



CAWRI

Creativity and Wellbeing Hallmark Research Initiative

Embodying Resistance and Survival: How drama and youth theatre can respond to eco-anxiety and support recovery in disaster affected communities.

Final report

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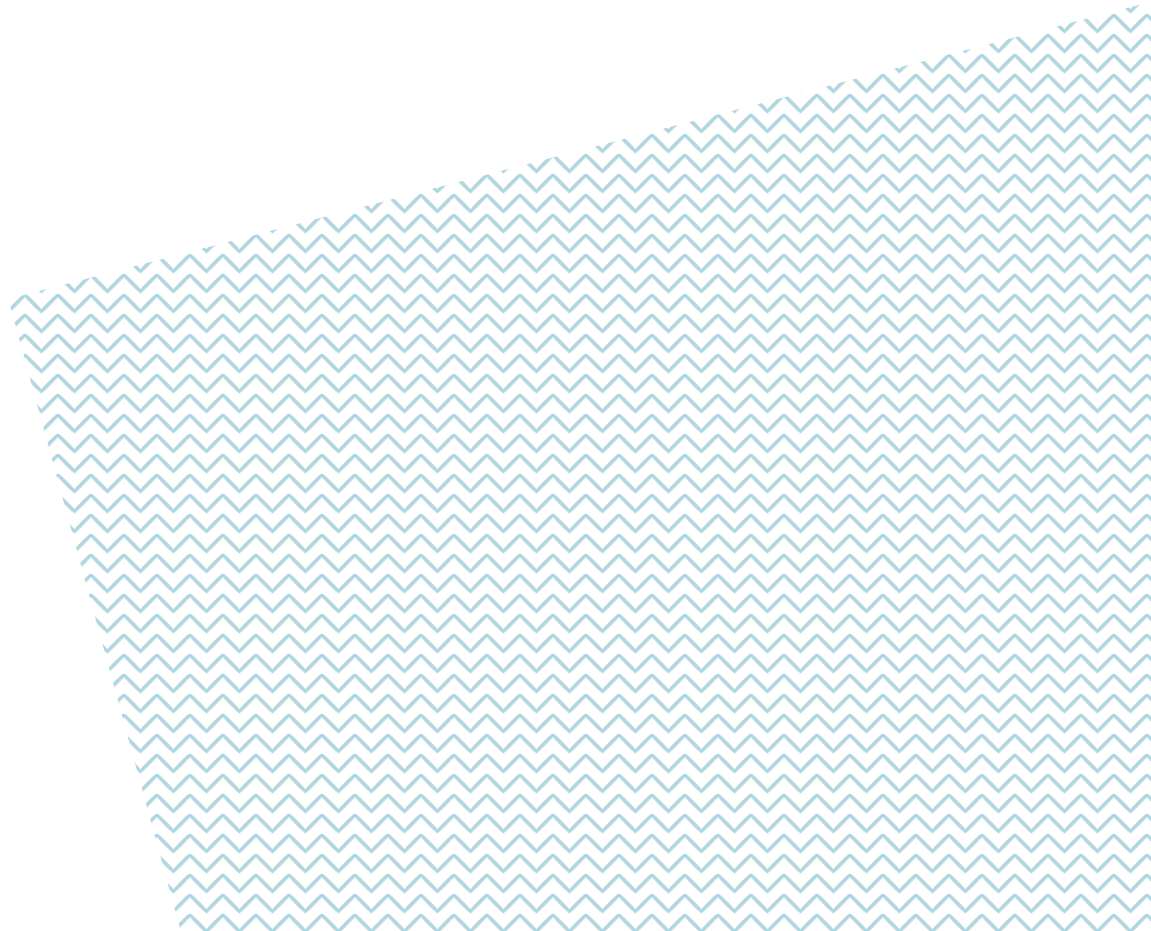


Table of Contents

Project summary	3
Research team	4
Partners/Participants	4
Acknowledgements	4
Background	5
Research context.....	5
Project aims.....	6
Methodology.....	6
Cross-disciplinary collaborations/connections	7
Key findings	8
Project outcomes	10
Discussion, implications and future directions	10
References	12
More information	15

