



Plague: A Tragic Way to Empower the Artistic Imagination and to Deliver Hope

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impacts of the plagues in dramatic literature and performance art beginning with ancient Greek Theatre and ending in Contemporary Theatre. It addresses the traditional application of the metaphorical employment of the plagues and a shift towards the pronunciation of the space in Contemporary Theatre. This research exposes the existential concerns that threaten humanity, such as fascism, marginalization, and the catastrophic consequences of climate change. To clarify the main argument, the classical and modern texts, along with the opinions of legendary theater theoreticians, directors, and artists, are examined. These sources range from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Albert Camus' *The Plague*, and Ann Bogart, to Robert Wilson. These existential concerns, along with possible artistic responses to the current problems of climate change and COVID-19, inspired them to start a discussion through more ecologically concerned theater practices..

Keywords: Plague, Marginalization, Metaphor, Space, Eco-Theater



Introduction

Plagues have been one of the sources that have empowered the imagination of theater artists throughout history. The main reason for this creative force is the context of the diseases, such as the physical and psychological manifestation of the plagues, contamination, and the methods of treatment. This article examines the traditionally metaphorical application of the plagues to address existential issues of humanity, and a shift through physical and even virtual space in Contemporary Theatre due to COVID-19.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic encouraged art makers to find new aesthetic methods to reflect social, political, and ecological issues and emergencies. Historically, plagues have fired playwrights and artists' imaginations metaphorically. Artists investigated the question of "who are we" in their new surroundings.¹ For example, Sophocles wrote *Oedipus the King* as a "plague character." In fact, the play wasn't literally about the plague that hit Athens in 430 B.C.E. Regardless, the dramatist applied the disease as a metaphor of devastation to articulate the tragic destiny of an innocent man, Oedipus.

In the 1940s, Albert Camus wrote *The Plague*, employing a fictional plague as an analogy to criticize rising fascism, Nazis, and other dictatorial regimes. Nowadays, the emerging aesthetics of art, such as Eco-Theater, concentrate on the question of "where are we?"² This question is linked to climate change, as well as the current and future environmental catastrophes that threaten the environment. Ecological issues are predominantly related to physical space. Fires, droughts, hurricanes, dislocation, and exodus significantly affect living organisms, endangering them in their habitats. The catastrophic effects of climate change are a big issue that we are and will be dealing with globally. After all, both aesthetic approaches are interested in the existential emergencies of humans and ecology. Comprehension of these aesthetic perceptions can assist art makers in creating dialogues to explore options while reflecting on contemporary social, political, and ecological issues.

COVID-19 destabilized and paused human lives for a while. Loss, unrest, uncertainty, fear, anxiety, isolation, and violence highlighted this tragic period. The consequences of crises have been traumatizing as well as opening doors for hope. This temporary pause has allowed artists to stop, to think, and to reconstruct. It has paved a way to communicate and to share both among the art makers, and between art makers and audience in terms of responding more effectively to the issues of the current pandemic or plague environment. In a recent interview, Richard Schechner states, "This virus gives an opportunity to think between the end of the virus and the climate catastrophe. Artists can participate in this. Because an artist's job is

1 Kristin Idaszak, "ECODRAMATURGY", Kristin Idaszak, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.kristinidaszak.com/ecodramaturgy>.

2 Ibid.

imaginary and participatory... So, I do feel that we have the opportunity, locally as artists, to reconfigure the aesthetic structures. And then to elaborate social and political world to world to deep structural changes.”³ Schechner’s hopeful approach as socially and politically active members of the art community remind us of Brecht’s activism. Anne Bogart also gives credit to Brecht with this quote from him: “New times need new forms.”⁴ Clearly, Schechner and Bogart see the future, which is embedded in activism, as hopeful, as did Brecht. In terms of possible changes in theater ecology, Bogart believes it is necessary to rethink the basics of theater. She reminds us of the value of listening, which allows us to cultivate ideas. Artists must be aware of the issues as well as fragmented words and pay attention to them. Bogart views the artists as the voice of the problems and happenings in life.

Therefore, Bogart is less interested in using the virtual platforms as a means of self-expression and critically approaches the way people use social media platforms. She shares Tina Landau’s definition of self-expression on virtual platforms as a “form of mourning” and Bogart argues with this statement by stating, “The theatre is not self-expression... If anything, it’s a eulogy. It’s actually giving voice to dead people.”⁵ This profound perception of theatre has a dimension of social and community consciousness.

As theater makers, she wants to see that people are using virtual platforms to project deeper issues that connect with one another through understanding and empathy. Bogart illustrates her point with a story. American prisoners at camps during the Vietnam War, and during WWII in Japan and China, created a communication method by tapping. The story continues, “they would be separated and enforced not to actually speak to one another. And so, they figured out a very elaborate way of tapping to one another, either through the walls or against the pipes. They figured out elaborate messaging systems that would go from one cell to another. And I thought, ultimately, that is interesting because it’s one person trying to reach out to others or a group of people trying to stay together amidst horrifying circumstances.”⁶ What Bogart suggests is a way of communication that has a deeper understanding and sense of each other, rather than shoddily expressing oneself in virtual reality. This is like earlier artists who used plague as a metaphor– a metaphor of touching ever-existing issues such as marginalization and violence. Ultimately, plague urges artists to search for their own way of reaching out, as Bogart expressed, “[A]re you there, do you hear me, and I have something to say than just kind of showing off.”⁷

3 The Segal Center, “SEGAL TALKS Richard Schechner (NYC)”, Video, *YouTube*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oznSzKhiw8c&t=1763s>.

