

Plague and the Moonflower: A Regional Community Celebrates the Environment

DAVID JOHN CURTIS*

Institute of Rural Futures and School of Environmental and Rural Science
University of New England | Australia**

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a case study of audience responses to the oratorio *Plague and the Moonflower*. The oratorio was performed by the community of Armidale in rural New South Wales, Australia. Through an examination of the qualitative data collected, the paper shows how experiencing this performance engendered better environmental attitudes and awareness in audience members and participants. There is a lack of good case studies in the literature that explore how performance and audience participation can change attitudes and intentions through emotional and aesthetic communication. This article addresses that gap in the literature with a novel case study and empirical work.

The implication of this case study is that amateur performers and audiences are not passive in their experience of art, but are active participants in meaning-making. The production provides evidence that the engagement of the senses and the atmosphere and excitement of a performance that incorporates music and dance, as well as visual and theatrical elements and poetry, can impact on people on a deep emotional level. Furthermore, the rich emotional response that such an event instils in participants and audience members indicates the important role that such an event could play in building a sense of community. The production also provides evidence that experiencing a performance such as this can engender better environmental attitudes and awareness in audience members and participants, as well as an enhanced intention to adopt pro-environmental behaviour. This event provides support for the view that theatre and other forms of drama can “excite change” when shaped, targeted and delivered in particular ways.

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** Institute of Rural Futures, University of New England, Armidale NSW, 2351, Australia

INTRODUCTION

There are many factors that affect the environmental behaviour of individuals and the ways these factors interact are complex. According to Jackson (2005), models of consumer behaviour fall into two categories. There are ‘externalist’ perspectives which see people as constrained or heavily influenced by external forces beyond their control such as physical structures, institutional factors (for example incentives and regulations), the influence of elites and social norms. There are also ‘internalist’ perspectives, which carry the implicit assumption that people act as autonomous agents. Internalist factors include a person’s values, beliefs and attitudes, a person’s situation, an awareness of the consequences of one’s actions and personal characteristics such as gender, habits, class, family, peer group, tastes and preferences, self concept, genetic makeup and personality.

Several models have been developed in the field of social psychology to explain how the interactions between various internalist factors influence behaviour. In the Theory of Planned Behaviour, beliefs about the outcomes of one’s behaviour, and about what others think, influence a person’s attitudes towards a particular behaviour. These attitudes then influence a person’s intention to act, which ultimately influences their behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In Stern’s Value-Belief-Norm Theory, values, beliefs and awareness of consequences form a hierarchy of influences that effect personal norms, which are the foundation of how a person behaves (Jackson, 2005).

The environmental sociology and social psychology literature are largely silent on the role of the arts in affecting environmental behaviour. This is despite the fact that the literature on the effects of the arts on society goes back to at least Plato and Aristotle; it has long been recognised that artistic engagement can influence values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and awareness of consequences (Belfiore and Bennett, 2006). Artistic practices aimed at bringing environmental issues to the public’s attention or using the arts to improve the environment in some way is growing (*e.g.* Gablik, 1993; Cless, 1996; Collins and Goto, 2003). Somers (2008) provides a framework for viewing theatre performances that seek to bring about change in society. He concludes that “when shaped, targeted and delivered in particular ways, theatre and other forms of drama excite change”. Arts sociologists are increasingly interested in the link between the arts and sustainability (Kagan and Kirchberg, 2008), and large events are becoming an increasingly important tool for environmental and sustainability communication (Buss and Pollmann, 2005).

Through a close examination of qualitative data collected from a particular multi-arts performance event (the oratorio *Plague and the Moonflower*), this paper aims to show: (1) how a dramatic object is created and manipulated in interaction with audiences; (2) how such a project may help build a sense of community; and (3) how experiencing a performance may engender better environmental attitudes and awareness in audience members and participants. Through this analysis, the paper aims to provide an example of the value of a multi-arts event in the communication of sustainability.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

The event was a group of performances of the ecological oratorio, *Plague and the Moonflower*, by the community of Armidale in rural New South Wales, Australia. This was an ambitious musical undertaking for this community of about 20,000 people.

Plague and the Moonflower is an oratorio designed purposefully around a strong ecological theme. It was written for choirs, solo guitar and orchestra with several vocal and instrumental soloists and acting roles. The music is by Richard Harvey with words and images by Ralph Steadman (Figures 1a/b). Prior to this production, it had never been performed outside the UK.



