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# Ethical Scenography in the North American Cluster Programme at the Prague Quadrennial

Essay by Ian Garrett

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With a background in Ecoscenography, Ian Garrett has contributed to sets and energy systems for various productions, including those at Coachella. He co-directs the Climate Change Theatre Action and has authored writings on arts, the environment, and sustainability. Beyond academia, his extensive production experience spans lighting design for award-winning shows and roles as a producer for premieres in diverse venues worldwide.

**Věra Velemanová**, the guest editor of the issue, invited Ian Garrett to share his thoughts about ethics and scenography in the presentation of the North American Cluster programme at the Prague Quadrennial, focusing on its efforts in decolonisation, embracing indigenous narratives, ecological sustainability, accessibility, and inclusivity.

The text below is the essay grounded in first-hand experiences. It emphasises the ethical dimensions within contemporary scenographic practices which have shaped the way the resulting exhibitions have been created and shared, the associated series of talks facilitated, and how the countries and regions of North America share an ethical consideration for their respective design work as post-colonial states sharing a continent. This aims to inspire inclusive approaches in global theatrical design context.



**Fig. 1:** Ian Garrett. Photo courtesy of the author.

## The North American Cluster

Within the vast panorama of global scenography on display at the Prague Quadrennial (PQ) the North American Cluster programme emerges as a unique intersection of ethics and design. Representing Canada, the USA, Quebec, and Mexico, the programme has emerged as a forum for ethically engaged scenographic work contextualised by the politics of these contributors to the Exhibitions of Countries and Regions. This is ultimately seen (or a scene) in the staging of the respective exhibitions and the collaborative conversation series organised by the cluster.

The North American cluster was initially coordinated for the Prague Quadrennial in 2019. Based on the call by the Quadrennial to remove borders between the exhibitions, the curatorial teams from each country felt there was an opportunity to look at the collaborative possibilities of crossing the borders between our respective exhibitions and integrating critical conversations about the nature of political boundaries drawn across our home continent.

The formation of the cluster was an effort to formalise existing ties between each of the four exhibiting countries and regions. I served as the Lead Curator for the United States at PQ 2019. However, I have lived in Toronto, Canada, since 2012, and have served on the board of directors for our stage designers professional association, now union, the Associated Designers of Canada (ADC). In this capacity I am part of the

committee which supports and organises the Canadian Exhibition at PQ from Anglophone Canada. The ADC works closely with our Francophone counterparts represented by the Association Des Professionnels Des Arts De La Scène Du Québec (APASQ), who work under separate agreements in distinct professional theatre networks. Both the ADC and APASQ support theatrical designers in parallel across the larger idea of a confederated Canada. We have historically exhibited adjacent to one another, but with separate exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> The conceptual approach of the APASQ exhibition, *Et Apres/And After*, considered the environmental impact of our profession's work. As a leader in the field of Ecoscenography and director of the Centre for Sustainable Practice in the Arts, I provided support to the APSAQ team and this concept as well as supporting the ADC team. At the same time, the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT), which is responsible for the US Exhibition, has been working to build connections with theatre professionals in Mexico. We collectively felt that links to their curation team were ready to be strengthened as to reify these connections. All of these links allowed us to build bridges between each country and region counter to the prevailing political rhetoric around our shared borders and security.

We developed a shared language in the lead up to that PQ. Translated into the lingua franca of our respective regions – English, French, Spanish – and to Czech, it reads:

In this time of polarization and political divisions, while world superpowers are building walls and reinforcing borders, we choose to focus on communication and exchange, the essential tool of our collaborative art. It is our responsibility as artists to reflect on ways to build bridges between our countries. We discover ourselves and our voice by listening to the voices of others. To define our shape and colour we find ourselves wanting to see all shapes and colours.

The formation of a cluster comprised of the North American countries and regions (Canada, Mexico, and the United States with the province of Quebec) was a logical model in the context of creating a borderless and open space. We each come from regions of rich cultural diversity. In exploring our work, inspiration, our heritage, and history we find ourselves searching through common roots, drawing parallel lines, combining seemingly opposite elements and arrive here sharing space and ideas. With full awareness of the political and cultural differences between our regions, we agreed to look at establishing bridges between us, rather than building walls to separate us.