4 The Segal Center, “SEGAL TALKS: Anne Bogart (New York, USA)”, Video, *YouTube*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E38Ft3pQGJg>.

5 HowlRound Theatre Commons, “Directors Lab West Connects - Anne Bogart and Jessica Hanna on Sunday 24 May 2020”, Video, *YouTube*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUHOSjT5HX8>.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

There is an undeniable shift from pre-pandemic to during and post-pandemic aesthetics and our means of communication. Zoom became a popular platform connecting people locally and globally. Eco-theater is gaining great currency across the globe by pointing out emerging current and future climatic catastrophes. The predicted future environmental disasters will manifest more horrifying effects on the planet than COVID-19. Richard Schechner warns, “New York will not have 250 thousand cases and 15 thousand deaths but be under 10 feet of water where Amsterdam and London will have disappeared where Bangladesh will be flooded out etc.”⁸ As evidenced here, the question of “where we are” is more highlighted than “who we are.”

This approach has two points related to Eco-Theater. Firstly, Eco-Theater is primarily focused on ecology-based issues rather than human-centered problems. Secondly, space has crucial importance in Eco-Theater. Yet the theater world is diverse. A number of performance companies still center on human conditions such as alienation, marginalization, violence, exodus, human trafficking, love, loss, and isolation, which are as urgent as the growing concerns of Eco-Theater. Hence, it is worthwhile to study the plagues in their historical and contemporary conditions. Examining the metaphorical applications of plague, and its relations with space, will allow us to understand the deeper relationship between plague’s political and social dimensions, such as minorities, scapegoating, pollution, and purification. The metaphorical comprehension of plague may help us to examine horrifying historical and current events such as Hitler’s “Jewish Plague,” violence against minorities, and even deportations at the borders.

Pharmakos, Scapegoating

A healthy body is a powerful metaphor in Western literature. It refers to the wholesomeness of the city or nation. In ancient Greece and its colonies, scapegoating or pharmakos rituals were practiced, purifying the city from plague and other environmental disasters. The plague was pollution and it needed to be purified by exclusion, extermination, containment, and isolation for curative purposes. Therefore, the annual pharmakos or scapegoating rituals symbolized the purification process of the city. The ancient Greek dramatists used the metaphorical applications of the healthy body. One of the greatest plague dramas was *Oedipus the King*.

The scapegoat ritual was based on human sacrifice. In this ritual “a man of the poorer classes used to offer himself as a scapegoat for the city which in return, supported him, for a year upon the best quality food.”⁹ His service as a scapegoat was meant to benefit the community. Then, “at the end of the period, dressed in sacred garments, he was led through the whole city, while prayers were uttered that all the evils of the people might fall upon his head. He was then cast out of the city or stoned to death by the people outside the walls.”¹⁰ The pharmakos maintain

8 The Segal Center, “SEGAL TALKS Richard Schechner (NYC)”.

9 Jennifer Cooke, *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 77.

10 Ibid., 77.

two binary functions: curative and transmitter of the plague. Thus, removing the scapegoat from the city or community meant eradicating the disease and bringing the cure. Hence, the sacrificed person was both considered poisonous and curative. In fact, this binary is consistent both in the formal and natural religions. Later on, we will see that there are attributions against Jewish people as plague carriers in the Old Testament, and even more recently. In ancient Greece, along with several of his duties, Apollo is considered the one bringing plague and the cure, as in *Oedipus the King*. In formal religions, God is also believed to be both the beneficent and the bringer of diseases to punish sinners. Albert Camus extensively talks about God's role in delivering the plague in his well-known novel *The Plague*, which criticized Nazism, fascism, and dictatorships.

The sacrificial ritual symbolizes the distinction between outdoor and indoor borders. By placing the scapegoat outside the city borders, the community contains itself as a city or nation. In this way, “the scapegoat who the city casts beyond its walls is supposed to secure the city by placing outside what is actually part of the inside and its constitution.”¹¹ The insider-outsider binary and scapegoat has been practiced throughout history in different forms. In his book, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Daniel Defoe talks about shutting down houses by marking their doors with cross signs. Later, Hitler stigmatized the Jewish people as a “Jewish plague” and exterminated them. Even today, we witness deportation tragedies at the US borders, to protect the so-called healthy body of the nation. In terms of the dramatic text, *Oedipus the King* is the most notable plague-driven play in Western drama. In the play, Oedipus, like a scapegoat, blinds himself and exiles himself from his kingdom of Thebes to reestablish stability.

The classical Athenian drama was immensely influenced by the Great Plague that appeared in 430 B.C.E. The plague fostered the Athenians' imagination and language. The tragedians were inspired by the characteristics of the plague to profoundly express “the tragedy's concern with social conflict and stability through a particular system of metaphors.”¹² Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is more concerned with the curative factor that rebalances and heals the social systems through pharmakos. Thebes purges Oedipus to restabilize the healthy body of the polis. While setting up the dramatic elements of this tragedy, “Sophocles maintains an active interest in the dramatic implications of disease yet seems reluctant to extend these implications as openly as Euripides to the realm of metaphorical.”¹³ Sophocles makes the audience work hard to understand the function of his dramas.

However, *Oedipus the King* is a post-plague play. When it was written, the audience was familiar with the Great Plague and its effects. It was probably easier for the spectators to sense

11 Ibid., 79.

12 Robin Mitchell-Boyask, *Plague and the Athenian Imagination: Drama, History, and the Cult of Asclepius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

13 Ibid., 6.

the supporting relationship between the plague and the well-known myth of Oedipus. The catastrophic force of the plague powerfully enforces the original myth to the point of catharsis. The plague adds urgency and tension to the text.