Figure 1a: The Plague Demon.
(Image: Harvey and Steadman, 1999)



Figure 1b: The Moonflower.
(Image: Ralph Steadman)

The work moves between celebrating the natural environment, reflecting on civilisations that have gone before leaving deserts in their wake, lamenting the destruction of the natural environment by modern industrialised society, and anticipating the eventual rediscovery of nature. It explores the dark side of humanity through the character of the Plague Demon (Figure 2), but is ultimately celebratory when Plague is transformed through encountering the Moonflower.



Figure 2: The Plague Demon in the December 2003 production at the Woodford Folk Festival. Six metres tall, it covered an area of about 10 x 10 metres. Behind it is the Armidale Moonflower orchestra and adult and children's choirs. (Photo: Garry Slocombe; cc by-nc-nd)

¹ The Moonflower is a rare epiphytic cactus from the Amazon rainforest. It only flowers under a full moon for a few hours, emitting a beautiful perfume while it flowers, but within a few hours it withers. Margaret Mee made several expeditions to the Amazon and finally found the Moonflower deep within a submerged rainforest. She painted it while balanced on the roof of a small boat at the age of 79. An assistant held lights over her head while she painted throughout the night (Mee and Morrison, 1988).

Through his transformation he pledges to provide a future for the child, and hence future generations (Figure 3). The discovery of the rare Moonflower by the botanical artist Margaret Mee provided the celebratory and inspirational aspects of the work (Mee and Morrison, 1988).



Figure 3: *Plague Demon* (Waine Grafton) at the moment of transformation for *Plague Demon* with the child (Caitlin Grafton). (Photo: Jim Vicars; cc by-nc-nd)

Armidale medical practitioner and French horn player Bruce Menzies heard and was enchanted by the music of *Plague and the Moonflower*. He put together a production team, performers and crew to perform the work, which he conducted, in Armidale in October 2002. It involved about 170 performers and crew, including the Armidale Symphony Orchestra, the Armidale Musical Society Choir, the Armidale Sing NSW Choir, the folk band The Gypsy Hot Club, solo classical guitar, violin, soprano, and boy soprano. It included a large array of instruments (including 35 percussion instruments and a didgeridoo), many of which had never performed with the Armidale orchestra before. The 2002 production added theatrical elements, projections, dancers, jugglers and acrobats to the original English production. Two dance groups were part of the production; Body Moves and the Indigenous dance group, Nyardi Indigenous Experience. At the commencement of the performance, the foyer was full of rubbish, so when the audience arrived they had to walk among plastic and other rubbish which lined the walls and covered part of the floor. Off the foyer was an art exhibition organised by the Armidale Tree Group and featuring works celebrating the natural environment. The exhibition was launched at the concert and later moved to the group's woodland education centre for two weeks. A proportion of the proceeds from each ticket sold was also donated to the centre.

A year later, the production was restaged in Armidale in a large covered cattle pavilion, before being transported by bus and truck to the Woodford Folk Festival to appear twice as one of the main amphitheatre acts (Figure 4). The production team had been expanded and the cast had grown to over 250 people. The production was redesigned and the theatrical elements expanded, costumes redesigned and an

efficient organisation established to administer and organise the transport and campsite accommodation at the festival for 6 days of over 300 people. Further details about the productions and the participating groups can be found in Asch (2004), Curtis (2003, 2004, 2006), Curtis and Curtis (2006) and Moonflower Tour (2005).



Figure 4: Crowds gather in readiness in the amphitheatre at the Woodford Folk Festival for the second performance in 2003. Images by Ralph Steadman and photographs by Australian photographers, Leo Meier and Richard Woldendorp, interspersed with video footage of the performance, were projected onto large screens on either side of the stage. (Photo: Jim Vicars; cc by-nc-nd)

The Armidale concerts played to full-houses; about 1,000 attended in 2002 and over 700 in 2003. The audiences over the two shows at the Woodford Folk Festival totalled about 10,000 and achieved considerable coverage in the Armidale media and some in the national media. The 2003 festival attracted over 100,000 people and the performance was considered one of the stand out performances:

I was one of the many thousands in the audience participating in a standing ovation for a performance of international standing [...] The performance was my highlight of the 520 events this year at Woodford and will take its place in my top memories of my 18 years as Director of the [Woodford Folk] festival. (Bill Hauritz, letter 14 January 2004)