We aim to explore these themes in a visual, scenographic manner, and practically through collaboratively programmed events. We invite attendees to join us in our shared space for exchange and dialogue, to visit us each individually to consider our commonalities and differences. We reach out through the various programs across the PQ to expand this engagement through the artists that come from North America presenting workshops, performances, and through informal encounters. (NORTH AMERICAN CLUSTER 2019)

1 It is notable that the emerging or student exhibition is presented as a collective effort of both Anglophone and Francophone Canada.

We received permission to display adjacent to one another in 2019 to allow attendees to move fluidly between our exhibitions. We also presented a series of panels and workshops throughout the PQ programme in which each country or region invited one or more artists featured in their exhibition to present and converse about the similarities and differences from working in each context, adjacent to one another.

We committed to continuing this collaboration for the 2023 edition of PQ based on our feeling that we had many successful elements in 2019. While PQ organisers decided not to have exhibitors request preferences for who they were adjacent to in the exhibition halls, we still developed a collaborative programme of panel conversations focused on core issues we were all facing in our own unique ways. Our relationships also influenced how we connected through adjacent programme elements, like the PQ Talks, and through *ad hoc* conversations that run through the entire experience of PQ. Though our initial impulse to organise the cluster was to work against borders, pointing towards the charged politics about physical walls and barriers, as a collection of diverse post-colonial nations, we have each brought focus to topics of decolonisation, the sustainability of a liveable planet and ecoscenography, and access.

## Decolonisation in scenography

Historical events have a way of casting long shadows, affecting generations and influencing the texture of art, culture, and narratives. Colonisation is a complex aspect of North American history that has left enduring impacts on communities, their stories, and the ways they are portrayed. The North American Cluster programme at PQ shows that a tide is starting to turn with efforts to decolonise our field.

### The context for decolonisation

To appreciate the steps taken towards decolonisation within scenography, one must first understand what we mean by decolonisation. In the briefest terms, decolonisation is the deliberate process of undoing colonial ideologies and their resultant legacies. In the artistic realm, it means peeling back layers of imposed narratives, dissecting and challenging stereotypes and long-standing conventions, and redefining what constitutes 'normative' practices. In Scenography, this includes how we work and the methods we use to create and realise design. Yes, this may alter the aesthetics and motifs seen in sets and costumes, but this is also a critique of where and when performance happens. The relational spatiality of the performance space and its matter – sets, garments, artefacts – is not just about the objects on stage, but many foundational aspects. What is the stage to begin with? How do we consider complex delineations between what is for the public and what is only for a community, or what is secular versus sacred? What are the appropriate systems for the transfer of intellectual property?

Much of the way theatre and performance manifests is itself a colonial structure, based in European traditions brought to North America by settlers. For too long, indigenous and local narratives in North America were overshadowed, marginalised, or, worse, in a way, misrepresented. Stories have been told through the lens of the coloniser, leading to an erasure of authentic indigenous identities, histories, and contributions. This continues, but even where there is narrative progress, the systems of realisation of a production, especially insofar as they might be shared at an event like PQ, are architected according to these colonial structures.

The colonial project of the last half millennium also concerns the genocidal efforts to eliminate indigenous populations on Turtle Island, an original name of what we call North America, as well as countless displaced Africans whose bodies became the enslaved capital of the 'New World'. European cultural dominance, and non-European erasure has shaped global performance culture. Geographer Kathryn Yusoff ties together colonisation and theatre in her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* in her explanation of the 1610 thesis dating European invasions of what is now the Americas to the start of the Anthropocene:

On his second voyage in 1493 to the New World (modern Dominica), Columbus initiates the first transatlantic slave voyage, a shipment of several hundred Taino people sent from Hispaniola to Spain. In 1496, he returns from his second voyage, carrying around thirty Native American slaves. By 1510, there is the start of the systematic transportation of African slaves to the New World. By the time Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* is first performed in 1611 (a year after the proposed start date), the enslaved figures of Caliban and Ariel are familiar subjects in the Old World. (YUSOFF 2018: 29–30)

Settler/Colonial cultural dominance in present day North America shapes all four countries and regions in the cluster. In Canada and Quebec, this conversation is very much on the surface. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has published its Calls to Action include multiple references to 'unique cultures of Aboriginal peoples in Canada' (*TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION* 2015: 6). Indigenous rights to self-determination are enshrined in the Mexican constitution, and a reconciliation process has been initiated, but resource use and management related to neoliberal capitalism and the precarious rule of law, has led to calls to enforce these protections (CALLEROS 2021). The United States redefined its relationship with indigenous tribes following the activism of the late 1960s, leading to an era of increased self-determination, but this follows hundreds of years of attempted genocide. And as Jessica Horton set out to unpack in her book *Art for an Undivided Earth*, these actions in the US helped to establish a 'spatial politics that motivated a generation of activists and artists' (HORTON 2017: 12). This can be applied to any of our regions, and it impacts the way scenography is practiced to varying degrees.