Project summary

This project examined the role of youth theatre and performance in responding to the multifaceted effects of climate change and eco-anxiety, and to experiences of trauma and loss within disaster-affected communities. Research shows that young people are disproportionately impacted by climate change and disasters, and this negatively impacts their mental health (Cox et al., 2017; Gislason et al., 2021). Arts-based interventions have been proven to positively impact children and young people's ability to process eco-anxiety in relation to climate change and to recover from disasters (Egan & Quigley, 2015; Madsen et al., 2015; Osnes, 2018; Peek et al., 2016; Wake and Birdsall, 2020). Applied theatre in particular has been shown to help young people develop 'creative resilience' and 'critical hope' and encourages young people to act socially and politically in response to climate catastrophe and global capitalism (Gallagher et al., 2017; Heras et al., 2016; Rhoades, 2021).

Initially, the intention of this project was to work with grassroots practitioners and established youth theatre companies to investigate how theatre and drama might facilitate a sense of wellbeing and agency for children and young people, both in direct approaches to post-disaster recovery, and in addressing eco-anxiety and ecological grief experienced on a societal level. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we shifted our methodology to accommodate government limitations on in-person gatherings. We conducted online interviews with 12 youth theatre practitioners, some of whom work at the 'coal face' of disaster recovery and youth theatre. We found that there is a trend toward young people 'performing resistance and survival' in response to disasters and the climate crisis.

This trend motivated us to change the title of our research outputs from 'embodying recovery and hope' to 'performing resistance and survival'. 'Resistance' recognises young people's relationship to climate activism, which is characterised by speaking back to structural inequalities. 'Survival' acknowledges the existential threat that climate change poses to younger generations, and how they respond to this threat as theatre makers and community leaders. Our major theoretical contribution is the development of a model that illustrates the key interacting elements of youth performance and the climate crisis (see Figure 1 in *Key Findings*). We also submit that youth arts and performance are in a fight for their own survival, and the capacity of practitioners who support young people in this work is increasingly threatened.

This project ran from 01/11/2021 to 01/11/2022.

Research team

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Natalie Lazaroo	School of Education and Professional Studies
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Simon Rice	Orygen Youth Mental Health (Research Advisor)

Partners/Participants

Fraser Corfield	Australian Theatre for Young People
Tiffany Vatcher	UpStage Independent Theatre School
Jennifer South	UpStage Independent Theatre School
Alice Cadwell	Spaghetti Circus
Joshua Maxwell	Jopuka Productions
Kate Sulan	Rawcus (as well as the <i>Refuge</i> project at Arts House)
Katherine Quigley	Educator (previously Backbone Youth Arts)
Lisa Apostolides	Byron Youth Theatre
Lucas Stibbard	Independent artist (previously Backbone Youth Arts and Queensland Academies Creative Industries)
Nazaree Dickerson	ILBIJERRI Theatre Company
Stephen Quinn	Independent artist and Backbone Youth Arts
Sue Giles	Polyglot Theatre

Acknowledgements

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Background

Research context

Australia is now experiencing the highest temperatures ever recorded and increasing bush-fire, flood, and cyclonic events (Cox, 2019; Kilvert, 2018). An eco-critical analysis of youth performance in this, the climate change space, offers a collective dis-ease with political arguments contradicting climate science. The emotional anxiety and uncertainty young people feel with the warming of the planet is reflected in the work they make, which also reflects the unique Australian context of escalating natural disasters and fossil fuel dependency.

Australia is a site of protest, a place of politicised debates over voracious resource extraction and ineffective land management practices. Economic stability is at the heart of environmental discourse, even as the mining industry and the farming and export culture are identified as contributing to escalating climate change. The Department of Industry, Science and Resources claimed Australia's resource and energy exports are forecast to reach a new record of \$459 billion in 2022–23, driven by global energy shortages and the lower Australian dollar (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). The Minerals Council of Australia further reported that the mining industry employed approximately 274,000 people creating up to more than 52,000 new jobs in the last 5 years (Constable, 2022). From this position Australians remain divided over what they perceive as either the threat to the mining industry and job security for many or the threat of mining industry expansion and catastrophic effects on our natural habitat.

Despite a recent change of government that has brought some hope that the situation might improve, Australia's economic dependence on fossil fuels continues to stymie the bold policy-making necessary to create meaningful impacts. Young people are caught in the centre of these debates and taking to the streets in protest. From our research position these acts of climate change protest can be viewed as both the subject and the method of youth performance/activism (see also Hassall, 2021).