METHODS

The event was investigated using semi-structured interviews with members of the orchestra, choir and audience and the musical leaders in the production within a few months of the concerts (18 interviews after the 2002 concerts and 17 after the 2003 concerts). About a half of the interviewees self-selected and the remainder were purposefully selected to get special insights (*e.g.* the leaders of the production). Ralph Steadman was interviewed 8 months after the 2003 performances. Three focus group interviews were undertaken with a total of 24 dancers, singers, orchestra members and audience members. Participant observations were incorporated as the author

coordinated the event and designed both productions. Unsolicited written comment and oral feedback was received from several participants and audience members. In the 2003 performances the initial hypotheses that emerged from the interviews after the 2002 concerts were tested using a standard survey. A week before the 2003 performances commenced, 100 participants self-selected to fill in the survey. The day after the first Woodford performance seven volunteers were stationed for 1 to 2 hours at a location at the festival and asked people at random (roughly every fifth person) whether they could fill in the survey. At Woodford 65 audience members participated, and 5 audience members in the 2003 Armidale performance participated.

The interviews were analysed to identify key themes, objects, actors and moments after Neumann (1997). The 76 emergent themes were connected within and across categories, and illustrative examples selected. To improve the validity of the findings, a draft of the results was sent to people closely involved in the event. This paper concentrates on the more experiential data relating to the intersection of the performance and the audience and refers to the survey data where appropriate to complement those observations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

HOW THE DRAMATIC OBJECT WAS CREATED AND MANIPULATED IN INTERACTION WITH THE AUDIENCE TO REVEAL THE WORK'S MEANING

Because the work was contemporary and unknown to audiences and performers, communicating the meaning of the work was a challenge for the production team. It was clear from the interviews that audience members were generally aware of the message of the work after a single viewing. These observations were supported by the responses, with two thirds of the Woodford audience reporting a positive response to the message of the work. The second production made the meaning clearer as the production team responded to observations from interviews after the first production. There were two ways in which the meaning of the work was revealed: through the musical script and through the way the work was staged (and in the way many elements were combined).

The music and words

Musically, *Plague* has many influences which reflect the different parts of the story, including Elizabethan and South American folk melodies, and many interesting musical elements like classical guitar and violin solos, an intricate marimba section as well as rich choral and solo voices (Figure 5). Most responses to the music were positive (over 90% of survey respondents reported a favourable response), many describing it as “inspiring” or “exceptional”. Different people identified with different parts. Certain musicians commented on enjoying the range of instruments employed, and for some it presented a challenge to experiment with new instruments. The music was described as “democratic”, since every part of the orchestra had a section where they featured. Some surprise was expressed that a contemporary piece could be so accessible to them.

Some interviewees noted that because the music was so appealing, it provided a way to appreciate the environmental message. The Musical Director (Bruce Menzies) said that he was initially attracted to the music, long before he understood that it had an

environmental message. Once he got the CD and read the words he realised that it was a “passionate statement [...] that fitted into my philosophy of music”. He said:

[...] there is no point doing something which has got a message, but which doesn't work as music, and I think this works, stands up perfectly well as music. More than perfectly well, it's very moving, but because it's linked to a message as well, I think that strengthens it.

As one musician noted, even if the sung words were at times hard to understand, the music itself conveyed the story and the emotions. It did this through captivating melodies, dynamic crescendos and a huge range of musical textures. But, what particular elements of musical and theatrical engagement led to such feelings?



Figure 5: The music for *Plague and the Moonflower* includes several instrumental solos, above percussion soloist Murray Winton. (Photo: Jim Vicars; cc by-nc-nd)

Some interviewees spoke of the way the work highlighted environmental destruction through the power of some of the words like “kill the tree”. Audience members and participants spoke of their increased appreciation of the work, as they had time to listen to the words and read the lyrics. (CDs of the UK performance were available and many people listened to it frequently during the preparation phases and afterwards.) One performer spoke of the transition from being “entertained” to gaining deeper understanding, and others spoke of their gradually growing understanding and awareness of the piece. Indeed, some who saw the first (2002) production were so captivated by it they joined up as participants for the second (2003)!

Many performers spoke of the way that physically participating in the work enabled them to express their feelings for the environment:

[...] we just sang. Something inside us made us sing so well — you wanted to and every singer [...] of that production right from the first note to the last note of it, you were just enwrapped in it. (female adult performer)

Some participants said the act of performing was a way of doing something constructive for the environment.