To do work towards rectifying historical misrepresentations and embrace a more inclusive artistic vision, the North American Cluster members each considered the ar-





**Fig. 2:** Canadian Exhibition. PQ 2023. Photo: Ian Garrett.

ray of work presented in each exhibition. This comes with a risk though, that the work on exhibit may or may not be read as scenography to some.

In its artistic statement, the US curatorial team articulates: ‘The United States exhibit will celebrate RARE design submissions that support the inclusion of under-represented communities, acknowledge stories born from systemic power structures and historical events, and document the recent Covid-19 pandemic’ (USITT 2023). And the Canadian exhibition proclaims: ‘This vessel will gather artistic output from a group of performance designers living across the country who position themselves both within and outside of dominant culture’ (ADC 2023). It also mentions that

[t]he country of Canada carries a complicated colonial history written across its landscape. While often a self-proclaimed ‘mosaic’ of cultures and experiences, a dominant culture inherited from imperial Britain has shaped most of the country’s current modes of expression. (ADC 2023)

The cluster countries and regions made efforts to actively incorporate indigenous knowledge and perspectives, and the associated programme sought to challenge and reshape the longstanding Euro-centric aesthetics that dominated the scenographic field. This extended to the collaborative sessions organised by the cluster. Each cluster region led on the coordination of each panel, reflecting on the topics concerning their exhibition and home community.

Quebec organised a discussion on the topic of working conditions for designers. This considered ‘the psychological, physiological, and socio-economic perspectives



**Fig. 3:** NA Cluster Conversation – Canada. Left to right: Carmen Alatorre (Canada), Nancy Tam (Canada), Wlad A. Woyno R. (Canada), Sophie El-Assaad (Quebec), Aris Pretelin-Esteves (Mexico), Yoon Bae (USA), and Luke Cantarella (USA).  
Photo: Ian Garrett.

will help us discover what can be learned from our individual experiences. How can this sharing improve the state of things in our communities?’ (APASQ 2023).

In the session led by Mexico, the conversation surrounded cosmopolitics,

a notion formulated from anthropology, attending to the forms of conflict and negotiation between diverse agents that are not only human, and considers other modes of existence, other ways of producing and inhabiting the world, recognising their political intentionality. (GARRETT 2023b)

Framed by a discussion on the migration of monarch butterflies, this panel sought to discuss relational cultural work as an ‘ecological, political, historical, economic, architectural, poetic and religious issue, linked to the understanding of theatrical practice, as a privileged stage for dialogue and negotiation between multiple perspectives’ (GARRETT 2023b).

The US session explored ‘the topic of “building” the exhibitions, reflecting on how each country and region approaches the creation of their exhibitions from design to fabrication, and how this reflects the systems of creation and embodied values of the design field in each national community’ (GARRETT 2023c). Canada explored ‘equity seeking artists working within a colonial/majority culture in Canada (and beyond)’ (GARRETT 2023a).



In addition to the session organised by each region, Canada also programmed a presentation by multi-media 2Spirit artist, educator, and collaborator of Kanien'keha'ka and Scottish Canadian ancestry, Jay Havens, who was featured in the Canadian exhibition. This presentation on Havens' projects included *Red Coat*, which was on display within the exhibition.

With the strong strands of Indigenous ways of knowing from similar post-colonial contributors like Australia, and within consideration of this as a core theme from last year's World Stage Design gathering in Calgary, Canada, there is a move within PQ towards considering what conversations about world scenography are given a platform. This could also be observed in Asimwe Deborah Kawe's early keynote as part of PQ Talks where she unpacked the impact of an imposed British tradition in Uganda, the challenges of pushing against this colonial bias in the programming at the *Kampala International Theatre Festival*, and the adaptation of productions through local craft and aesthetics to appeal to local sensibilities. Kawe also served as a judge for the competitive aspects of PQ.

Art, in all its forms, is a powerful tool of representation and validation. How a community, its values, and its narratives is portrayed shapes perceptions, constructs identities and influences cultural interactions. In theatre, where we are presented with how those identities are performed, this is particularly true. By ensuring that indigenous narratives in scenography are both made visible and done so through the support of the artists themselves in their own words, there is an orientation towards a genuine expression working in opposition to colonial biases that are currently embedded within theatre.