Globally, young people increasingly experience eco-anxiety and mental ill-health in response to climate change (Cox et al., 2017; Gislason et al., 2021). Societal inequality further contributes to eco-anxiety in young people because "climate change [...] disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations, and further taxes already strained mental health services" (Gislason et al., 2021, p. 2). Further, environmental education has largely been limited to positivist scientific and biophysical discourses on climate change (Trott, 2021). This may contribute to a 'knowledge-action gap' whereby young people have a heightened awareness of these issues, but have limited personal agency in response to threats (Bentz et al., 2021). To combat this, Bentz et al. (2021) argue that arts-based, embodied, participatory work can strengthen personal agency for young people.

Just as agency has become widely recognised as a critical component of youth theatre, hope has been positioned as an important pedagogical and psychosocial principle in several studies on arts-based interventions related to climate change and disaster recovery (Ho et al., 2017; Mutch & Letai,

2019; Upton, 2021). However, Rhoades (2021), found that in reality young people have struggled to maintain hope because they “envisioned cataclysmic futures in which they would have limited or no agency” (p. 343). As an alternative to hope, Rhoades (2021) reiterated Gallagher, Starkman, and Rhoades’ (2016) position that facilitating a critique of structural injustices through applied theatre can empower young people to “rehearse strategies of survival and resistance” (p. 11). Rhoades (2021) therefore advocates for ‘critical hope’ to address issues such as climate catastrophe and the adverse environmental consequences of global capitalism.

Gallagher et al. (2017) described the process of engaging with structural oppression through drama workshops as a form of ‘creative resilience’, arguing that creativity helps young people imagine ways of responding to systematic injustice. ‘Creative resilience’ is an alternative form of resilience that speaks back to power structures that produce social inequality (Gallagher et al., 2017; Rhoades, 2021). This conceptualisation recognises the increasing problematisation of the term ‘resilience’ when used to denote self-reliance (Davoudi et al., 2013; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013; Moser et al., 2019; Van Loon et al., 2020). On the other hand, Osnes (2018) argued that performance is uniquely suited to resilience planning because it is expressive, embodied, collaborative, and can help mobilise communities; theatre and drama can also help mobilise young people as climate activists (Egan & Quigley, 2015; Freebody and Finneran, 2021; Trott, 2021).

Project aims

This project’s aim was to investigate how theatre and drama might facilitate wellbeing and agency for children and young people, both in direct approaches to post-disaster recovery and in addressing eco-anxiety experienced at a broader societal level. Initially, we intended to lead a pilot study—in partnership with an established national youth theatre company and youth performance practitioners at the grassroots—to investigate work currently being undertaken in response to the climate crisis. However, we redesigned our methodology due to COVID-19 restrictions, instead interviewing youth theatre practitioners in response to the research question: how might drama and youth theatre respond to eco-anxiety and support recovery in disaster-affected communities?

Methodology

Our original plan was to conduct a mixed-methods, participatory study that combined arts-led place-based approaches with clinical measures for wellbeing and agency. We hoped to combine interviews and focus groups with practitioners and young people and facilitate creative knowledge exchange workshops around the issue. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic derailed these plans and instead we conducted online interviews with practitioners from around the country. The methodology therefore consisted of:

1. A literature review for current evidence, policies and practices relating to young people, the performing arts, and wellbeing in the context of disaster recovery and eco-anxiety.
2. Interviews with 12 youth performance practitioners whose work encompassed mainstage text-based youth theatre productions; youth devised community works; circus; immersive,

participatory performance works; and multi-arts festivals. Participants represented organisations ranging from high profile, well-resourced arts companies, to independent makers, to grassroots community groups.

3. Data analysis using NVivo coding software alongside collaborative workshop practice within the research team, identifying key themes emerging from the interviews.

This led to the generation of a model illustrating the key interacting elements of youth performance and the climate crisis (see Figure 1 below in *Key Findings*). This represents our baseline findings that will inform future iterations of the project.