The language of plague and pharmakos is deeply embedded in the story as driving and resolving factors. Oedipus, the king of Thebes, is dealing with a big problem: plague. He is a responsible king, and vows to erase the disease from Thebes. He sends Kreon, his brother-in-law, to Delphi to receive a message from an oracle of Apollo. Meanwhile, the Thebans congregate and wait for Oedipus in front of the palace at dawn. Oedipus is distressed to see his people in misery. The Priest explains the reason they are convened and urgently pleads with him:

*Lord Oedipus, right there,
In front of your eyes-this city-
It reads under a wild storm of blood, wave after
Wave battering Thebes.
We cannot breathe or stand.
We hunger, our world shivers with hunger.
A disease hungers,
Nothing grows, wheat, fruit, nothing grows
Bigger than a seed¹⁴*

In these lines, the plague defines the language. The disease crisis affects the choice of emotionally charged images and words like *wild storm of blood*, *disease hungers*, and so on. The physical reality of plague becomes both a metaphor itself and it shapes the language to form diverse metaphors to express the destruction of the physical condition.

The plague is embedded in the language throughout the story. We never lose sight of it. Plague words like suffering, disease, and fear constantly remind us of the calamity of plague and the tragedy of Oedipus. In fact, plague is the reason Oedipus finds out who he really is. As a fair and responsible king, he vows to find the murderer of the former King Laios. This action will supposedly eradicate the plague from the land as Apollo had declared. Oedipus says, "Follow me. Join me in fighting this sickness, this plague, and all over sufferings may end, like a dark sky."¹⁵ The constant repetition of the disease-related words turns into metaphorical expressions of Oedipus' wretched situation as a king who has fallen into blind exile. From now on, he will wander beyond the city borders like a dervish.

There are two pharmakos in the play: Oedipus and Apollo. Oedipus leaves his kingdom to restore the healthy body of Thebes. This means metaphorically, he carries this disease, and his departure will be the cure for his people. Apollo is known as the God of disease and healing along with his other specialties. In *Oedipus the King*, he sends the plague to Thebes

14 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 24.

15 Ibid., 33.

due to the corruption that Oedipus has caused in killing Laios unwillingly. Apollo instructs Oedipus to find the murderer, since the plague is rooted in murder. Thus, the murderer needs to be removed. Thereby, Apollo enacts a pharmakos. Kreon brings the news from Delphi. In his news, Apollo commands:

“Cleanse the city of Thebes, Cleanse the plague from that city
 Destroy the black stain spreading everywhere (...)
 A man must be banished. Banished or killed.
 Blood for blood. The plague is blood,
 Blood, breaking over Thebes¹⁶

Clearly, the characteristics of the plague and the bodily sense of the disease determine the language of the dramatic text, and how to apply it. Moreover, it creates disease metaphors.

Later, these metaphors varied in literature depending on the type of plague experienced. For instance, William Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* takes the reader into the Bubonic Plague that struck London in 1665. It is also called the Great Plague of London. It began in 1664 and lasted through late 1695. The Bubonic Plague terrorized Londoners and swept away 68,590 people out of a population of 460,000. The symptoms of Bubonic were “buboes and inflammatory swelling of lymph glands.”¹⁷ Usually, it killed its victims in a most horrific way, as is heartbreakingly illustrated in *A Journal of the Year*. Centuries later, these experiences were metaphorized by playwrights like Albert Camus.

William Defoe was a merchant, and a journalist in essence. His novel *narrates* the plague year of 1665. Essentially, a narrator named H.F. walks through parishes of London and reports on the terrifying plague environment by blurring reality and fiction. The novel compiles the regulations of the authorities: shutting up infected houses, mortality bills, death carts, and short stories. The text has an episodic structure because it is made up of short stories. Other prominent plague writers also applied the episodic structure, such as Boccaccio in *The Decameron*, and Camus in *The Plague*. *Decameron* refers to the Black Death in Florence in 1348. Ten men and women express their lamentations through one hundred short stories while they are escaping the Black Death. In *The Plague*, the Bubonic Plague hits the Algerian town of Oran through rats. The town closes its doors and militaristic measures are taken to eradicate the plague. The novel tells the stories of the individual characters rather than one big dramatic narrative. In its conclusion, the untimely ending of individuals’ lives reflects on the episodic structure of the texts from Boccaccio to Camus.

As in *Oedipus*, the language of plague is prevalent throughout *A Journal of the Plague Year*. But unlike in *Oedipus*, language is not the driving force of the novel; rather, it is descriptive.

16 Ibid., 27.

17 Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year: Easyread Edition*, Dover Thrift Editions (2001; repr., London: Dover Publications, INC., 2020), iv.

This difference might be related to the episodic structure of the text: unlike the dramatic structure of Oedipus that rises through crises, it resolves. In this context, plague-related words and expressions are prevalent throughout *A Journal of the Plague Year* and present in the novel as one big horrific experience of Londoners. Some of the words and phrases are *terror, delirious, cries and shrieks, burial pits, murderers, watchmen, horrible, exile, grief, shutting up houses, death*, and death carts. The horrifying, heartbroken images drawn through language impacted Camus' *The Plague* and *The State of Siege* deeply, and they became a perfect tool to express the madness of Nazism, fascism, and dictatorial regimes.