This movement towards decolonisation in scenography has multiple manifestations and functions. On the one hand, it is about inclusivity and equity in the present and the future. It is about creating platforms where diverse voices can be heard, celebrated, and understood in their entirety in aspirational ways to move beyond tokenistic representation towards meaningful inclusion. But importantly, it is also about making visible modes of spatial and temporal organisation for performance and modes of presentation as a critical contrast to our assumed ways of working in the practice of legibly European forms of theatre. This is revealed not only in the presence of how the North America countries and regions include more that moves towards a decolonial future, but also in notable absences at PQ. India did not have an exhibition at PQ in 2023 but is home to one of the oldest texts describing performance space, the *Natya Shastra*. This is still a basis for how many events are designed and realised, with production networks across the Greater Toronto Area and Houston, which operate in parallel with euro-normative support for sizable South Asian diasporic communities.

While the strides taken by the North American Cluster programme are commendable, decolonisation is a complex journey with numerous challenges. One of these challenges is that, ultimately, it is a question of practice and may not be visible in the aesthetics. It does more to blur the edges of our theatrical practices where we may look at two events which appear nearly identical but have some as the result of different approaches to personal and spatial relationships, time, sacred information, and

ways of transferring knowledge. By looking for a clear aesthetic difference, there is the danger of over-simplification. Each community has its unique stories, traditions, and aesthetics, codified or not. Decolonised scenography, while seeking authenticity, may at times conflict with popular perceptions – perceptions molded by years of colonial narratives. Educating audiences so that this work can be understood and appreciated, will remain an ongoing challenge of decentring a European derived cultural dominance.

Movement towards decolonising scenography, as endeavoured in the North American Cluster programme at the Prague Quadrennial, is a homage to the past and a commitment to the future. By unraveling colonial legacies, embracing non-Western and Indigenous aesthetic approaches, and committing to meaningful collaboration, the programme is trying to chart a course towards a more inclusive, equitable, and ethical scenographic landscape. This does more to problematise cultural dominance than seek representational pastiche by painting work with traditional motifs of the past. Haven's *Red Coat* project exemplifies this in the construction of a garment through waste items selected for their parallels in material procurement related to community food systems. It does not need to look different than another item designed and constructed in a way that is divorced from this wider relational question to resources (even if it does) because the story of its creation that it carries is essential to its reading. Similarly, Elizabeth Wislar's costumes for *Othello*, included in the US Exhibition, supported the production as a 'celebration of Indigenous Futurism aligned with Black Liberation' (WISLAR 2023) by nodding to the Lakota and Cherokee practice of prayer ties in the use of scarve's gore. This aligned with the production's reduction of the violence in the play to imagine a less violent future which supports a trauma-informed approach. This is a journey that beckons reflection, understanding, and most importantly, action to validate approaches which a euro-scenographic biasing has historically overshadowed.

## Ecoscenography: the ethical imperative of sustainability

In a world facing the undeniable impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, the integration of ecological considerations into various disciplines has become paramount. Ecoscenography stands at the forefront of this transition in the world of performance arts. Bridging the gap between environmental consciousness and scenographic design, ecoscenography encapsulates a new vision for theatrical and performance design, one that is rooted in sustainability. The North American Cluster programme at PQ incorporates this thinking, underscoring the urgent need and profound potential of merging artistic excellence with ecological responsibility.

While work from each cluster exhibition includes samples of nature-inspired themes or visuals in a performance – including the previously mentioned *Othello* or *Ocean Filibuster* in the US exhibition – Ecoscenography extends beyond the inclusion of ecological tropes. It represents a holistic approach, encapsulating the philosophy of

sustainability in every aspect of scenographic design – from the materials used to the narratives portrayed and the practices employed (BEER 2021: 2). For those familiar with the Sustainable Development Goals, the 17 internationally negotiated targets which guide domestic policy across issues of sustainability and planetary balance, ecoscenography similarly takes an expanded view of making, what is made, and how this connects performance to wider concerns of human survival on Earth.

Ecoscenography challenges traditional methodologies that are often resource-intensive and environmentally damaging. It also emphasises co-creation with humans, non-human life, and material. It requires a circularity approach to repurposing, recycling, and harnessing sustainable technologies and materials to think about how we design for performance. It expands on the decolonial, to also move away from an anthropocentric worldview.