It felt like you were doing something for the environment, saying something. And because you're young, you were [...] saying that we don't want this [environmental destruction] to happen. (female member of children's choir)

I know that some people who were involved in the performance described it like a gift that you were giving [...] I'd heard a few people say that it was a gift to give back to the world — to give out that very beautiful message about where we've come from and where we're going in this century. (female adult audience member from Armidale)

To be able to sing about something that is really important to you, you're on much more of a high. (Director of Children's Choir)

These reflections by participants and audience members indicate that physically performing in the work, and engaging first hand with the music and lyrics, provided a powerful space for interacting with and internalising the works' environmental message. It was especially valuable for these performers to add the communication of this message to the act of performing, something that they did anyway.

Combination of other elements

The way the event was staged, with the integration of dance, visuals and theatrical elements with the music and poetry was also cited as important in communicating the message of the work: the medium was the message (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Dancers, choirs and orchestra stage the dramatic finale. Original choreography was developed for the productions by Tania Gammage, above is the Moonflower blooming (front to back — Layna Stephens, Jay Nagle-Runciman, Lauren Cordingly, Rachel Goldsworthy, Alanna Proud). (Photo: Jim Vicars; cc by-nc-nd)

Involving Indigenous performers (Figures 7a/b) and projections of Australian landscapes was another theatrical mechanism by which the work's creative team endeavoured to make the work more meaningful for local audiences. Audience

members and participants spoke of the impact of the many art forms involved in the production and how this made the production more memorable, meaningful, and special:

[...] the dancers were fantastic — their movements were unusual and earthy. [I] loved the Aboriginal dancers at the beginning and end. [I] loved all the elements, Powerpoint, Plague with red light, variety of media, and how they supported the stories, and gave different artistic interpretations [...] it was a feast, visually and aurally. (female adult audience member in Armidale)

The exciting thing about *Plague and the Moonflower* was that it was an attempt at using such a range of media to get to people in new ways and to get people thinking — not to impose an answer but to stimulate people to think about and engage with environmental issues. (male adult audience member in Armidale)



Figure 7a: Incorporation of the didgeridoo into the orchestra and the cleansing and farewell ritual performed by Indigenous dancers provided the work with special significance for an Australian audience, above Duan Pittman: opening didgeridoo solo.



Figure 7b: Shannon Smith and her daughter Narree Pittman of Nyardi Indigenous Experience in the 2003 Armidale production of *Plague and the Moonflower*. (Photos: Jim Vicars; cc by-nc-nd)

The combination of elements led to the spectacle and what one audience member described as a “fantastic atmosphere”, others as “the wow factor” (Figure 8):

The gestalt was extraordinary — the quality of music, boy soprano, choirs, production side, visuals, dance [...] integrating theatrical elements [...] the coming together of the community, harnessing the talent, the variety [...] and commitment of community. (female adult audience member in Armidale)

You could see they were like stunned mullets after the first performance because they had not expected something that matched the last evening of the Proms at the Albert Hall. It had that sort of atmosphere, the hall was full, the stage was packed with people, the floor was packed with people as well, and it all came together. I think it’s important to realise by that time, within a week, the whole thing had been enthused with a passion for what it was about. (male adult performer, regarding the first concert)

These quotes again indicate that specific elements of the work’s performance and staging were integral to the overall impact of the work as reported by individual audience members.



Figure 8: *Finale — Rejouissance*. (Photo: Jim Vicars; cc by-nc-nd)

Staging the work outside (at Woodford) in a Greek Theatre type auditorium where there is a natural concave in the hills, and by putting the performance in a relatively natural environment, surrounded by forest, were additional ways in which the creative team sought to physically integrate the theme of the work with its physical staging. The outdoor venue was designed to increase the visual impact of the dancers and myriad theatrical components (the boat, moon, Plague Demon) of the work. The visual spectacle gradually unfolded with the focus of the spectator being confined to the stage early on; then gradually expanding, until at the end the eye had to sweep 180° to take it all in. As theatre scholar Downing Cless notes, performances which occur outside, and which celebrate the natural environment in a way that stirs the emotions, re-connect performance with the natural environment in ways that occurred traditionally (Downing Cless, interview, 13 July 2004).

In the first production, the foyer was filled with garbage. In the second production the physical realisation of the Plague Demon (in Figure 2) using plastic shopping bags developed this idea further.