Cross-disciplinary collaborations/connections

This project brings together the disciplines of theatre, applied theatre, youth studies, education, sustainability, and psychology. This cross-disciplinarity was initially reflected in the project's conception and design in collaboration between the principal investigators (Woodland and Hassall), Fraser Corfield (Artistic Director at Australian Theatre for Young People), and the Research Advisors: Emeritus Prof Helen Cahill, an eminent drama and education scholar who specialises in health education; and A/Prof Simon Rice, Senior Research Fellow and Clinical Psychologist at Orygen child and youth mental health.

The project's cross-disciplinarity then extended to the literature review and theoretical framing for the project. To begin with, we reviewed background literature on disaster resilience, climate change, and young people to identify any key overarching issues that may influence the study, such as the increasing problematisation of the term 'resilience'. We then conducted a targeted literature search using terms more closely related to the area of investigation, including 'applied theatre', 'youth theatre', 'eco-anxiety', and 'resilience', within a date range of 2015 to present. This search produced few relevant results. Consequently, the search was modified to include more specific terms – for example, 'arts-based interventions' AND 'post-disaster recovery' – which yielded 19 highly relevant articles. Subsequently, a third search was conducted with the addition of the North American spelling of 'theater' and synonymous term 'drama' along with previous and additional terms, including 'disaster recovery', 'climate change', 'disaster prepar*', 'young people', and others. An additional 11 sources were deemed highly relevant, totalling 30 articles that were closely reviewed.

Across the range of sources, the following disciplines/fields were represented: sustainability, environmental and climate sciences, geoscience, emergency management, education (drama and sustainability), performing arts, theatre, drama and performance studies, applied theatre, youth studies, public health, community wellbeing, psychology, and human geography. There was agreement between disciplines on the impacts of climate change and disasters on young people as these relate to eco-anxiety and mental ill-health. Conversely, the term resilience was defined differently depending on the discipline although there was sufficient agreement that resilience is an increasingly problematic term when used to denote self-reliance (Davoudi et al., 2013; MacKinnon

& Derickson, 2013; Moser et al., 2019; Van Loon et al., 2020). This conclusion informed our shift in focus from ‘recovery and hope’ to ‘resistance and survival’. This shift was also supported by findings from our primary research and is explained in more detail in the following section.

Key findings

The study has enabled us to see how child and youth performance addresses the climate crisis across four intersecting domains: from **disaster preparedness**, through **first response**, to **disaster recovery**, and **climate activism**. Crucially, the ways that performance works across these domains traverses artistic practice and everyday actions that contribute to children and young people’s sense of critical hope, agency, community, and, ultimately, their very survival. This is represented through the below model (Figure 1), which illustrates the key interacting elements of youth performance and the climate crisis.

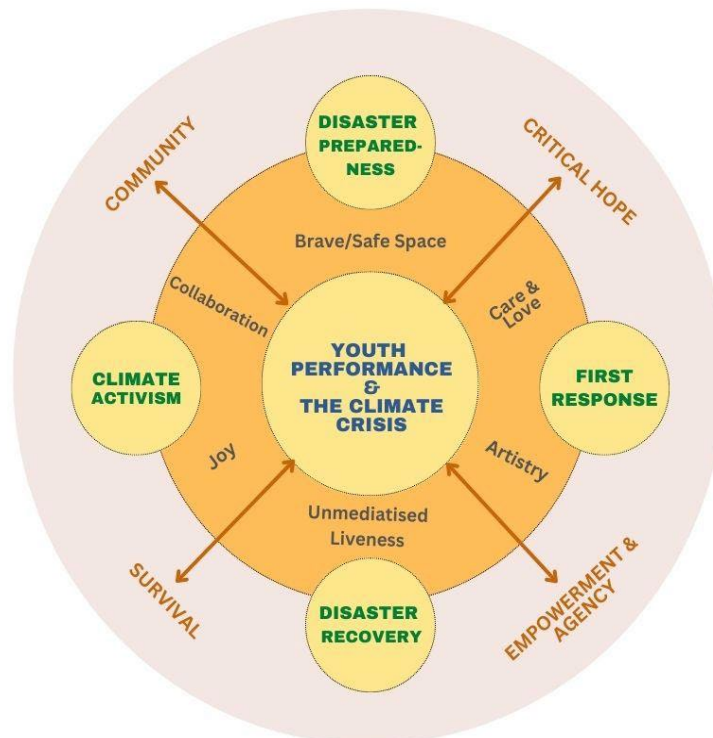


Fig. 1 – Model illustrating the key interacting elements of youth performance and the climate crisis. Created by Woodland and Hassall.