The North American Cluster programme's endeavours in ecoscenography are emblematic of a wider shift in artistic perspectives. Recognising the impacts of theatrical productions on the environment, from set construction to waste disposal. Some exhibits within the programme utilised repurposed materials. For example, the US exhibition worked on transforming discarded scenic materials into the 'house' seen in the exhibition hall. These installations not only reduced waste but also conveyed a message about the life cycle of the materials used to realise our designs and the potential for their reinvention.

The arts, like any other discipline, bear a responsibility towards our planet. By minimising waste, reducing carbon footprints, and promoting sustainable practices, ecoscenographers play a crucial role in mitigating the environmental impacts of theatrical productions. Beyond the reduction of emissions or volume of solid waste generated through producing a performance, approaching these issues through ecoscenography enhances practical consideration of environmental impacts in the conceptual foundation for a design. It acknowledges a relationship and responsibility to the greater world, whereas the work of the designer has often been allowed to abdicate their role in harmful environmental practices. Few, if any, other artistic fields are historically so divorced from the material *stuff* of it as a discipline, and rarely are material properties, consequences of manipulation and manufacture, and the impact of these choices a concern of a designer beyond budgetary limitations.

There is also a socio-cultural dimension at play as well. This is, in part, related to the ability of art to influence perceptions and mold opinions with audiences. It is also related to the intrinsic links between planetary health and the people who live on it. This has been out of balance for centuries. Referring to the quote from *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* shared earlier, the start of the Anthropocene, an epoch marked by the human impact on the Earth, is rooted in the colonial project of displacement, eradication, and exploitation of human and natural resources through slavery and extraction (YUSOFF 2018: 29–30). Ecoscenography looks at how we design and perform alternatives and all the relational changes that can lead to. As the data about climate change is clear, and there are clearly articulated actions we should take to avoid catastrophic climate change, it only stands to reason that the dominant society



**Fig. 4:** USA Exhibition. PQ 2023. Photo: Ian Garrett.

is without the will to make the necessary changes. This existential issue is a cultural issue foremost.

Characterised by its multifaceted interplay of geography, ethnicity, and socio-economic disparities, the United States reveals many of the interrelated concerns and challenges with attaining a sustainable future. It should not surprise that its exhibition is always faced with the challenge of reflecting its complexity. Having personally been involved in the creation of the US exhibit since 2015, I can verify the importance of this core question of representing its scale and complexity. This is the hardest thing to address for a country the size of the US and is especially true in also working to meet the brief of the producing organisation, USITT, and its membership, many of whom do not attend PQ. The exhibit constructed for PQ 2023 resembles a house composed of salvaged materials. It serves as an illustrative microcosm of the complexity of the US theatrical design milieu. This ‘home’ emblematically foregrounds the nuances of locale, affiliation, and cultural identity. Displayed are selected artists’ interpretations on the theme of ‘home’ (Fig. 4), juxtaposed on screens controlled through digital interfaces. This is effectively a requirement of the US exhibition given the number of perspectives it is required to take to be at all reflective of a national identity or parallel identities.



To extend the multiplicity of the scenographic work it showcases, the exhibit's fabrication was an amalgamation of repurposed materials from theatres nationwide with physical pieces which had a previous life in another project. There are thousands of hand tied strips cut from old scenic drops forming the cladding of this house in a vernacular style, itself made from reclaimed lumber. Each piece is labeled with its origin, promoting an environmentally conscious approach where design becomes a critical dialogue with the world. This underscores a commitment to sustainable design practices and also accentuates the historic and aesthetic significance inherent in each fragment. As theatrical spaces reopen with pandemic closures ending, there is a discernible paradigm shift emphasising inclusivity, environmentally conscious methodologies, and an enriched collaborative outlook. As articulated in the 'building' conversation hosted amongst the cluster by the United States, ways of making reveal the systems, infrastructures, and values the exhibition's makers work with in mind. This serves as a container for those inclusive values the curatorial vision expresses.