The nature of the Bubonic Plague drove people to delirium. The lymph nodes were swollen. The body took on absurd shapes to get rid of the pressure of the virus. The plague was so violent that “the power of man was baffled and ended. So, the plague defied all medicines.”¹⁸ Once infected, men and women would drop dead in the marketplace and on the streets within just a few hours. The horror and pain of the plague led people to take extreme actions to ease the pain. Hence, the stories in the novel seem exceedingly absurd and almost unbelievable. The accounts are brief because the lives of the infected people are incredibly short—like one breath. Daniel Defoe uses the idea of a human life cut short as a literary technique. He tells a story of an infected man in one sentence, as if in one breath:

*I heard of one infected creature who, running out of his bed in his shirt in the anguish and agony of his swellings, of which he had three upon him, got his shoes on and went to put on his coat; but the nurse resisting, and snatching the coat from him, he threw her down, ran over her, ran downstairs and into the street, directly to the Thames in his shirt, the nurse running after him, and calling to the watch to stop him; but the watchman, frightened at the man, and afraid to touch him, let him go on; upon which he ran down to the Stillyard stairs, threw away his shirt, and plunged into the Thames, and, being a good swimmer, swam quite over the river; and the tide being coming in, as they call it (that is running westward) he reached the land not till he came about the Falcon stairs, where landing, and finding no people there, it being in the night, he ran about the streets there, naked as he was, for a good while, when, it being by the time high water, he takes the river again, and swam back to the Stillyard, landed, ran up the streets again to his own house, knocking at the door, went up the stairs and into his bed again; and that this terrible experiment cured him of the plague, that is to say, that the violent motion of his arms and legs stretched the parts where the swellings he had upon him were, that is to say, under his arms and his groin, and caused them to ripen and break; and that the cold of the water abated the fever in his blood.*¹⁹

The poorest classes were the ones most affected by the plague. The government's regulations against the disease were strict. Some regulations closed up and marked the houses of infected people, placing two watchmen, one for day and one for night; these houses would be watched and no one would be allowed to go in or out. Two orders seem especially cruel: closing up and

18 Ibid., 27.

19 Ibid., 123.

marking the houses. Even though it seems necessary due to health reasons, it is confinement and imprisonment of people by isolating them. According to Defoe, "...shutting up of houses was at first counted a very cruel and unchristian method, and the poor people so confined made bitter lamentations."²⁰ Ultimately, the upper classes fled London, but the poor had to deal with harsh regulations to protect the healthy body of the city. Closing borders during COVID-19 presents a similar mentality, shutting foreigners out and protecting the nation's healthy body. This regulation reminds us of the ancient Greek ritual scapegoat. Foreigners are considered pharmakon: both the transmitter of the disease and the cure by staying out of the country. Londoners presumably protected themselves by containing the infected ones in their homes, outside the social borders.

The images became a powerful tool to express the militaristic measures that the government took, and the horrifying and unthinkable results of the plague. Because of the rage and intolerable agony of the swelling, people became crazed and violent, even toward themselves, including, "...throwing themselves at their windows, shooting themselves; mothers murdering own children in their lunacy... some into despair and lunacy, others into melancholy madness... some broke into streets, perhaps naked and would run directly down to the river if they were not stopped by the watchman or other officers, and plunge into the water wherever they found it."²¹ There were cases where the infected died, and their children would be "found sucking the breasts of their mothers, or nurses after they have been dead of the plague".²²

Furthermore, death carts carried the dead to the burial pits, which were like mass graves. The officials carried the dead bodies during the night. The graves had to be six feet deep. Men and women, rich and poor, were dumped to the burial pits like sacks of potatoes. Once a farcical event happened with a drunk piper and death cart carriers. A locally known piper would go from door to door piping around ten o'clock, and people would take care of him by providing food and drink. As the story goes, he became drunk, laid down in a stall, and fell asleep. Someone saw him and thought the piper was dead. They called the death cart, which took him to the burial pit, where he woke up. The frightened piper yelled, "Hey! Where am I?... But I ain't dead though, am I?"²³ Greatly inspired by Defoe, Camus uses the drunk piper character directly, along with death carts and other images, as an analogy to criticize the political upheavals of his time.

As a matter of fact, the authorities' militaristic attitude towards the Great Plague, and Defoe's response to the disease and regulations align with Camus' political concerns, in which he uses plague as an analogy to address the emerging, existential issues of humanity. Camus' novel,

20 Ibid., 37.

21 Ibid, 62.

22 Ibid., 90.

23 Ibid., 69.

The Plague, dwells on growing dictatorships which threaten the natural growth of humanity. Suddenly, the rats start to come out and die in Oran, a French Algerian city in the 1940s. Soon after, in the novel, the Bubonic Plague begins to spread. The government cremates the rats and takes militaristic and tyrannical steps to prevent the spread of plague, like closing the borders for quarantine. These measures leave its inhabitants feeling trapped and exiled. The novel is interested in questioning existential issues in the context of plague. Camus applies plague metaphorically to make an analogy between the disease and the Nazis and fascism.

The Plague is written in an episodic structure. It relates the lives of the characters who are imprisoned in Oran, struggling to fulfill their personal goals and desires under “the reign of terror.”²⁴ For instance, Dr. Rieux is separated from his beloved wife. She has health issues, and leaves Oran for treatment. Rambert, a French Journalist, makes every effort to reunite with his wife in Paris. Grand tries to perfectly write the first sentence of his dream novel, and he longs for his ex-wife. Rambert dreams of a big success. He exclaims, “What I really want, doctor, is this. On the day when the manuscript reaches the publisher, I want him to stand up? After he’s read it through, of course, say to his staff: ‘Gentlemen, hats off!’”²⁵ Father Phaneloux is torn between God and his consciousness. *The Plague* moves the reader from one character’s life to another’s. Meanwhile, all these figures interact with each other, mostly in conjunction with Dr. Rieux’s professional efforts. The episodic structure of *The Plague* reminds us of Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, which inspired Camus greatly.

