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**CLIMATE CHANGE AND DRAMA: THE YOUTH LEARNING ABOUT AND  
RESPONDING TO CLIMATE CHANGE ISSUES THROUGH DRAMA**

*Lindie Buirski*

**ABSTRACT**

*Mobilising cultural practitioners to promote understanding of climate change is important for public engagement, in particular for young learners and children. Over the past six years, interest in the 'science' of communicating climate change has flourished in South Africa. Psychologists, social workers, schools and the city of Cape Town, through the Department of Environment, have been united in the quest for systematic, reliable evidence with which to promote sustainable behaviour. They have been mobilising cultural and creative resources among young learners regardless of their race and ethnicities to enhance the general public engagement with climate change. To take one topical example, Yes Festival is an annual event that adopts the idea of "creativity versus climate change." The invisible nature of climate change is rendered real through everyday stories, performances, and simple yet authentic ideas through children and school teachers to create a positive social norm. Typically, the challenge of climate change communication is thought to require systematic evidence about public attitudes, sophisticated models of behaviour change and the rigorous application of social scientific research. All of this is true, but it is human stories, creative plays not carbon targets that capture children's attention. The science of climate change communication is essential to engage people's minds, but the art of engaging people's imagination may be just as important.*

**Keywords:** *art, theatre, Yes Festival, city of Cape Town, young learners*



*Note.* Learners from Chris Hani High School presenting their play at the *YES Environmental Drama Festival*. From “YES Environmental Drama Festival Focuses on Making Our City Resilient,” by Lindie Buirski, 2012, Media Release No. 477/ 2012.

The city of Cape Town has for the past six years implemented a festival of environmental dramas. The young participants are school learners aged between 15 and 18. They create their own plays in response to an environmental theme and these plays are developed through a series of skill-development workshops and then showcased at a two-day performance festival.

The Festival, known as the *YES Environmental Drama Festival*, is part of the city of Cape Town’s 14 year-old Youth Environmental School (YES) programme of activities.

*YES* is an on-going extensive, integrated, youth capacity-building programme achieving the goals of environmental education and awareness through a variety of projects, activities, resources and opportunities. This is available to all schools in Cape Town.

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The city of Cape Town is committed to taking on this responsibility by the implementation of a number of detailed strategies guided by the Integrated Metropolitan Environmental Policy (IMEP), one of which is the Environmental Education and Training Strategy.

One of the goals of this strategy is to ensure that the citizens of Cape Town will be environmentally aware and able to take collective responsibility for the environment. This forms the framework for the *YES Environmental Drama Festival*.

The Drama Festival expands awareness and understanding around key environmental issues by giving learners a wide range of opportunities to source information, question issues, develop opinion and gain new understanding.

Links are made with their school environmental education as well as the performing arts curriculum. Through the drama festival the learners gain new and expanded skills in the performing and expressive arts which enable them to use these skills as effective communication tools for environmental issues.

They participate in a quality education programme, through an active learning process, using locally relevant subject matter and engaging with local community issues, cultural statements and forms of expression.

Each year, since its inception in 2008, the festival has had a theme to guide the focus of the plays. The theme has pointed to a specific environmental issue and included related global issues.

In 2008, the festival theme was “Smart Living” which asked learners to explore how they conserve resources. In 2009, this focus was more specific looking at “Climate Change and Energy Efficiency.”

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The theme of climate change was further explored the following year when the festival theme encouraged learners to imagine the future: “Cape Town 2020: Climate Change.” Learners were asked through this theme to explore how we take action in the present for a positive impact in the future.

The festival theme always encourages the learners to simultaneously reflect on global issues whilst exploring local challenges and solutions. In 2011, the theme continued with a forward-looking focus and by asking the learners to explore biodiversity in relationship to climate change. The theme was “Conserving our future: Cape Town 2020.”

In 2012, the learners were presented with a theme which asked them to look at natural disasters and disaster risk management: “Making Cities Resilient: My City is Getting Ready.” The current theme for the 2013 Festival is “Smart Living. Smart Saving” which focuses the learner’s attention on electricity consumption and safety.

The city of Cape Town funds this festival in association with a theatre complex in the city. It is a two-day event which also includes a prize-giving ceremony at which the young performers and playwrights are recognized for their hard work.

An adjudicating panel of six judges comprises representatives from the city of Cape Town, the Western Cape Education Department, and theatre professionals and environmental experts and activists. They present various awards including those for the best script, the best performer and the best play.

In preparation for the festival, the learners attend a programme of six creative workshops on theatre making. They also attend information sessions on environmental issues related to the festival theme.

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Leading theatre practitioners facilitate and lead the theatre skill development workshops. Voice trainers help learners understand the value of clear and confident communication on the stage. Script-writing workshops enable learners to express the messages contained in the theme through skilled script writing. Movement, mime and physical theatre experts guide the learners through physical characterisation and the use of effective movement for the stage. Through the information sessions, the city of Cape Town ensures that environmental experts from the various service departments meet regularly with the learners to give them up-to-date information which will ensure the factual accuracy of their scripts.

All participating schools make use of a “one-set-for-all” design. Every school performs its play using the same staging and set items. This is a very effective tool for encouraging learners to be highly creative in their approach to the stage space, and it levels the playing fields between advantaged and disadvantaged schools.

The *YES Environmental Drama* festival also has a mentoring programme in which young learners, who have participated in the festival over several years, join the festival organising team and are mentored in project management. They develop organisational, communication and time management skills.

Of the four festival assistants who have been mentored on this programme for the last three years, one youngster has followed a career path in environment management and another in the performing arts.

Besides performing their own plays, the schools also participate in a choreographed group performance piece. The group piece, which has been in the past a group dance

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piece, a group soundscape (voice piece), and which this year is a group mime, succeeds in bringing together learners from different schools and cultures.

They work together on one very powerful performance piece with between 120 and 150 learners performing at the same time. This group piece is an important social experience. New friendships are formed, and there is great camaraderie amongst the learners.

This year the *YES Environmental Drama Festival* will take place at the Baxter Theatre Centre on the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of July. For more information on the *YES* programme, go to: [www.capetown.gov.za/environment](http://www.capetown.gov.za/environment) (click on YES Programme).

## **References**

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Lindie Buirski

Head, Environmental Capacity Building, Training and Education

<http://globalmedia.journals.ac.za/>

Environmental Resource Management Department (ERMD)

City of Cape Town

Address: 6th Floor, 44 Wale Street, Cape Town, 8001 or PO Box 16548, Vlaeberg, 8018.

Tel: + 27 21 487 2839; Cell: 084 629 9305

E-mail: [Lindie.buirski@capetown.gov.za](mailto:Lindie.buirski@capetown.gov.za)

Web: [www.capetown.gov.za/environment](http://www.capetown.gov.za/environment)