The Canadian exhibition takes another approach to its construction, though is also engaged in the question of how to display diverse points of view. The exhibition engaged local builders to avoid shipping materials halfway around the world, as they would not have a future life back in Canada. Inspired by the approach taken by Mexico in 2019, this also allowed for responsive modification to the site of the exhibition. This is not possible when the exhibition needs to be shipped from its country of origin six or more weeks ahead of installation. Whereas the US exhibition prioritised reuse of material to allow the history of each element to inform its reading halfway around the world, the exhibition from Canada takes a more practical approach of avoiding exacerbated environmental impacts of a global supply chain. This puts the designers and builders from Canada into a different conversation with scenography in Czechia, choosing to allow locally available materials and construction practices to shape the final form of its 'carrying vessel'. The artists of the Canadian team sought to express themselves while honouring both traditional knowledge and the perspectives of newcomers.

The Mexican exhibit (Fig. 5) also tackles the spatial politics thematic of an ecoscenographic approach by featuring the Zapatistas, who have been historically marginalised and silenced by the Mexican state. Their theatrical endeavours aim to reverse this, by being both a cry against oppression and a reflection on the instability of the world around them. Their *Journey for Life* is represented here. Contrary to the Western approach to art, which often isolates the artistic from the everyday, the Zapatistas integrate their art with daily life, including education, agriculture, and even warfare. This comprehensive approach to art and performance is not just a critique of global systemic failures but also a hopeful envisioning of alternative futures. Their performance is not just for the sake of art; it is a form of protest and a way to envision an achievable utopian goal. Considered in relationship to the US and Canadian counterparts, we see differentiated attention to sustainable scenography. Mexico brings singular focus to politically engaged performance through their exhibition design while the US and Canada bring more focus to the making of the exhibitions, domestically and internationally respectively.





**Fig. 5:** Mexican Exhibition. PQ 2023. Photo: Ian Garrett.

Quebec's exhibition (Fig. 6), like Mexico, also uses its design to focus on specific social considerations. However, where Mexico designs a showcase of performance/politics, Quebec brings attention to the performance/politics of design. It positions scenographers as a limited resource, focusing on the precarious nature of the profession in a changing world. Though less explicitly ecoscenographic in its construction or concept, it engages the important question of survivability as a designer for living arts. In addition to the current exhibition, the Quebec team has commissioned a digital twin to archive its 2019 exhibition, focused on the environmental impact of the profession, which is shared via virtual reality. This expands this edition's valorisation of the scenographer, to maintain links with their previous consideration of the scenographer's valorisation of the *stuff* which gets used to realise their designs.

Across the North American Cluster programme, artists have experimented with materials, tapped into digital technologies, and crafted virtual scenographies that may require no physical materials at all. Each of these engage with the ecological concerns within the regions, and political and infrastructural challenges with working in a way that looks beyond objects on a stage. This is done understanding the loaded politics which permeates each of these materials. The US exhibition highlights the challenge of sourcing materials which can then be imported and survive their journey, along

[ guests ]



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Fig. 6: Quebec Exhibition. PQ 2023. Photo: Ian Garrett.

with the labour involved in preparing salvaged material for use. Canada's exhibition takes another approach to these same considerations by negotiating a build from another continent to work with local artists and materials which can also be recirculated after PQ. Mexico has engaged with the utopian politics of expanded performance through the focus on the Zapatistas. Quebec, has raised similar questions with a focus on the state of working conditions for designers, and exploring the use of digital tools to extend the life of their work. Each connects the politics of these complex societies with those of their material construction. By taking responsibility for design and the execution of those designs beyond the immediate aesthetics during the 10 days of PQ, they each integrated principles of ecoscenography where the designer is of the world, its politics, its concerns, and not sheltered in the theatre building.

Ecoscenography promises a future where the theatre is not just a mirror to society but also a demonstration of hope for the future. A more cynical reader may find this overinflates the position of performance and design for performance given the common positioning of performance as entertainment and leisure time activities. But all of human society is just a performance. It is not directed by any natural law or scientific principle. Referring back to the essence of planetary survival as a predominantly cultural issue, the acceptance of this as the important work of performing into future societies and working to shift cultural norms is correct.

## Accessibility and universal design

In line with shifts in the world which reflect a collective move towards inclusivity and the rejection of a fallacy of normative existence, the realm of scenography is transforming. The North American Cluster programme at the Prague Quadrennial underscores this transformation by working to integrate the principles of accessibility and universal design. These principles are not additions or afterthoughts; they are an integral part of contemporary scenographic practices, ensuring that as many as possible, regardless of their abilities, can experience the work.