Figure 9: The Plague Demon was constructed from 3000 plastic shopping bags tied together by about 30 volunteers over 300 hours. It was used in an installation in the main shopping centre in Armidale and in the Autumn Festival parade in March 2004 to highlight the problem of waste. It contained the equivalent of an estimated three hours of plastic bag consumption by the city of Armidale. (Photo: Garry Slocombe; cc by-nc-nd)

It emerged from a large pile of “rubbish” dumped into the festival arena by a garbage truck at the beginning of the performance. The rubbish was designed as a metaphor for the messages contained in the work. The use of waste material in the construction of this major prop not only saved the production money, but the construction phase was cited as educative in itself. As volunteers spent many hours tying the bags together to create the large sheet of bags, they discussed the problem of waste. Participants spoke of how seeing that big pile of plastic prompted them to stop using plastic shopping bags (Figure 9).

Another aspect of the medium being the message came with what one audience member described as the grace of the dancers, including the boys: he found it really encouraging that the young men and women could dance so beautifully together (Figure 10). One audience member said that she found it was an inspirational and uplifting experience and took her out of her “normal day to day [...] to a higher plane”. Because the music and the whole production was a work of such beauty she felt that the medium itself ultimately gave her optimism for the future.

[It] inspired me to appreciate [the] beauty of nature and the environment more [and to] appreciate clean air and absence of ‘Plague’ in my environment. It was more appreciation rather than action [...] I guess that appreciation feeds that action. It was an aesthetic appreciation. It’s that beauty [...] To me the whole performance was so beautiful it was inspiring, (female adult audience member)



Figure 10: Robin Curtis and Lauren Cordingly dance in “The Master Builders” section of *Plague and the Moonflower* in the 2003 Woodford performance. (Photo: Jim Vicars; cc by-nc-nd)

Interestingly, one performer warned of audiences being “seduced” by the “beautiful sounds and sights”, and that the “beautiful lyricism” can “lull the senses”. However, he felt the production avoided this by employing Brechtian techniques of alienation², such as the projected images and selected passages of text, as well as devices like the

² The German playwright Berthold Brecht used techniques such as a person holding a sign to force the audience to step out of the world created by the play and engage their critical faculties.

Plague Demon puppet, to refocus the audience's attention on what the performance was about.

The fact that the work contained serious content distinguished it from entertainment for many audience members. People described this aspect variously: “takes us to a higher plane”, “you remember the underlying messages”, “the connection with the things that are important to you,” where you could “get beyond the trivial” — “entertainment is also valuable, but in the end it is just entertainment”. The musical richness of the work through the lyrical classical guitar solos, the haunting soprano solos, the soaring choral sections and the building of repetitive simple South American type melodies into dynamic crescendos were specifically designed to heighten the impact of the underlying environmental message.

The message was embedded in the way the production was run in other ways also. Taking most participants to Woodford (a distance of about 500 km) by bus rather than car avoided greenhouse gas emissions from about 70 cars. Constructions that were built for the production, such as the choir risers, will be used by groups in Armidale for years. Recycling at the camp-site allowed the production to “practise what it preached”. Nevertheless the event did have an environmental cost, particularly an energy cost in getting people to and from rehearsals, and in lighting and sound. The case study showed the importance of trying to make the medium the message as much as possible: many participants said that this exposure to environmental practices in the production itself was an important element of changing their attitudes.

Interviewees highlighted how the work changed from despair (represented by the Plague Demon) to the resilience of nature and hope. This was symbolised by the moonflower, and was realised through both the music and the dance (Figure 6). “The flower opening — I was a mess there — it was totally moving,” said one audience member. One of the children's choir members said that the soloists were like the “moonflower speaking” and represented different parts of the environment. Another choir member spoke of the “redemptive” aspect of the moonflower. The sense of community itself was hopeful for many interviewees: “In a world full of despair it is great to see this happen [...] we need the message of dedication, that we can change this” (audience member).

The responses regarding the meaning of the work confirmed Somers' (2008) observation that the creation of a story to organise issues is valuable in organising momentary experience into memories, and predicting a future and experience through the stories of others — aspects of the world we ourselves do not experience. Somers (2008) also suggests that by concentrating meaning, an artwork can compress truths about human existence and people's search for significance. “If the outcomes are performed, and the representation resonates with audience members, that compressed meaning expands within the receivers”.

EFFECT ON SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND NETWORKING

The production had a strong effect in engendering appreciation and pride of community as evidence in both surveys and interviews. Interviewees described how they felt connected to the community in which they lived, and how special they considered their community:

I've lived in Armidale for 25 years [and] I've never been more proud to come from this community. I thought it was an amazing showcase of what this town's capable of doing and it brought together so many disparate groups that wouldn't normally come together [...] to me it defined what community is about [...] (female adult audience member from Armidale)

The sense of community — looking around and seeing all the people you know — feeling a part of that — isn't it wonderful that all these people created this event, and you're part of it, watching it. (female adult audience member from Armidale)

The fact that the work was seen to be of high quality added to the pride that people felt in their community, some saying it was “world class”, others saying how “amazed” they were by the quality of music-making in Armidale, and others saying that they would expect to have to go to a capital city to experience something so good.

