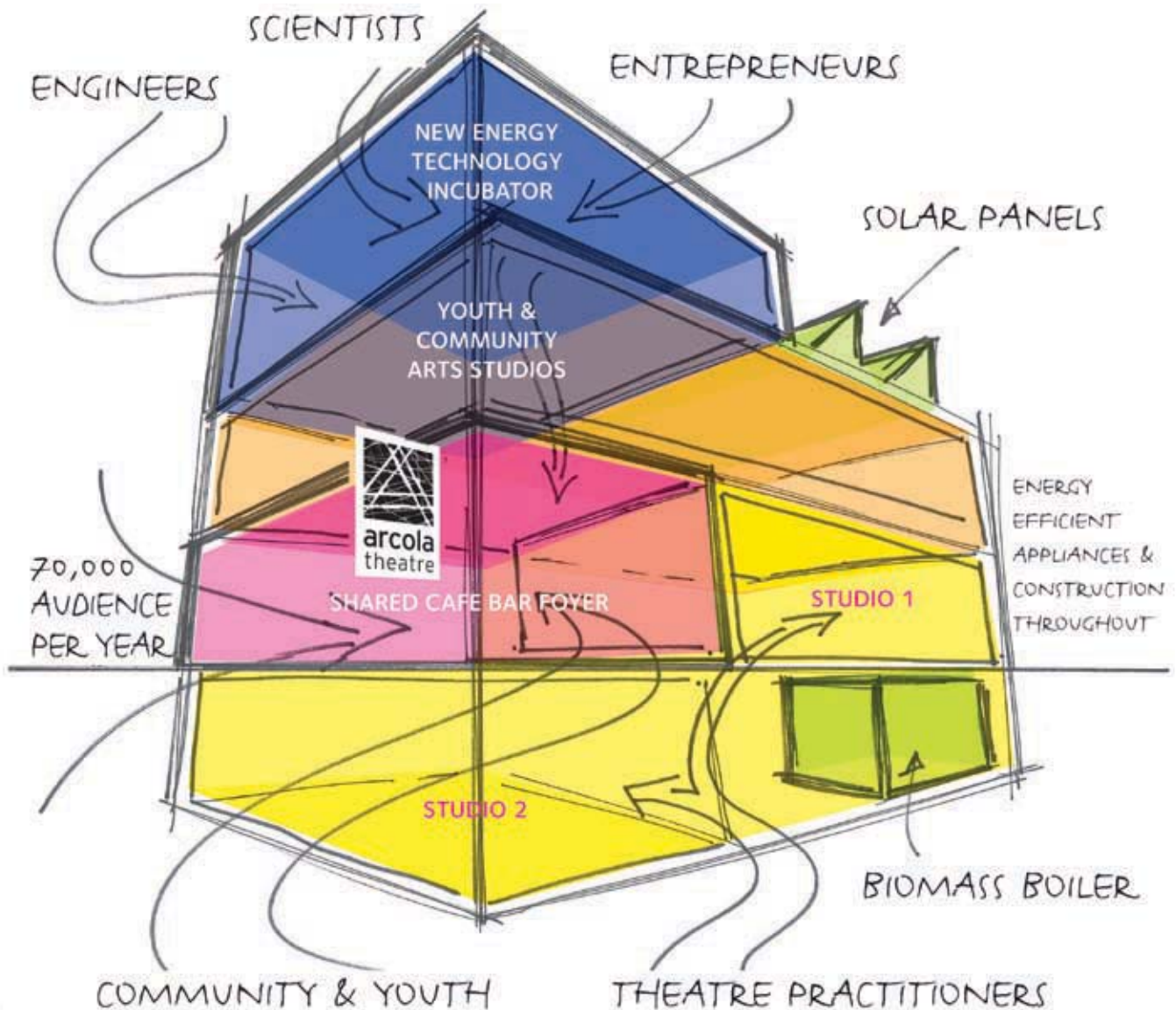


Sustainable Staging... Thoughts on “Greening” the Theatre

BY MATTHEW WELANDER '09
AND JIM SIMPSON '81



A schematic for an expanded and revamped Arcola Theatre, in London, courtesy of the Arcola Theatre Photo Gallery.

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It is undeniable that our culture is currently undergoing a “green” revolution.

Against the background of global warming, even major television networks and automobile companies are promoting themselves as friendly to the environment. But what does it actually mean to pursue environmental sustainability—and how can the theatre contribute?