To fully comprehend the nuances, one must first understand the foundational concepts. 'Accessibility' pertains to the creation of spaces, products, and experiences tailored to individuals with disabilities. In contrast, 'universal design' adopts a more holistic approach; it aims for inclusivity for everyone, ensuring that people of all ages, sizes, and abilities can engage with a space or experience without modifications. In their insightful article, 'Introduction: Access Aesthetics' (2022), Mary Bunch and her team critique the dominant rights-based perspective, which often relegates access to a supplementary role, serving only as an afterthought in predominantly standardised spaces. This perspective leans heavily on a social disability model, inadvertently framing disability as an 'issue' necessitating adjustment to align with conventional norms. Bunch et al. (2022: 11) promote the idea of access as an inherent facet of 'crip aesthetics' – a progressive disability arts movement that challenges and reevaluates conventional aesthetic standards, where the barriers to involvement are removed. Applied to



scenography, these tenets emphasise the importance of crafting performance environments, sets, and experiences that inherently cater to all, thus removing the need for after-the-fact accommodations within traditionally designed spaces.

The North American Cluster programme has worked towards recognising the diverse needs of audiences and participants, the programme has actively sought to break down barriers that might hinder the complete theatrical experience. One example of this is the inclusion of Kinetic Light, a team of disabled artists, and their project *Descent* in the 2019 exhibition for the US (GARRETT 2019). This dance performance explores the pleasures of wheeled movement and the rich terrain of physical potential that is available to those with disabilities. The dance is performed on an architectural ramp with hills, curves, and peaks designed primarily for the wheelchair-using dancers, and is a combination of choreography, lighting, and design. The performance interprets the story of Venus and Andromeda, offering a queer and interracial reimagining of this classical myth. Throughout the performance, the dancers navigate the sculptural ramp, showcasing the intricacies and potential of wheelchair movement, thus pushing the boundaries of what is typically understood as dance. The work is a statement on disability, beauty, and the potential that exists outside of society's norms.

The push towards accessibility and universal design is rooted in a deep ethical imperative. By ensuring that this art is accessible to as many as possible, we reaffirm the fundamental right of every individual to access and appreciate cultural and artistic expressions and participate in shaping the world. Through the integration of access design principles in elements of the exhibitions presented by the clusters, and by featuring artists who are engaged in disability aesthetics, there is a desire to champion these principles and challenge longstanding biases and prejudices in parallel to considering the barriers of access to working in the field of scenography. The sample of the work from the US reflects this, especially in the way screen-based work from the forced online presentations during pandemic related closures is included. This considers what it means for artists and audiences to access one another. More pointedly, Quebec's core concept reflects on the impacts of recent accelerations of the departure of professionals from the field, the declining enrolment in training programmes, and shrinking funding and interest from government. It primarily features designers, less so individual designs, to discuss the survivability of the living arts ecosystem and its artists.

This is a challenge of PQ itself. Prague boasts a rich history and picturesque architecture. However, its historic charm, characterised by cobblestone streets and centuries-old buildings, often poses challenges for those with disabilities. The uneven pathways can be difficult for individuals using wheelchairs, and many older attractions lack modern accessibility features, such as ramps or elevators. The city's public transportation system, while undergoing modernisation, is not consistently accessible across all platforms. Some metro stations, trams, and buses might not be equipped for wheelchairs, and facilities for the visually or hearing-impaired can be sparse (PRAGUE PUBLIC TRANSIT COMPANY s.a.). Similarly, while modern accommodations often cater to disabled guests, older establishments might lack the necessary

infrastructure. The time and expense of engaging with PQ filters out who is and is not present. Compounded with limited physical access accommodation, there is a significant question posed through the contrast created by exhibiting work which might integrate access and the ability for someone to access the exhibition. This PQ is notable for sharing productions that feature tactile elements, inclusive designs, and culturally sensitive narratives from a period which moved everything online, but is limited in its ability, and in some elements' priority, to integrate these features.

Admittedly, finding a space in Prague to host the PQ which removes barriers, physical or otherwise, for attendees is difficult. The US and Quebec exhibitions, having been built according to their respective construction conventions may comply with access requirements of the respective Americans with Disabilities Act or Quebec's Building Act, can be made for access, but this poses a larger question about the site itself. If a wheelchair user is not able to access the site of PQ with ease, the access to an individual exhibition is a secondary concern. At a future PQ, disabilities are not barriers; they are just different vantage points from which the performance and performance design is experienced.