In terms of **Disaster Preparedness**, Van Loon et al. (2020) suggest that creative methods are currently an unexplored way for communities to take action or seek support to increase preparedness – to consider the future rather than reflecting on the past. This was a crucial aspect of Kate Sulan’s work on *Refuge*, produced by Arts House Melbourne: a multi-year project focused on building community and fostering participatory art projects to imaginatively explore responses to climate disaster and recovery before the disasters occurred. Sulan described how the five-year project shifted from being about disaster preparedness at its commencement in 2016, to being

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focused more on how to 'live into' disaster. Along with projects like Refuge, we suggest that youth performance provides a space to implicitly 'perform preparedness' through collaborative creativity, developing agency, empowerment, community building and other aspects inherent to youth performance.

In terms of **First Response** in disaster, we found circus and physical theatre training organisation Spaghetti Circus acting as a community hub immediately following the 2022 floods in northern New South Wales. They worked with displaced people, offering mental health first aid, and providing food and internet access to the community. Other research bears out the role of arts organisations as safe, accessible hubs for community members in times of difficulty and crisis (see Bartleet et al., 2019). In Bairnsdale, Victoria, UpStage Independent Theatre School stepped in quickly to provide an 'escape' for kids through a Pirate Day at the local library while parents and carers dealt with the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfire crisis. This reflects similar projects from around the world, including Peter O'Connor's *Teaspoon of Light* project in response to the 2011 Christchurch earthquake (see Gibbs et al., 2013).

In terms of **Disaster Recovery**, at Spaghetti Circus young people were focused on the dual recovery goals of cleaning up their site and their community after the floods, but also remounting their circus festival, which would be the first after a 3-year hiatus due to the compounding crises of flooding and the pandemic. General Manager, Alice Cadwell saw working towards these outcomes as equally important in signaling recovery for the young people and their community. In another example, Polyglot Theatre's Artistic Director, Sue Giles spoke about Polyglot's project *We Built This City*, which invited children and communities to imaginatively 'rebuild' using cardboard boxes. This project was deployed in Healesville, Victoria, after the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires and Minami Sanriku, Japan, after the 2011 Tsunami. Young theatre maker, Joshua Maxwell from Jopuka Productions also wrote his play *Very Happy Children with Bright and Wonderful Futures* (2022) as a response to the September 2019 climate strikes, but it also became a way of dealing with the unfolding fire emergency that was occurring around him during Australia's Black Summer bushfires.

In terms of **Climate Activism**, we found, unsurprisingly, that children and young people see climate activism as inseparable from their artistic practice. Young people from Backbone Youth Arts, Jopuka Productions, Spaghetti Circus, and Byron Youth Theatre were at times simultaneously involved in climate protests and marches, performing works about climate change, and engaging in advocacy with local politicians. This points towards a strong sense of responsibility that young people feel to *act*, which we observed across interviews. Josh from Jopuka identified a need to create a balance, however, between directly addressing the threat and all the eco-anxiety it entails, and providing a sense of hope for the future. As Stephen Quinn from Backbone put it:

It's the idea of taking that anxiety or all that information and at least filtering through it in some way that is active - while you're actively engaging with the content and dissecting it and thinking about what it [means].

This points towards some recent writing around the need for ‘critical hope’ in youth performance including Rhoades (2021).

We found specific qualities within child and youth performance that contribute to the outcomes we’ve described here. These include the creation of **brave and safe spaces** (see also Austin, 2021) where young people can both escape from and critically explore through **artistry** the magnitude of the crisis; the presence of **care, love, and nurturing** (see also Woodland, 2018) and the importance of **joy and enjoyment** in supporting young people through crisis; and the vital quality of ‘**unmediatised liveness**’ that supports young people to respond in immediate and embodied ways. Some of these qualities have been well explored in the literature, but we believe that our emerging notion of ‘unmediatised liveness’ in particular warrants deeper attention (see *Discussion, implications, and future directions* below).

Project outcomes

In 2022, we presented our findings at two international conferences, listed below. We are also preparing to submit a paper to *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, also noted below. It is our intention to further this research as part of an ARC Linkage project with partner organisations and advisors. Our success following grant applications to CAWRI, as well as Griffith University – where the project was positioned within the wider context of the Climate Beacon, and the Creative Arts Research Institute (CARI), P*ERL (Performance Ecology Research Lab) – reflects the important contribution research in this interdisciplinary field can make.