At Yale School of Drama’s Alumni Weekend in October 2008, **Jim Simpson ’81** and **Matthew Welander ’09** participated in a panel called *Green Theatre*, which investigated the role of theatre artists in the ongoing fight to preserve our national resources. Welander, who earned his MFA in Technical Design and Production, wrote his third-year thesis on *LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Certification of Performing Arts Buildings*. Simpson has been the artistic director of off-off-Broadway’s The Flea Theater since he co-founded it with **Carol Ostrow ’80** in 1996. We asked each of them to share his thoughts on theatre and the environment.



Matt Welander '09

For the past fifteen years I have been fortunate enough to work as a theatre technician and have often found the two most exciting moments of my job to be the day I start working on a new show and the day I strike it. The excitement and challenge of budgeting and building the scenery soon give way to the anticipation of tearing it down and throwing it out to make room for the next production. We work at a furious pace to get a show on stage, we pause for a moment to catch our breath, and then we do it all over again. It is easy to get so caught up in the act of creating theatre, however, that too often we don’t stop to think about the impact our creative process has on the

world beyond the wings. Once I began to realize the environmental impact of our productions, I started looking for ways to make the whole process more sustainable.

There are many theatre companies making simple changes in how they operate to reduce their environmental impact. Both Berkeley Repertory Theatre and Mōolelo Performing Arts Company post their green guidelines on their websites, making it easier for other organizations to become more sustainable. The Arcola Theatre in London has pledged to become the first carbon-neutral theatre in the world and is making significant progress toward that goal. Showman Fabricators, a professional scene shop in Long Island City, has developed a green production philosophy that includes taking back scenery to recycle, reuse, or give to other organizations. Two of the best sources for information are the Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts and the Green Theatre Initiative, organizations dedicated to providing resources and support to help arts organizations become ecologically and economically sustainable. *Greening Up Our Houses* (Drama Book Publishers, 1995), by Larry K. Fried and Theresa J. May, is also an

excellent resource for ecologically sound practices for every department in a theatre organization.

In the course of my research, I was also surprised to find that when it comes to energy consumption the biggest culprits are theatre buildings themselves. According to an ongoing study conducted by the office of the Mayor of London, almost 75% of the carbon emissions in the London theatre industry comes from lighting, heating, and cooling the non-production areas of the building. Inaugurated in 1998 in the United States, the LEED building certification program provides a framework and third-party verification for sustainable buildings, and more theatre companies are pursuing LEED certification for their buildings.

Simply put, we can dramatically reduce our environmental impact by making the buildings we work in more efficient. Sometimes it’s as easy as changing a light bulb; Stagecrafters, a theatre organization in Philadelphia, replaced the incandescent bulbs in their offices and non-production spaces with compact fluorescent lighting and reduced their monthly energy consumption by 15%. Most of the energy wasted in a building is used to heat, cool, and illuminate empty rooms. Suggestions to save energy include: install programmable thermostats to automatically adjust temperatures when the building is unoccupied; switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs and install occupancy sensors to automate lighting in rehearsal rooms, offices, and other non-performance spaces.

These examples are a good start, but there is a lot more work to do. Whether we see ourselves as theatre artists or theatregoers, we should all take a close look at the organizations we interact with, demanding and seeking new ways to make our art compatible with our planet. Sometimes the hardest part is getting started, but theatre companies that want to get on board don’t have to reinvent the wheel. In addition to the organizations already mentioned, there are others, such as the



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Arcola Theatre's production of *Enemy of the People* used low-energy lighting in April 2008. Photo from the Arcola Theatre Photo Gallery.

ecoTheatre blog, which lays out frameworks for going green. Visit the websites of those who are already engaged in sustainability, talk with colleagues and collaborators, and come up with an action plan that best fits your theatre's needs. Each change in practice, no matter how small, is one more step on the road to ecological sustainability and well-being.



Jim Simpson '81,
*Founder and Artistic
 Director of The Flea.*
 Photo by Ivano Pulito.

Jim Simpson '81

I run a small theatre with **Carol Ostrow '80** called The Flea in downtown New York City. We have two stages and although our seating capacity is small, our output is large. We do all kinds of performance: theatre, dance, music, and alternative work. A typical week at The Flea will have two New Music concerts alongside at least two plays performing in repertory, a dance presentation, and weekend workshops. We believe that a dark theatre is a shameful one. We also expend a fair amount of energy and thought in finding the means to continue our work, especially in these trying economic times. We're busy. But this is the hurly-burly of activity and creativity that drew many of us to this field.