The Plague is set in the uninspiring, dull city of Oran, where the only concern is to make money and be rich. There are no gardens, trees, or flowers. It has a dusty, gray air which is truly unpleasant. People spend their free time with short-lived, ephemeral pleasures. There is no intimacy among the business-minded inhabitants of Oran. Oran is “treeless, glamourless, soulless, the town of Oran ends by seeming restful and after a while, you go complacently to sleep there.”²⁶

The images are like the ones in Defoe’s text, since Camus chose the same plague as Defoe did, with such word choices as *grief*, *delirium*, *agony*, *buboes*, *blotches*, *suffering*, *death carts*, and so on. Furthermore, Camus uses additional images that suggest to the reader political connections. The author encourages the reader to create connections between Nazis, fascism, and existential issues by using the plague’s symptoms and outcomes. The following images assist the audience in experiencing the state of existentialism: “the feeling of exile, that sensation of a void, and the prisoners of the plague.”²⁷ Camus also employed expressions that may be related to the Holocaust, for instance, “a systematic extermination of the rat population by injecting

24 Albert Camus, *The Plague*, n.d., accessed February 7, 2022. 144.

25 Ibid., 50.

26 Ibid., 2.

27 Ibid., 34.

poison gas into the sewers, and a strict supervision of the water supply.”²⁸ He also mentions mass burials, “the heaps of corpses,” collective punishment, and the military.²⁹ Most of these images and the other illustrations in *The Plague* might also connect to any other dictatorial regime, such as Stalin’s. However, the choice of words like *Holocaust* and *extermination* immediately leads us to recall the Nazis. Moreover, the depiction of the environment, lack of individual freedom, and business-minded military state lead us to think that Oran is governed under fascism. Therefore, it is safe to say that Camus mostly criticized Nazis and fascism in *The Plague*.

The Nazi’s extermination of the Jews, a marginalized community, leads us to inquire about the relationship between Jews and the plague. Where did Hitler ground his allegation of a “Jewish plague?” Moreover, Camus’ account of the extermination of rats raises the question: is there any supposed connection between the rats and the Jews? To answer these questions, a presumed connection between disease and otherness/foreignness needs to be explained. This supposed link is cardinal since it leads groups to conceive of others as “non-us, the alien,” which underlies the source of all anger against Jews and other marginalized groups of people or individuals in history.³⁰ Sontag refers to Aristotle’s definition of metaphor in *Poetics*. Aristotle says that metaphor, “consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else.”³¹ Metaphorization engages the mental process of analyzing and exploring the common characteristics of two unrelated things. Disease is a literal name for the soma deviating away from the healthy, normal state of the body. Treatment processes involve separation, confinement, isolation, and other methods, which all have military features. The diseased body is polluted. Society stigmatizes a polluting individual and finds that person is always wrong and harmful. This conception distresses society, so the individual needs to be isolated from the community. Essentially, the body is a metaphor. Plague disrupts the body by contaminating it. The solution is to segregate the body from society for the benefit of society.

The connection between plague and pharmakos expresses the Jewish people’s experiences through history. Historically, Jewish people have been stigmatized and cast out as pharmakos by being accused of being plague carriers. This idea became part of anti-Semitic discourse by fascists and Nazis, and it gained a number of supporters. The strongest and earliest basis for anti-Semitism appears in a story in the Old Testament, where the Jewish people were punished by God “with plagues of different kinds,” so Jews were thought of “as plague-bringers or plague carriers... [T]hese views linked Jewishness to plague.”³² Secondly, a plague emerged in “a small village in the Bavarian mountains” during the early 1700s.³³ Following 1634, the

28 Ibid., 26.

29 Ibid., 145.

30 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (Macmillan, 2001). 136.

31 Ibid., 93.

32 Cooke, *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*. 116.

33 Ibid., 116.

villagers began to stage *The Oberammergau Passion Play* every ten years as a “theatrical pledge to avert plague” by reciting their rescue story.³⁴ However, the play was strictly associated with being Jewish. The villagers also portrayed Jewish people negatively for their connection to Christ’s death. This celebration became very popular. People visited the village as pilgrims. Hitler saw this performance two times. Furthermore, most of the villagers became supporters of the Nazis. In addition, during the second half of the fourteenth century, the plague of Black Death emerged in Europe. Jewish people were blamed for poisoning and spreading disease. According to the accounts, God was displeased with Jewish actions and sent a plague. Hence, “Jewish families were hounded and ostracized... whole Jewish communities burnt alive or chased from towns, with thousands dying, particularly in Germany.”³⁵

The so-called sickness that is inherited in Jewish people was seen as impure and jeopardized the pure, healthy body of the Aryan Germans. Therefore, the body became property of state politics, and scapegoated Jewish people once again. As bringers of the plague, rats and Jews were associated with each other. It was considered that “the rat and the Jew are the physical manifestations of disease”.³⁶ They both carried the plague, and their removal would cure the whole nation, as it was practiced in the Greek rituals of *pharmakos*. Hitler said:

*“If somebody tells us, ‘The future will demand sacrifices,’ then we say, ‘Yes, indeed it will!’ National Socialism is not a doctrine of inertia but a doctrine of conflict. Not a doctrine of happiness or good luck, but a doctrine of work and a doctrine of struggle, and that also a doctrine of sacrifice”*³⁷

Consequently, Camus’ *The Plague* leans on these painful historical facts, and uses them to question the Nazis and fascism, which do not value love, wisdom, or democracy. Therefore, their mindset creates irrational politics, and the consequence of irrationality is madness, like the Holocaust. Hence Camus applies plague as a metaphorical analogy to criticize Nazis and fascism. Susan Sontag states, “The plague metaphor was common in the 1930s as a synonym for social and psychic catastrophe.”³⁸

Eco-Theater and Space

Nevertheless, contemporary theater, reframed as Eco-Theater, diverts from the traditional view of plagues as being a source of metaphorical inspiration to address the existential issues of humanity. Eco-Theater is mainly concerned with ecological issues that threaten the living environment, or “environmental justice.” The physical space, site-specific settings for plays, and immersive interaction with space are essential to create living and breathing plays.³⁶

34 Ibid., 117.

35 Ibid., 118.

36 Ibid., 124.

37 Ibid., 126.

38 Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 145.