With decolonisation and ecoscenography growing as essential components of global scenography, access, or lack of, becomes that much more apparent. As I remarked to Markéta Fantová on the final day of PQ, PQ is so large, and so complex in seeking balance between the programming of PQ and each of the participating countries and regions (including the North American Cluster), that it is notable that at the end of this edition of the PQ, we are able to talk about access and how to improve instead of all the things that went wrong. As the programme across the Quadrennial, from PQ Talks to the North American Cluster, has made significant strides towards decentering the euro-colonial conventions of what performance is, and reckons with politics, resources, and infrastructures within which that performance exists, the overall container of PQ still needs to consider who it is including and excluding through its own sites and organisation. As the PQ changes, time also reveals what is omitted.

## Reimagining the ethical dimensions of contemporary scenography

The collaboration between the countries and regions of Turtle Island within the North American Cluster programme at PQ reflects a collective commitment to expanding ethical scenography. The challenge to dominant narratives, the acknowledgment of intersectionality, and the advocacy for social justice within this programme point towards an evolving scenographic community, one that places ethics at its core. It gestures towards a future where scenography becomes a realm where diversity is celebrated, and inclusivity is the norm. It is a scenography working towards awareness of its potential and responsibilities as it is conscious of the greater world.

Each installation, performance, and initiative within the programme serves as an effort to display the ability of scenography to speak to and lead societal change. The North American Cluster programme at the Prague Quadrennial is one demonstration





**Fig. 7:** Asimwe Deborah Kawe. KITF 2023. Photo: Ian Garrett.

of the evolving ethos of contemporary scenography, intertwining artistic innovations with ethical considerations in this context. By shedding additional light on the pillars of decolonisation, ecoscenography, and accessibility, the programme advocates a new function of scenographic practice, one that is not just attuned to stage aesthetics but also deeply rooted in ethical consciousness and social responsibilities.

The pursuit of decolonisation in scenography is a radical step towards dismantling entrenched colonial legacies that have shaped artistic expressions for centuries. By centering indigenous knowledge, cultural diversity, and previously marginalised voices, the North American Cluster programme embarks on a journey of reconciliation, though this will be a very long journey. This act is hopefully more than representation – it is an emerging stance against cultural erasure, affirming the rightful place of indigenous and non-European derived narratives in the global theatre community.

As the world stands at an environmental crossroads, where the choices we make now will determine the future of our planet. In such a critical juncture, ecoscenography emerges as an opportunity to hope, reflecting the potential of art to champion sustainable change. The North American Cluster programme's emphasis on ecoscenography and the variety of ways this influences how work is displayed in their exhibitions shows commitment to the planet. By marrying art with ecological

responsibility in a plurality of practical and social forms there is the possibility of a sustainable theatrical future.

The emerging conversation on accessibility and universal design looks to a future in which artistic work is accessible to all, irrespective of physical, sensory, or cognitive differences. The North American Cluster programme's endeavours to embody a shift in thinking from accessibility to genuine inclusivity. But there is a larger question about the context of PQ itself. While decolonisation and ecoscenography are a matter of bringing together the artists engaged in this work, if there are physical and practical boundaries to their participation, it results in the exclusion of important voices.

While the North American Cluster programme serves as a focal point for these discussions, its implications are intended to go beyond North America. The ethical dimensions illuminated by the programme can serve as a potential blueprint for other regions and PQ programming, especially for the inclusion of countries and regions grappling with post-colonial legacies, environmental concerns, and inclusivity challenges. The Prague Quadrennial, as a global platform, offers an opportunity for these conversations to echo on an international stage, potentially catalysing components of a worldwide movement towards more ethical and inclusive scenographic practices.

When Asiimwe Deborah Kawe (Fig. 7) gave her keynote, she described the spatial design and interwoven politics of programming the *Kampala International Theatre Festival*. Both due to practical concerns and audience expectations she described the necessity of adapting the aesthetics of the shows programmed in the festival. Beyond the costs of bringing a show to Uganda in its original form, and the available skilled labour to install it, she described the distance between festival audiences and the work created when the scenography of a piece was presented in a form designed for European touring (KAWE 2023). This provides an example for the potential of an ethical approach to scenography including the considerations outlined here, respecting the co-collaborators of the performance event by working past colonial biases in a respectful relationship to local materials and resources with an effort to prioritise access to the work over any previously assumed form.

As we look forward to future Quadrennials, the path explored by the North American Cluster programme offers some inspiration. It suggests a future where scenography is a medium for social change – a space where stories of marginalised communities are narrated, ecological values are championed, and the sanctity of inclusive spaces is preserved.

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