Now we have an additional concern to add to our already full plates: how do we address issues of climate change in our practice?

The apocalyptic nature of climate change is daunting. When I read a recent forecast in *The Lancet* on the major effects of climate change worldwide, I wanted to stick my head in the sand. But it's more useful to consider the advice of Frances Beinecke '71, FOR '74, head of the Natural Resources Defense Council: We humans created these problems; we should be able to solve them.

Fortunately, one of the things that the theatre has going for it is over 2000 years of sustainable practice. We've only had air conditioning since the 1920s. Broadway used to take the summer months off; in Japan, ghost plays were performed in the dog days of summer because



This image of Jim's bike in front of the theater is part of the logo of The Flea.
 Photo by Ivano Pulito.



Carol Ostrow '80,
*Producing Director of
The Flea. Photo by Ivano
Pulito.*

their cooling chills enticed audiences indoors to see the shows. We've also had hundreds of years of vivid theatre without electric lighting. Our common history reveals that the most sophisticated work was often accomplished with low-tech means.

Investigating and evaluating our use of energy here at The Flea has produced some surprises. We discovered that air conditioning, not stage lighting, is our major culprit. An easy fix: We use our zoned system much more carefully. Our small staff knows that when summer comes, it's going to be warm in The Flea offices—Carol now wields a Japanese fan in meetings. Luckily, the offices are in a sub-basement, which is naturally a few degrees cooler than the concrete sidewalks above us. We're also switching

our incandescent exit signs to more efficient LED units. These signs are on 24/7, and there are a surprising number of them. Their constant drawing of power really adds up.

The Flea's shoe-string economy is sympathetic to a sustainable approach. Even before the economic downturn, we had to work hard to bring in funding for our efforts. Now we squeeze every nickel and in the process conserve energy. Our water heater is already insulated. Our offices are lit by low energy fluorescents. We vigorously recycle, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because in New York City it is the law, and the fines are significant for a small theatre. We troll Craigslist for our furniture needs. We recycle flats and have used the same chairs onstage for the past four years. Actors like them, they fit our room, we repaint them. I am secretly (well not anymore)



Gerry Bamman, holding onto a recycled chair, in Dawn by Thomas Bradshaw, directed by Jim Simpson '81. Photo by Joan Marcus.



Stimulating imaginations and evoking emotions are easier when there is less onstage.

That was The Flea's aesthetic even prior to Al Gore's call to action.

Jim Simpson '81

referencing Chinese theatre practice where a chair exists as many possibilities. I am a believer in Grotowski's theatre algebra: theatre = actor + spectator. Everything else is extra, even extraneous. Stimulating imaginations and evoking emotions are easier when there is less onstage. That was The Flea's aesthetic even prior to Al Gore's call to action. Everybody loses when the set plays out an extended run in a landfill. Also, dumpsters cost a bundle.

We theatre workers would like to think of ourselves as good guys. But the truth is that the theatre as currently practiced is—ecologically speaking—an extravagant use of resources. When actors light up an herbal cigarette onstage, sensitive members of the audience often cough in protest; they don't want that second-hand smoke. The day is not too far away when audiences will also take note of our use of resources and question why we well-meaning theatre folk generate heavy carbon footprints to create something that should be pro-people, pro-existence, and progressive. We're being watched. We don't get a pass for being well intentioned.

A reconsideration of our methods might result in new ways of working. Who knows? We also have an opportunity to be public leaders in a major awakening and change in human behavior. It's exciting. 🍎

Here are some useful links to get you started:

The Green Theater www.thegreentheater.org

The Mayor of London Green Theatre Plan
www.greeningtheatres.com

The LEED green building certification program www.usgbc.org

The Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts
www.sustainablepractice.org

The Green Theatre Initiative www.greentheaters.org

Mō'olelo Performing Arts Company

www.electrictemple.net/green.php

Berkeley Repertory Theatre

www.berkeleyrep.org/about/greenroom.asp

Showman Fabricators www.showfab.com/green_index.html

Arcola Theatre www.arcolaenergy.com

ecoTheatre ecothatre.wordpress.com