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ARTS & CULTURE, NEWS

Can Superhero Clubhouse Save the World With Ecotheater?



(Photo: Aya Lane)

Environmental justice is taking center stage, quite literally. Superhero Clubhouse, a New York-based community organization, is bridging theater and ecology to hopefully enact change.

When co-director Jeremy Pickard moved to New York City over ten years ago he witnessed a lack of environmental storytelling in theater and was appalled by the sheer amount of waste the city produced. He knew there was space to create something new and exciting in the already crowded theater scene.

Five years ago, Lanxing Fu joined forces with Pickard and became co-director. Both felt an immediate understanding with their passion to bring environmental justice to the forefront. Their “niche” theater is part of the genre of ecotheater, which aims to ask difficult questions about the environment through the theater-making process. “In the visual arts, photography and more so poetry, you see environmental issues being tackled. But there isn’t much work with narrative-driven art forms.”

Obviously, the need was great as the organization has continued to grow and hosts a sizeable team of scientists, artists and mentors. For the first time, this year they’re hosting a **Climate Performance Week** from March 23 to 27, highlighting their various programs, in-progress plays and lab work. On Saturday, the fellowship participants will be showcasing their performative pieces.

The fellowship program is a recent incarnation piloted in 2016. Pickard calls it “an immediate response to the increasing need we’re seeing for there to be more space to discuss environmental issues.”

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Shy Richardson and Karina Yager (Photo: Dylan River Lopez)

This past year, they managed to secure enough funding to support two individuals from different disciplines to collaborate over a six-month-long residency. The fellowship program represents the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration that Fu says is “a huge part of our toolbelt.”

The fellowship program stemmed from another of their programs, The Lab, which brings together scientists and artists dedicating time to environmental research and short performative pieces. “Since the beginning we have strived for a holistic approach,” says Pickard. “Part of the reason we feel so strongly about collaborating across disciplines is because we feel the act of making theater is a microcosm of society and very useful as a tool for how we can move forward in the world. It’s people beyond the art. It’s not exclusive to just theater artists.”

Saturday’s fellowship performances will touch on environmental issues and social justice, an integral intersection that Fu believes must be at the core of the work. “Oftentimes people see climate or nature as separate to us,” says Fu, “but these issues are completely intertwined.”

The first piece, *Trés Maria*, is described as a “love poem to the communities that emerge from wreckage and displacement.” In it, Shy Richardson, a poet and spoken word artist, and Karina Yager, a climate scientist, explore the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

For the second piece, *Drexciya*, associate fellows Aya Lane and Imani Dennison will perform an “underwater mythical resistance story honoring the Black diaspora’s complicated relationship to water.” The piece is not fully complete and being called Study II– a work-in-progress.

And so launches the Climate Performance Week, with a full schedule of interesting works in the making. Most importantly, the co-directors want people to come away with a greater understanding of climate justice, “if we can make a difference in the cultural consciousness, that’s more than we could ever hope for,” says Pickard.

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