic) for it to be about the climate crisis (as a context). In fact, every play we write today exists within the climate crisis. What might that mean? Do characters/situations written in the awareness of uncertainty/unpredictability/loss/change as part of their lives, present a more accurate and experientially impactful portrait of the world we are living in now?

- **Tone:** Is 'depressing' paralysing? When should we be playful and fun? Can we imagine alternative structures, societies, ways of being (either through reflecting existing practices or imagining alternative scenarios)
 - **Genre:** what is the implied message of the form you are writing in? are tragedies helpful for this era? If you are writing a tragic drama, is it tending to nihilism, accepting fatalism and shutting down questions of change – or is it acting as a warning, addressing the failures in human behaviour? (The former plays into the hands of those climate-destroyers who want to maintain their power, the latter opens up questions about what humans are capable of). What possibilities are there for exploring alternative scenarios, or imagining how we can change the future (epic)?
- Don't be paralysed by the gap between your ideal world and the real world as you see it. It is precisely in this gap that there's the greatest tension. There's value in probing the gap between the urgency/necessity of transformation – and society/individuals holding on to a way of life that opposes their interests/beliefs.
 - Recognise consumption/consumer mentality as a specific cultural practice built on the right to have immediate desires fulfilled (and the right, on the parts of companies, to fulfil – and even generate – those desires by exploiting people and resources out of sight of the consumer). Ask yourself whether your writing assumes this is simply 'human nature' rather than a cultural framework we are currently immersed in.
 - Not every play that explores questions in relation to climate crisis has to be overtly radical/bold/political/involve a grand gesture. Exploration in small shifts, or gently inviting opening up our mindsets, is fine (CF Force Majeure's skewering of male egotism). So is finding the joy. As climate activist Simone Ahiaku quoted at the NT's climate day: 'It is the job of artists to make the revolution irresistible'.
 - There are many purposes for engaging with climate crisis (implicitly or explicitly) – it doesn't have to follow conventional perceptions and about 'persuasion' or

'communicating the facts'. Other purposes/modes include: exploring grief, loss, anxiety, scale (and our difficulties computing it), cognitive dissonance, gaps between belief and behaviour, intergenerational conflicts, addressing the political and social systems that brought about the catastrophic era we are living through, telling stories that decentre Eurocentric/Western models, the uncanny – landscapes that are the same but not the same, entanglements with other living beings, frustration, fury, pain, working out how else we might live – and who else we could be, taboos in relation to all of the above

Writers' agency:

- What responsibility can a playwright take to ensure climate-careful practices when their plays are produced, now and in the future? e.g. at the start of the script, instructions for
 - how it can be cast in ways that are conscious of lived experience/inequities in access to roles
 - climate-careful practices in staging (cf Dawn King's *The Trials*)
- What info can writers ask of a theatre company? - e.g. ask to see their Ethics or Environmental policies, and then share thoughts on how the writing process/production can align with this
- Think about the power you might have to shape the context of performances of your play, at what point in the process – and use it! Eg ask for a conversation about production conditions – does how the work is being made contradict what it is exploring?

This document was developed by Zoë Svendsen in collaboration with Clare Slater, out of consultation discussions at the Donmar New Work and Commissioning Workshop, as part of the Climate Conversations research project, 2022-23, 21 April 2023; with Farah Karim-Cooper, Mike Longhurst, Josh Parr, Dadiow Lin, Sylvie Bressler, Isley Lynn, Dawn King, Ella Hickson, Sonali Bhattacharrya, Ishy Din, and Inua Ellams.