

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Birmingham		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA33: Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Performance and the Environment: Making New Theatre, Making Change		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> September 2015–December 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Adam J. Ledger	Reader in Theatre and Performance	1 <sup>st</sup> January 2011–present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> September 2015–December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Despite increased awareness of the global ‘environmental emergency’, theatre that responds to pressing ecological concerns remains underdeveloped. Ledger’s practice-research into participatory performance, which positively <b>engages a diverse and under-represented range of audiences</b> with environmental issues, has <b>enhanced cultural understanding and informed public attitudes, values and behaviours</b> with regard to issues of climate change and water as a precious resource. Through extensive touring, allied activities and legacy, Ledger’s approach to performance has <b>changed the organisational practice of companies and arts organisations</b> alike, leading to the <b>adoption of new and improved processes</b> relating to environmental issues.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>As a theatre studies scholar and practitioner, Ledger’s iterative practice-research (PR) process, undertaken through his theatre company, The Bone Ensemble (TBE), has developed new productions and assessed their efficacy. Recently, this has focused on participatory performance about environmental issues.</p> <p>Surveying contemporary theatre’s response to the current climate crisis, Ledger noted that a high proportion of work adopts a dystopian approach, often bombarding spectators with negative imagery and decontextualised information (RO2). Elsewhere, he noted the high incidence of inclusivity gaps in participatory performance, as well as the tension between audiences actively participating in so-called ‘immersive’ theatre and simply being present (albeit intimately) while the action unfolds (RO1).</p> <p>Thus Ledger’s guiding research imperatives became:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• what characterises empathetic, positive environmental dramaturgies?</li> <li>• how can participatory performance forge empowering and accessible experiences for family audiences?</li> </ul> <p>Ledger set about devising <i>Where’s My Igloo Gone?</i> (RO3), which was inspired by issues of global warming, but which adopted a constructive approach to the issue, whilst also exploring innovative theatrical form. Ledger was also eager that the piece be open to younger audiences, d/Deaf audiences and those for whom English was an additional language. Not only would this approach ‘universalise’ the environmental message, thus maximising engagement, but would expand the inclusivity of participatory theatre more broadly (RO4). Ledger worked closely with</p>		

scientific experts and d/Deaf theatre practitioners, and sought feedback from different schools on pilot versions.

Awarded funding by a range of sources (including significantly by Arts Council England), the performance enjoyed an extensive regional, then national tour to diverse venues. Inspired by the major success of this tour, and drawing on analysis and reflection upon the work, Ledger devised *Gulp!* (RO5), which focused on crucial issues concerning water. In its development, the views and needs of stakeholders and scientists were incorporated more proactively into the work from the outset; *Gulp!* also further developed Ledger's highly visual, non-English language performance mode with innovative use of sound, music and object manipulation (RO6). It also resulted in a book version of the show.

Through this PR process, Ledger's key research findings were:

**RF1:** Theatre which takes a positive approach to environmental issues, and which invites audiences to personalise and empathise with its story and protagonists, is much more successful at engaging audiences in issues around the current global environmental crisis, leading to behaviour change;

**RF2:** The participatory element is more effective when audiences are progressively 'aided' to enter and to take part in the performance, as opposed to being prescribed a clear delineation between performance and participation; such an approach instigates a more 'transactional' relationship between audience and performer that is crucial to the work's affect;

**RF3:** The developmental/rehearsal phase is vital in realising and generating the participatory 'moments' of such productions; the imperatives and definitions of training is thus shifted from the performer or material to the needs and presence of the audience;

**RF4:** The strategy of combining a highly visual performance style with the incorporation of an invented, syntactical language enabled comprehension without a signer/captions; this reveals how gestural storytelling can offer diverse audiences a more inclusive experience.

### 3. References to the research

**RO1:** Ledger, Adam J. (2016) 'Caravania!: Intimate Theatre for Family Audiences', *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, ed. James Frieze (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp.145–50. ISBN: 9781137366030.