The project provided an opportunity for substantial community involvement, networking, meeting new people, working with people one already knew, the building of bridges between different groups within the community, and the strengthening of bonds. Many of the participants interviewed, both adults and youth, expressed how “wonderful” the community element of the production was, and how it came about through the performances and preparation for them, and also through camping together.

The bridging elements of the production were emphasised by many participants, and in particular the coming together of Indigenous and non-Indigenous performers was considered positive. In some cases, it was the first opportunity non-Indigenous people had of working with Indigenous people, and for some Indigenous people it was the first time they had experienced an orchestral performance:

Something you don't see is [...] the orchestra with the didgeridoo — I'd never seen that before, and that was *really* great, and the Aboriginal dancers with our dancers — the mix of cultures, and addressing the issue of reconciliation as well. (female teenager audience member)

The experience with *Plague* was similar to that found by Somers in his analysis of a community theatre project in the UK. He writes: “I believe [it] was an opportunity for a large section of the community to find justification to join again in common purpose, to *work* together to make something that could not be achieved without other members of the community” (Somers, 2002). The reported effects of *Plague* were consistent with those identified by other authors who have concluded that participatory art forms are important in community development (e.g. Jermyn, 2001; Guetzkow, 2002; McQueen-Thomson and Ziguras, 2004; Mills and Brown, 2004; CMCSWG, 2005).

The production of *Plague* had unanticipated effects beyond the event itself. Various elements were used in the Armidale Autumn Festival parade (Figure 9) and in an installation in a shop front, extending messages of the work to thousands more people. As a result of the event, Steadman wrote another oratorio with similar themes specifically for the Armidale community (*God's Drawing Board*), and funding was gained for an Australian composer (Elena Kats-Chernin) to compose it. Many from the *Plague* production came together for the world premiere of this work in Armidale in 2008. Also many of the networks established through *Plague* energised other community sustainability activities and the staging of other productions. These flow-on effects are consistent with sustainability initiatives that are helped by cultural

activities undertaken by amateur arts groups internationally (EcoArts Connections, 2010; Greenmuseum, 2010; International Council for Cultural Centres, 2010; South Florida Environmental Art Project, 2010).

HOW EXPERIENCING THE PERFORMANCE ENGENDERED BETTER ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES AND AWARENESS

Evoking an emotional response

First and foremost, participants and audience members reported powerful emotional responses to the work. The emotional response appeared to be due to the music combined with the other elements of production. Respondents were not asked what kind of emotional response the work evoked, but it is possible to infer from interviews that the emotional response was positive:

It was one of the most moving experiences of my life, [I was] elated, inspired, overwhelmed by it all [...] it was awe inspiring.

[I] found it incredibly moving — absolutely good feeling.

Very elated, exhilarated, really wonderful [...] would rate it as one of the most moving performances [I've] been to.

Wow! Buoyed up! [...] The production would have affected most people emotionally.

I don't think the message was on an intellectual level, it's poetic, deeper [...] Intellectually you know that humanity has been steadily damaging the environment since the industrial revolution, but for me it gave me the **feeling** of what that meant — it [...] connected the head with the heart [...]

I was pretty affected by it emotionally actually [...] not so much [by] the work itself, but more the experience of being part of it.

In evoking these emotional responses, the artists involved in this production demonstrated how artists have a special ability to connect communities with the environmental imperative. One musician said that using the arts was not a usual way to present issues but it was a way of getting people to sit up and listen. She said that music makes it more memorable and “touches you somewhere”. An audience member who was a professional ecologist said that scientists underestimate the importance of building an emotional response. He said that people with a scientific background may be practical — “This is how you plant trees” — but were worse at engendering respect and awe. They deal factually rather than emotionally. In his long career he had noted different ways that people became aware of the need for conservation, and he recognised the value in creating an “emotional warmth” to engender belief. Taken together, these responses indicate that the particular aesthetic design of this work may have engendered impactful emotional reactions in a way that more scientific communications do not.