Eco-Theater is immediate and urgent. It aims to relay the message directly and efficiently by connecting the audience with the specific environment of the drama, and with each other. Lately, environmental performances such as *The Wolf Project* and *Sila* have impacted audiences' theatrical experiences somatically and intellectually. In particular, *The Wolf Project* creates an immersive opportunity for the audience to engage with the site-specific location of the performance that was staged. Furthermore, the artistic views and practices of legendary theater-makers, such as Anne Bogart's actor training technique of Viewpoints and Robert Wilson's space-oriented vision, have become more alive than ever due to their timely responsiveness to our current environment. Their art, along with that of others, looks for reciprocal, immersive relationships with the environment.

Eco-Theatre artists are politically aware. The artists respond to the pressing issues of their times by investigating the most effective ways to transmit their messages. However, their methods have a profound tradition in the avant-garde theater movements. Traditionally, avant-garde artists have shown great interest in the environment, racism, inequality, and other issues, and have been in search of new art forms and site-specific performances. Distinctively, Eco-Theater is more concentrated on ecology and climate change. The Eco-Theatre Manifesto states:

*"The future of our ecosystems – the network of relationships that make up our earth, our society, and by extension our theatre – depends on a radical and immediate change in our culture. The combined legacies of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy have manufactured a world of mass extinction, vanishing coastlines, displacement, and inequality. Climate change is not an issue to overcome but our new global reality. Eco-Theatre is a movement of artists compelled to make work in the context of this new reality, toward a collective goal of environmental justice... A just society can only be achieved by shifting culture; by shaping our values through artistic practice and imagining alternative futures through stories... Theatre thrives on cultural diversity: intersectional, collaborative spaces produce great art. Eco-Theatre amplifies underrepresented voices, includes people from all fields as artists, and features a myriad of performance forms."*³⁹

Clearly, the Eco-Theatre Manifesto addresses the current momentous problems around the globe, but climate change is exceedingly pronounced. The matter of climate change is closely related to physical space, such as in "vanishing coastlines, displacement."⁴⁰ Calling attention to physical space in Eco-Theater is a departure from the inquiry of "who are we" to the contemporary approach of "where are we." In addition, contemporary artists highly regard virtual platforms to present their art. These new trends in theater represent a shift from the traditional metaphorical application of plague to the significance of the physical or virtual space, which has gained prominence due to plague and isolation. "Who are we" has more existential implications, as in Oedipus being in search of his identity, or Camus' characters, who are trapped by plague/fascist circumstances. The answer changes from person to person.

39 "What Is Ecotheater?," Superhero Clubhouse, <http://www.superheroclubhouse.org/what-is-ecotheater/>.

40 Ibid.

On the other hand, “where are we” is more direct, and gives an impression of urgency to find solutions right away.

Richard Schechner, who is one of the most ardent advocates of Eco-Theater, points out the gravity of the consequences of climate change. He warns that the outcome of climate change will be much more catastrophic than the current plague. Climate change is going to lead, and already leads, to complex environmental problems such as:

“Extreme weather, shifting wildlife populations and habitats, rising seas and a range of other impacts... lost crops, and drinking water shortages...some species-including mosquitoes, ticks, jellyfish, and crop pests-are thriving.” Moreover, “Booming populations of dark beetles that feed on spruce and pine trees, for example, have devastated millions of forested acres in the U.S.”⁴¹

Schechner observes that COVID-19 is temporary, but climate change isn't. Therefore, art makers must take the responsibility to reflect these issues to create awareness.

Despite the scientists' apprehensions about current and future expected disasters, Eco-Theater is hopeful. The loss is unavoidable, but Eco-Theater suggests that we must acknowledge and work through it to solve the problems. The Eco-Theatre Manifesto asserts, “There is a better future, Eco-Theatre counters narratives of futility by centering stories of resilience, innovation, and interconnection.”⁴² The upshot of all this guides the artists to pause and rethink the events that endanger living environments and evaluate the new tools that technology offers for creativity to respond to the issues.

The temporary state of the plague has given an opportunity for art makers to pause and think about their art, and to explore the possibilities of new tools. The COVID-19 plague and its environment have introduced us to new possibilities of creating and reaching a wider audience through digital platforms. Universally, Zoom has become the most common virtual place for a wide range of practices to share ideas and work. However, it is still an unknown land for many artists who used to do live theater. Anne Bogart argues that technology and the soul of the theater should be in balance. High reliance on technology can cause the loss of the original soul of theater. At the same time, technology like lighting, sound systems, and Zoom contribute greatly to drama. This resembles the high-tech train example in Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, which Bogart shares as an anecdote, “The South of France. You have this incredible countryside and then you have a high-speed train running through it.”⁴³

41 “Global Warming Effects,” *National Geographic*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/global-warming-effects>.

42 “What Is Ecotheater?,” Superhero Clubhouse.