Journal Article in progress:

Woodland, S., Hassall, L., & Kennedy-Borissow, A. (2024 TBC). [Working title] Youth theatre and the climate crisis: Performing resistance and survival. To be submitted in response to Call for Papers for a Special Issue of *Research in Drama Education (RiDE) The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance: ‘Confronting the Global Climate Crisis: Responsibility, Agency, and Action’*.

Presentations:

Woodland, S., & Hassall, L. (2022, December). *Youth theatre and the climate crisis: Performing resistance and survival* [Paper presentation]. The Performing Global Crises Conference 2022, Otago, Ōtepoti/Dunedin, New Zealand.

Woodland, S., & Hassall, L. (2022, July). *Embodying Recovery and Hope: How might drama and youth theatre respond to eco-anxiety and support recovery in disaster affected communities?* [Paper presentation]. The 10th International Drama in Education Research Institute (IDIERI) Conference, Warwick, Coventry, UK.

Discussion, implications and future directions

This research has contributed to the development of knowledge by re-thinking the role of youth theatre and performance in Australia in the context of the climate emergency. It has also revealed

the multivalent role that grassroots organisations play in supporting communities – artistically and practically – regarding disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and activism. Significant outcomes of the research include the above model (see Figure 1 in *Key Findings*), and contribution to scholarship on the concepts of ‘unmediatised liveness’, as well as ‘resistance and survival’ (as opposed to ‘hope and recovery’) in youth theatre.

The connection between live artistic collaboration, community collaboration, and live actions suggests the experience of ‘unmediatised liveness’ – that is, not filtered through the tools of technology ubiquitous to contemporary culture – is particularly necessary to arts-based interventions in response to disasters and climate change. As researchers, we do not privilege unmediatised interactions above those that occur through technological means (see also Auslander, 2012; Davis 2012). Drama educators Gallagher et al. (2022) discuss the importance of both forms to young people amid “current intersecting social, political, and ecological crises” (p.3). The circulating affects, emotions and relationships that are produced enable what Lury and Wakeford (2012) describe as the “happening of the social”. While acknowledging the role of mediatised liveness, we argue that we must not lose or let go of unmediatised liveness which, together with co-presence and collaboration, are vital elements to youth theatre. This is especially important in the context of increasing shifts to online learning and engagement in the performing arts that proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The notion of survival in the context of youth performance also warrants further attention. Hickman (2020) claims children and young people are increasingly taking centre stage in protests about the need to take urgent action, while simultaneously often being the focus of society’s anxieties about the psychological impact of the crises. Sue Giles described how adult members of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (which she chairs) feel powerless to respond, but that children and young people are moving ahead regardless. All our other interviewees supported this: children and young people are responding to and surviving crises despite the fears and assumptions of adults. This indicates that young people are increasingly acting as leaders within their communities in response to climate-related threats.

We observed that survival and the existential threat of planetary extinction is deeply affecting practitioners, indicating that there is intense emotional labour associated with leading youth performance in response to the climate crisis. As compounding crises of pandemic, climate disaster, and economic upheaval continue to affect Australia, the capacity of practitioners who support young people in this work is increasingly being threatened. Youth arts and performance are in a fight for their own survival as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and other overlapping disasters, which has increased sector-wide fatigue and funding precarity.

While successive governments have emphasised the need for ‘resilience’—of both individuals in response to disasters, and the arts sector as a whole—the literature (and our study) problematises this, calling for resistance against the neoliberal forces that continue to demand we ‘bounce back’, rather than addressing systemic inadequacies. This carries significance for policy makers across education, arts, sustainability, and emergency management, as resilience rhetoric is increasingly

rejected in favour of more critical paradigms.