An audience member who had for a time worked for the environment movement took this theme further. He said that an emphasis on scientific arguments can turn people off, and that if the environment movement was to make progress, it was also important to take on a spiritual and aesthetic dimension. For him, the aesthetic approach (as exemplified in this work) could allow a moral engagement with the environment. Interestingly, the artist (Margaret Mee) was portrayed in the work as having sensitivity to the environment, and was the medium through which the Plague Demon (representing humanity) was ultimately transformed.

The capacity of the arts to evoke an emotional response is an important path through which people learn about an issue. Emotions are physiological responses to particular types of sensory experiences. Emotional responses to *Plague* included happiness (manifested by tears of joy and laughter) and catharsis (manifested by people saying they were on “a high”, were amazed or “flabbergasted”). The notion that art can evoke catharsis dates back to at least Aristotle (Belfiore and Bennett, 2006). When people experience an emotion, they tend to pay more attention to events and as a consequence learn more about the events that are congruent with their mood (Atkinson *et al.*, 1990).

Effects on environmental attitudes and awareness

It was also evident from the interviews and survey that this production may have prompted many participants and audience members to reflect on humanity’s relationship with the natural environment, to feel strongly towards it and to become aware of some environmental issues. This effect was exemplified by a member of the crew who said that the Plague Demon had a big impact on people: “We’re very conscious about using plastic bags now — we just don’t use them [...] so it’s had an impact on our family directly. I think it impacted on other people who saw the show similarly”.

In some, particularly the younger people interviewed and surveyed, this process of reflection led to learning about environmental issues and developing their beliefs:

Once I actually learnt the music and I actually thought about the words and then I heard the other adult choir lines, [it] [...] made me more conscious about the environment. (female member of the children’s choir)

The event reinforced many peoples’ existing behaviours, or reminded them of pro-environmental beliefs that had become dormant. This effect came through strongly in interviews, and was confirmed through the survey. One performer said “I don’t think that it’s changed me personally in what I do. It’s consolidated it”. An audience member said that it provided personal affirmation of his beliefs, his behaviour and the incidence of his views among others. Another audience member said that it reinforced things she already knew and did, and that the garbage in the foyer made her feel good that she did not consume grossly or drop litter. A third audience member provided a broader perspective by saying that people look for and notice, perceive and process things that are consistent with their belief system. For her, the work reinforced disgust and worry about environmental degradation, and “articulated her concern”. A fourth audience member said that a work like this was not “preaching to the converted”, it was “keeping the choir singing”. For him, to see a full hall of people who he assumed must also feel like him, was “very reinforcing”. Others spoke of how it reinforced work that they were doing in the community for the environment, or made them feel good about things they were doing in their own lives, such as recycling or composting. There was an element of reinvigoration for some interviewees who had worked on environmental matters during their careers, or who were at key turning points in their lives, such as retirement:

I’ve always been [...] a[n] [...] environmentally aware person, but it brought home a lot of things to me, to make me feel that I was doing right in the way that I felt about the environment and the way I lived my life. (Male adult choir member)

Some said that they knew about the environment, but seeing the production reminded them and prompted them to action. This manifested itself in different

ways: reminding a person of all “the wonderful things”; energising the person to try harder in their professional life; bringing the issues to the “forefront” of consciousness; being reminded of ideas from one’s youth about building and lifestyle choices which the person may have let slip (“it’s so easy to let [convictions] slip”, particularly when one spends so much time in a “computer-virtual world” which is “disjointing”).

It was evident from the interviews and the survey that the production of this work provided a physical and emotional space for audience members and participants alike to reflect upon the environmental impact of their behavior. A large proportion of those interviewed and surveyed listed things that they would do differently, such as not using plastic shopping bags, recycling, reducing waste and pollution, planting trees, saving water, joining or donating money to community groups, using the arts to raise environmental awareness, practising organic gardening, and “spreading the word”.

It is not possible to know if people actually did change their behaviour as follow-up interviews were not feasible. One audience member said that the response to the work might be qualitative rather than quantitative: “getting people to say ‘I don’t like that’ is beneficial”. Some responses indicated that the event was a pivotal moment in many of the participants’ lives. In others, the event may have opened people’s minds to information received at a later time.