**RO2:** Ledger, Adam J. (2017) '[Action, Participation, Feeling: Where's My Igloo Gone?](#)', *Climate Cultures*.

**RO3:** The Bone Ensemble (2016–18) *Where's My Igloo Gone*, dir. Adam Ledger.

**RO4:** Ledger, Adam J. (2018) 'Where's My Igloo Gone?: "Trainings" for/in participatory performance for family audiences', *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 9(2): 282–6. DOI: 10.1080/19443927.2018.1475161

**RO5:** The Bone Ensemble (2019–20) *Gulp!*, dir. Adam Ledger.

**RO6:** Ledger, Adam J. (2020) '[Gulp!: Water choices, stories and theatre](#)', *Climate Cultures*.

### 4. Details of the impact

1. **Enhanced cultural understanding** of environmental issues and **informed public attitudes, values and behaviours**, including amongst under-represented groups and those with relatively limited access to the arts.

Ledger's practice-research has **changed understandings of the environmental crisis** (RF1) through extensive tours of *Where's My Igloo Gone?* and *Gulp!*, both of which personalised climate issues for their audiences, thus increasing their relevance. This is shown in extensive audience responses, where, for example, one audience member testified, "when I see the young girl cry because her home was melting, it brought [it] home to me" (S1). The change for

audience members went beyond understanding, to **informing attitudes and values**, and **changing behaviours** by empowering audiences not only to think differently but also to act differently. This is attested to by the way venues reported that the shows “created a team of climate change warriors!” (S3), and audience feedback indicated how individuals “felt more empowered to stand up and invoke others to join me to make change!” (RF2; S1). A corpus linguistic analysis of post-show questionnaires following *Where’s My Igloo Gone?* revealed the prevalence of the word ‘feel’, thus pointing to the uniquely empathetic response the show elicited (RF1); elsewhere a score analysis of free-text post-show responses to *Gulp!* demonstrated both a **change in understanding** and a **concurrent behavioural change**: 25% in terms of water use and waste, and 25% in terms of consumption, committing to a reduction in plastic use and, most explicitly, a cessation in the purchase of bottled water (S1).

Although activities were cut short by Covid-19, many schools where TBE performed subsequently adopted new environmental interventions (RF1). Following *Gulp!*, for example, one teacher reported how “pupils were inspired to create classroom displays about water and the Y4 chose to do an assembly about the difference between needing and wanting water” (S6). Pupils also “carried out a survey of where water was used in the school and also produced a questionnaire that they took around all the teachers” (S6). Furthermore, teachers modified their practice, praising the clarity of the book version, which they now use “to support our teaching on water and the environment” (S6).

Drawing on Ledger’s research, the shows’ minimal English language and reliance on visual vocabularies were especially successful in **reaching diverse and often under-represented audiences** (RF4). The National Rural Touring Forum board testified that, before Ledger’s intervention, “work for children and work which is highly accessible to d/Deaf and hearing-impaired audiences [was] heavily under-represented across the rural touring network” (S5). Addressing this gap, *Where’s My Igloo Gone?* toured to 23 rural touring venues, giving 32 performances in community contexts, while *Gulp!* gave a total of 12 (before lockdown occurred). Longwill School for the Deaf (Birmingham) explained the significance of this approach stating that “environmental issues have been addressed previously but it is hard to hold our pupils’ attention,” whereas *Gulp!* and *Where’s My Igloo Gone?* succeeded in “holding our pupils transfixed” (S6). Indeed, the unique ability (RF4) of *Where’s My Igloo Gone?* to engage such audiences ultimately led Severn Trent Water (STW) to collaborate with Ledger on the development of *Gulp!*. Ledger’s unique approach enabled the organisation “to reach our diverse customer base in changed ways, in particular giving accessibility to non-English speaking and d/Deaf audiences” (S4). Impressed with Ledger’s approach, STW subsequently invested £15,000, funding 12 performances in 6 Birmingham primary schools and the publication of the *Gulp!* book.