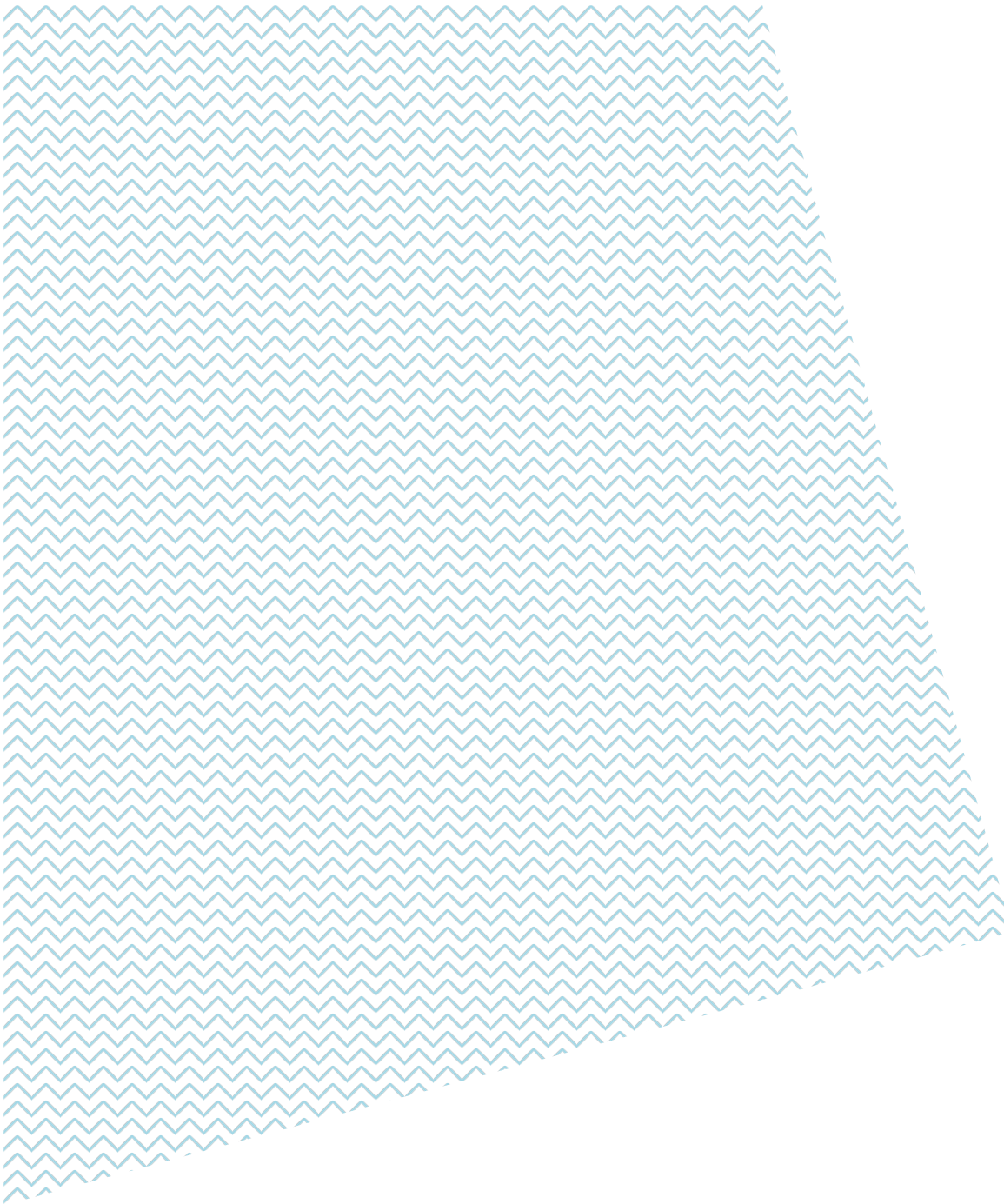
Finally, in just a few years, we have seen the language in youth theatre and performance expanding beyond its previous focus on empowering young people, giving them a voice, and a sense of belonging and identity, to also becoming focused on performing resistance and survival in the face of existential threat. This contributes important knowledge to eco-critical discourses in theatre in performance and represents a significant shift in how we conceptualise agency in applied theatre, and youth theatre and drama specifically. We therefore propose that future directions for this area of investigation include exploring these issues with children and young people themselves by incorporating performative and arts-led methodologies.

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More information

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For more information about CAWRI, visit <https://research.unimelb.edu.au/creativityandwellbeing>

CAWRI | Embodying Resistance and Survival: How drama and youth theatre can respond to eco-anxiety and support recovery in disaster affected communities.