I know a lot of people held on to that experience after Woodford finished, because it did uplift so many people [...] But in terms of its environmental impact, I don’t think you can help to see that story and see the figure of the Plague Demon and [...] that transformative experience that he undergoes, and not be touched in some way. I can’t imagine somebody seeing that performance and not being touched [...] by the underlying message and that transformation [...] it’s like a call for us to all look at where we’re going and what kind of future. (female adult audience member)

I think the kids [that] it had the biggest impact on were the kids who hadn’t been confronted with some of those issues before [...] It’s not a political work, so I don’t think it’s the sort of thing that makes you rush out and man barricades [...] It doesn’t tell you what to do. I think what it does do is generate discussion, it generates ideas, probably enhances awareness [...] there were a few kids who were already saying [...] “I want to do some research on this aspect of it”. (female adult choir member and teacher)

Any exposure to a specifically environmental message could potentially stimulate discussion and self-reflection among individuals. What is key to the performances of the *Plague*, however, is that the specifically aesthetic and emotional reactions participants and spectators reported seems to have provided a deeply internalized space for this self-reflection to take place. Rather than being ‘additional’ or ‘decorative’ aspects of the environmental message, the music, lyrics, and theatrical conventions used by the work were integral to transmitting this message in a unique way.

Discussion

Intention to act, awareness of consequences and attitudinal changes are all considered to be important precursors to behavioural change according to the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Stern’s Value-Belief-Norm Theory (Jackson, 2005). Notwithstanding the positive responses from people saying the production made them want to change their behaviour, it would be unwise to attribute

behavioural changes to a unique event (Lucas and Matys, 2003). Indeed, as Deikmann and Preisendorfer (1998) have shown, there can be inconsistencies between citizens' environmental attitudes and their behaviour. Perhaps, as articulated by viola player and lecturer in urban design Chris Cunningham, the real value of the production was that it galvanised a community in an act of altruism that was an important counter to the materialistic message of industry:

It is not therefore particularly important whether the show turned the audience 'on' to responsible environmental care [...] The real point is that the show demonstrated, through and by the Armidale community that there ARE alternatives to the passive acceptance of the message of consumerism that industry would like to rule our lives. (Chris Cunningham, letter 3 January 2004).

This view mirrored that of Somers (2002) who writes "In a world in which consumerism has become the defining activity, the production of a work of art provide[s] a valued activity". Hennion (2007) describes how amateur music listeners give themselves over to an emotional response to the music or performance they are experiencing, and social links are formed as a result. This case study provides compelling evidence of this process in action. Certainly, an event such as *Plague and the Moonflower* can have a powerful role in community engagement and motivation.

I propose that the impact of this production seems to be so strong because it made simultaneous use of aural, visual and kinetic elements. This engagement of the senses and the atmosphere and excitement of a performance combined to enable music and performance to impact people on a deep emotional level (Banes and Lepecki, 2007). The visual and performing arts were an important element of the protest movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and remain so now (Clark, 1997; Branagan, 2003; Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2005; Futerra Sustainability Communications, 2010). The connection of "the head to the heart" (as one audience member called it) makes a music-based approach with its persuasive force (as exemplified in this production) very important to the global ecological movement in propelling action at the community and even larger global level.

CONCLUSION

The production of *Plague and the Moonflower* by the Armidale community provides an example of the value of a multi-arts event in the communication of sustainability. The production provided evidence that the engagement of the senses and the atmosphere and excitement of a performance that incorporates music, dance, visual, theatrical elements and poetry can impact on people on a deep emotional level. Furthermore, the rich emotional response that such an event instils in participants and audience members indicates that such an event can play an important role in building a sense of community. The production also provided evidence that experiencing a performance such as this can engender better environmental attitudes and awareness in audience members and participants, as well as an enhanced intention to adopt pro-environmental behaviour. This event provided support for Somers' (2008) view that theatre and other forms of drama can "excite change" when shaped, targeted and delivered in particular ways.

The implication of this case study is that amateur performers and audiences are not passive in their experience of art, but are active participants in meaning-making. In terms of environmental behaviour, this event points to the power of a work of music/theatre that is accessible (considered "beautiful" by the majority of

observers), especially where it is repeated. If a work like *Plague and the Moonflower* could be popularised in the same way as (say) Handel's *Messiah* is, and repeatedly performed, it could well become a signature work to move our society towards ecological sustainability. The repeated performance and experiencing of such a work is an act of constant reminder of the need for care of our environment. A focus on the specifically emotional and aesthetic dimensions of such experiences may also be an important way to open a dialogue between reflexive arts practitioners and social scientists about the interactional work of meaning-making.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David John Curtis has over 30 years of practical and theoretical experience in revegetation, conservation and environmental sustainability. He recently completed a major research project examining the role of the visual and performing arts in shaping environmental behaviour from which he gained his Ph.D. and on which this paper is based.

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