43 HowlRound Theatre Commons, “Directors Lab West Connects - Anne Bogart and Jessica Hanna on Sunday 24 May 2020.”

Virtual spaces, which are the latest internet technology, have contributed to theater by impacting its accessibility and audience participation. Through the internet, theater makers can reach the audience and expand it globally. Now they create a production in a small intimate theater, and reach a wide range of audiences around the world. The easy accessibility creates global interconnection and participation. The possibilities of the new digital platform can serve superbly to the benefit of immersive theater and create a “collective experience.”⁴⁴ The online environment also provides instant feedback.

However, it is doubtful that the virtual environment by itself is capable of creating a soulful, collective heartbeat among spectators. In an online environment, audiences are connected globally, yet they are still on their own couches, in their safe environments. There is not an organic inter-connectedness, as in live theater. There is no communal laughter, tears, anger, or thought sharing. Thus, the possibilities of virtual space may serve theater better if they are in conjunction with the physical state. At the same time, the participatory and liberal characteristics of virtual space align with the immersive nature of Eco-Theater.

The immersive quality in Eco-Theater is achieved mostly through space, making it an active participant of the performance. The settings in Eco-Theater are mostly site-specific, and more diverse. It is intended to create superior ecological awareness in the audience through experiencing nature’s bequest to the performance. Environment is no longer considered a setting that serves human-centered concerns, as it is in naturalism. Now, the ecological issues are central. Furthermore, the interactions between audience and performers and between audience and nature are encouraged in Eco-Theater. *The Wolf Project* (the prologue *The Princess of the Stars* and epilogue *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*) is an Eco-Theater interactive performance set in the wilderness of Canada by R. Murray Schafer, “a librettist, educator, writer, and soundscape theorist.”⁴⁵ It is a one-week project that includes performance and camping. Nature is incorporated into the work; it seeks to “erase the line between life and art.”⁴⁶ For example, the setting of an opera affects the audience’s experience distinctly from outdoors from a concert hall. The view, sounds, and smells of nature incorporate music and human sounds. The environment, humans, and music blend together. Nature is a participant in the performance too. In this mobile and immersive performance, the audience travels to the cliff singing, and sits. In the performance, “The Princess paddles down the lake slowly singing all the way.”⁴⁷ This continues about thirty to forty minutes until it gets dark, and her voice gets softer. Then, people walk back to the camping area and sleep. *The Wolf Project* is like a ritual, taking a moment from life, submerging oneself in nature, remembering being a part of nature, breathing with it, staying quiet, and contemplating.

44 Ibid.

45 R. Murray Schafer, Eleanor James, and Sarah Ann Standing, “Eco-Theatre,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 36, no. 1 (January 2014): 35–44, https://doi.org/10.1162/pajj_a_00174.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

Similarly, Anne Bogart uses current COVID-19 as an opportunity of space and time to contemplate and acquire “the quality of the energy in the moment before you move or before you act...As Eugene Barba said it is the moment before the release of the arrow that determines the success of the arrow.”⁴⁸ Even though Bogart’s statement seems relatively apart from the dynamics of the performance and space, it is still in the context of the current living environment and artist’s response to it through contemplation before s/he acts, as in *The Wolf Project*.

In addition to site-specific performances, space and architecture also suit the intentions of Eco-Theater. Space and architecture are two of the techniques in Bogart’s Viewpoints that function to create spatial interactions and multiply the meanings of the existent or non-existent text. The actors are affected by where they are, and influence the environment they are in. These spatial relationships pronounce more spontaneous and evolving interactions within the theater ecology.

Regarding the “social distance” rule of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bogart asserts that the expression should be rephrased as “physical distance.” She illustrates how people are superbly considerate about the people around them. Now individuals need to learn how to move by respecting each other’s space. Her view is closely associated with people’s current experiences globally, and the Viewpoints. Therefore, Bogart’s Viewpoints become more immersed in life and they seem to be more responsive to our current conditions.

Correspondingly, Robert Wilson enjoys creating art projects pronouncing the space, either site-specific or by relying on media technology. Plastic arts such as sculpture, objects, and their interactions with theatrical elements such as light, color, space, architecture, set design, and actors are the landmarks of Wilson’s art. His performances are a poetic composition of vivid and intimate interactions between these elements –which have the flavor of dreams– where all participants fluidly interact with each other in a magical sense.

Wilson believes in blending art and life. He looks at life as if it is already a piece of art, for example, sitting in the park and observing that the wind is blowing, the leaves are moving, and there is a smell of flowers in the air. He thinks these momentary experiences of living things can be taken as they are and reframed as art. Wilson thinks this approach makes art exciting, living, and breathing. Thus, he breaks the barriers between the environment and the art.

Both artists value space and time, community, presence, social responsibility, and architecture. They celebrate pluralism and openness, as in Eco-Theater. For instance, Wilson has an open-door policy on his property in Long Island at the Watermill Center where he gives residencies to artists every year. Wilson explains, “You can walk into the property. You can walk into the building. In the past few years, it’s been difficult to bring certain people in, a Muslim

48 The Segal Center, “SEGAL TALKS: Anne Bogart (New York, USA).”

or someone who has different religious beliefs than your political ideas, a different color of skin.”⁴⁹ Thus, the open-door policy has both the literal and symbolic value of inclusiveness. Wilson’s perception of inclusivity goes beyond what theater institutions offer their students or state in their productions.

It is also striking how Wilson is inspired by the events happening in life. He advocates for being a responsible citizen. He reacts to life, sees the creative potential in it and turns it into an extraordinary project that reflects his interaction with the ecology of life, but he doesn’t directly present his point of view in his performances. He takes the realities and transforms them into a unique representation of the issue, forcing the audience to think harder by creating associations between the elements in theater ecology.