Overall, *Where’s My Igloo Gone?* was performed 62 times in 40 places across the UK, representing a significant expansion of TBE’s usual touring run; *Gulp!* was performed 43 times in 26 places across the UK (lockdown cut short the overall tour). This resulted in the 2 productions playing to 5,766 people in total and reaching audiences that would otherwise not typically engage with some venues or, crucially, this subject matter; the Marlowe Theatre (Canterbury), for instance, attested to how “a different type of audience” attended the show (S2). In addition, during lockdown, the *Gulp!* film was accessed by nearly 300 devices (each with multiple spectators) as part of online theatre festivals, while 3,000 copies (plus eBook version) of the *Gulp!* book were distributed for free.

2. **Changed practices** in utilities, arts and education organisations, leading to the **adoption of new and improved processes** relating to environmental issues.

*Gulp!* radically altered the means by which STW — the UK’s second largest water company, serving 4.4m customers in England and Wales — **achieved its key objectives to change understandings of water as a precious resource, for which we are collectively responsible** in terms of future supply. This is attested to by STW’s Communication Adviser, who states, “*Gulp!* was a **new approach for the water industry** and **changed how we are working to**

positively influence future generations” (RF1; S4). STW’s education officer wrote an extensive accompanying education pack for KS2 pupils, something STW had never produced before, further evidencing its belief that “the unique nature of the performance helped to raise the profile of how important it is for us to influence children as the future custodians of water and the environment” (S4). To bring aspects together even under current Covid-19 limitations, Ledger held a post-screening Q&A with Bourne Westfield Primary School (for South Kesteven District Council’s online family festival), where 90 school pupils saw the *Gulp!* film and used the education pack.

Overall, TBE’s interrelated creative tools, which included composing and performing a new song, **enhanced and increased the reach of STW’s messages**; STW confirms “collaboration with The Bone Ensemble and the creation of *Gulp!* fulfilled our objectives. It boosted creativity in our approach, [and] provided us with new materials we can continue to build and develop” (S4). Finally, STW further **changed its practices** during lockdown by creating and accelerating the delivery of an online Education Zone, a new resource for families; STW confirmed “much of the content was based on the education pack created to work alongside *Gulp!*” (S4). Overall, STW testified that “the collaboration with [TBE] gave us access to an innovative range of creative skills and thinking which has broadened and enlivened our future thinking” (S4). Ledger also changed international practices by demonstrating the transferability of participatory practices that draw together theatre and interdisciplinary concerns. Inspired by *Where’s My Igloo Gone?*’s imaginative connection with audiences (RF2), the Boulevardteatern (Stockholm) — a major theatre company touring across Sweden — approached Ledger for permission to create and tour its own version, *Vart tog min igloo vägen?* (to date, 45 performances, 2019–20). Ledger collaborated as a consultant. Despite its provision for young audiences, this type of performance was an entirely new approach for Boulevardteatern; as the company’s producer testifies: “it has been inspiring to take part in how The Bone Ensemble works; how they explore and research a specific theme and transform it into a piece of art. It was of great value to us to have the creative team in Stockholm to share their knowledge and experience” (S7). Ledger also presented on the work at the Meyerhold Centre (Moscow): Russian colleagues found the “the exchange of experience was high-level and very useful [and] an important event” and now plan to change their own participatory practice (S8).

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1:** Audience feedback for *Where’s My Igloo Gone?* and *Gulp!*
- S2:** Venue feedback for *Where’s My Igloo Gone?* and *Gulp!*
- S3:** Testimonial from the Director of The Turnpike (January 2018).
- S4:** Testimonial from the Senior Communications Officer at Severn Trent Water (May 2020).
- S5:** Testimonial from the Director of the Board at the National Rural Touring Forum (September 2020).
- S6:** School feedback for *Where’s My Igloo Gone?* and *Gulp!*
- S7:** Testimonial from the Chief Producer at the Boulevardteatern (October 2020).
- S8:** Testimonial from the Deputy Director of State Museum and Exhibition, Meyerhold Centre.