In conjunction with this, Wilson’s first play was based on his involvement in protecting a Black boy, who presumably was mute, and thought “in terms of visual signs and signals.”⁵⁰ One day, Wilson was walking in New Jersey. He witnessed a policeman who was about to beat the boy with his club. Wilson grabbed the policeman’s arm and stopped him. This conversation occurred between Wilson and the policeman;

Wilson: Why do you hit the boy?

The policeman: It’s none of your business.

*Wilson: I am a responsible citizen.*⁵¹

After this altercation, Wilson wrote his first play with this boy. He says, “It was not something I was planning to do or necessarily even wanted to do it. It’s something that happened.”⁵² Thus, Wilson’s productions are inspired by the events in the ecology of life and presented in the ecology of the theater through the vivid interactions of theatrical elements. Wilson’s views on art also show that he is deeply interested in the issues of communities around the world such as Afghans, Aborigines, and Eskimos. He believes understanding of the global community will enrich the local community and make the work of art timely.

Bogart also emphasizes that we have an intentional civic responsibility to the wellness of our community and social system. At this time of uncertainty, Anne Bogart’s technique of the Viewpoints, specifically space, becomes more alive. In the Viewpoints, the environment and the actors’ interaction with and within are prioritized. Actors’ awareness, attention, and spontaneity in the space are highlighted. In the Viewpoints it is explained as, “The physical environment of the space through which the actor moves, be it the rehearsal studio or the stage set, its shape, dimensions, furnishings, textures, light levels, entrances and exits, and actor’s

49 HowlRound Theatre Commons, “Segal Talks with Robert Wilson at the Martin E Segal Theater Center on Thursday 8 April 2021,” Video, *YouTube*, April 8, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDYSXP0Zc0>.

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*

relation to them.”⁵³ Bogart asserts that this type of relationship became more viable in social life under the COVID-19 circumstances. She says, “Social distancing is really a misnomer. Physical distancing is true.”⁵⁴ Physical distancing is about the space between people, and how much they care about this distance. Bogart asserts, “With intentional civics that we intentionally take care of people around us. We move together more gracefully.”⁵⁵ In Bogart’s technique, space is considered an element of theater that has a community function through experimenting with “how to get along” by spatially engaging the physical space.⁵⁶

In Wilson’s works, space is not a main concern between the actors, or the actors and the audience, or audience members or actors and their surroundings. He widely uses different locations. Once he created a performance in an area with seven hills in Shiraz, Iran. Each day, they performed on a different hill. Wilson stated that when he looked out from an airplane, he saw infinite space. Both Bogart and Wilson are interested in being present, which is associated with eliminating the distinction between art and living. The active participation of space in a production is the main point of Eco-Theatre– that is, being interested in the question of “where we are.”

This inquiry is reflected in the design of contemporary performance centers, their immersion in the surroundings, and what they are including in it. There is a fluidity between the architectural style and theater ecology. These contemporary performance spaces allow communication between sound and architectural design. The fluidity in design breaks the audience’s usual perception of art and paves a way for immersive experiences.

One of the most cutting-edge, high tech, contemporary performance venue spaces is the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art in Prague. It is a multifunctional, complex, and dynamic building that includes sections such as a music hall, school of architecture, film, dance halls, and rehearsal places. The parts are unified into a single body through the fluid interaction of the buildings. The unity of the architecture is expressed in that, “the buildings are a single unit from the architectural aspect and this principle is symbolically expressed by the unified gray color and fluid interaction of all parts into one whole... The hall has variable acoustics and can be compared to a musical instrument which can be tuned depending on the needs of the specific performance.”⁵⁷ Moreover, “The three-walled panels are supported by a sound absorbent, diffuse and reflective surface and can be rotated to modify the acoustic properties

53 Scott T. Cummings, *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). 113.

54 The Segal Center, “SEGAL TALKS: Anne Bogart (New York, USA).”

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Daniel Tapia, “Centre for Contemporary Art DOX+ / Petr Hajek Architekti,” *ArchDaily*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.archdaily.com/907565/centre-for-contemporary-art-dox-plus-petr-hajek-architekti>.

of the ceiling, thereby changing the acoustic parameters of the entire hall.”⁵⁸ The features of the music hall “modifies the acoustic properties of the ceiling, thereby changing the acoustic parameters of the entire hall”.⁵⁹ Another striking feature is the ring of foyers that surround the main hall. This creates a substantial lengthening of the fadeout part during the lower numbers. Seemingly the architectural design of the complex and the interactive features of the contemporary performance center, are focused on the exploration of the space and the ecology of the performance. This reminds the audience that they are not central in the performance environment, but a part of it.

Conclusion

Plague has been a force for the imagination of artists since ancient times. Predominantly, plague was applied as a metaphor to express the political, social, and existential concerns of humanity, as in Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and Camus’ *The Plague*. Plague images stir the audience and readers’ imaginations as well as intellect. Traditionally, human issues have been the central focus of art makers. In contemporary theater, the perspective of art has begun to shift from the human-centered aspect to an ecology-centered one. This shift celebrates the immersive, reciprocal relationship of the elements of the performance with their surroundings and encourages politically-driven ecological consciousness. The current COVID-19 pandemic has opened up the possibilities of virtual space reaching a global audience. Even though the resonances of plague changed from the metaphorical application of it to directly addressing the issues of Eco-Theater, the traditional way of employing plague images as metaphors is still valid, since human suffering continues. The deportations and marginalization of people, and therefore scapegoating, are as alive as they used to be in ancient Greece, and throughout history.

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