

# Theatre Studies

## THEATRE AND DANCE STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BERN

Theatre studies is a discipline of cultural studies. It uses a range of scientific methods to examine theatre and performance-related phenomena, processes, and events from a historical, aesthetic, and theoretical perspective. Research areas range widely. Besides the analysis of theatre and dance performances as well as various practices of drama, theatre, performance, and choreography, they also include the placement of social and political movements in their cultural-historical contexts, and the study of topics like self-staging on social media platforms. The study programmes of the [Institute of Theatre Studies](#) at the University of Bern cover the history of European theatre and dance, the study of contemporary theatre and dance from a regional and global perspective, theories of theatre, dance, and cultural studies, as well as aesthetics of theatre and dance.

### How are theatre and dance studies linked to sustainable development, and how has this influenced practice?

Theatre studies examines social, historical, and cultural phenomena through the lens of theatre. In academic discourse, theatre in a European tradition is also described as a place of cultural memory, where the cultural repertoire is not only preserved, but also critically reflected upon, processed, and changed. This memory is activated, overwritten, and changed in the ongoing engagement with cultural artefacts and the interaction between the creators of theatre, dance, and performances and their audience [1]. Scholars of performance studies, such as Diana Taylor, distinguish between the concepts of archive and repertoire, viewing repertoire in particular as the embodied practice of memory and knowledge [2]. Theatre and dance are thus understood in their practice as embodied cultural memory. This directly links theatre studies with concerns about sustainability, which is why the discipline is increasingly placed in the context of a proposed fourth dimension of sustainable development, namely “cultural sustainability” (the original three being environmental, social, and political sustainability) [3].

Theatre is, therefore, a place of memory, education, debate, and social discourse. The fact that it both acts as a norm-maintainer and serves as a critical practice for transforming the existing order makes it a topic of interdisciplinary and disciplinary debate [4]. Theatre studies can also reflect how earlier societies approached questions of sustainability. In this way, scientific investigation can reveal risks as well as potentials of theatre’s norm-maintaining function, and it can show up areas in which theatre has a responsibility – and the capability – to promote sustainable development.

Internationalization and digitalization have changed the theatre scene. The study of theatre, previously dominated by major “theatre nations”, now increasingly extends to countries with a less prominent tradition of theatre; and it is also moving beyond the concept of “nations” towards a critical reflection of cultural exchange and dominance relations in the global space [5,6]. Global issues are an increasing focus of theatre studies: for example, through analyses of the effects of globalization processes on cultural achievements, the dialogue on North–South development issues [7], or the question of institutional sustainability.

International theatre studies research is increasingly postulating critical environmental and decolonial approaches that focus on indigenous knowledge and the relationship of humans to their ecological environment [8,9]. This focus was also reflected in the conference of the International Federation of Theatre Research, held in the summer of 2021 under the title of *Theatre Ecologies: Environments, Sustainability, and Politics* [10].

### Example: Raising awareness of sustainability in contemporary theatre

As the most watched, most expensive event in the world, the Olympic Games could be trailblazers of sustainability. While they are advertised as that, their sustainability has never been systematically evaluated. In 2018, the United Nations adopted a resolution promoting “sport as an enabler” of sustainable development and signed a declaration of intent highlighting the contribution of the Olympics to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, this contribution is ambivalent in many areas [4].

Theatre has always been closely related to current issues of political and social debate. However, it has lost its function as a mass public forum, due to the emergence of other mass media formats in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Nonetheless, theatre is striving to diversify its venues and its audiences, supported to a significant extent by new media formats. Thus, for example, theatre may take place outside the theatre hall or involve audience participation. The independent performance scene as well as municipal theatres use a multitude of formats to address intercultural global challenges such as intergenerational and social justice, human rights, peace, democracy, partnership, sexuality, migration, or climate change. How this is linked to sustainability can be shown using the United Nations global sustainable development framework (Figure 1):



In the countries of the global South, this kind of flexible, playfully critical way of raising awareness of sustainable development – inspired by Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed” [11] and providing the public with options for action – is of immense importance (**SDG 4**). But in Europe, too, many theatre groups are committed to sustainable development in their work. The Berliner Compagnie, for example, dedicates its theatre work to the preservation of peace (**SDG 16**), international understanding (**SDG 17**), and social justice (**SDGs 5 and 10**), especially with regard to developing countries [12].

In recent years, an increasing number of theatre formats have been developed that stage assemblies, conferences, and tribunals, and thus appeal to the political responsibility of the audience. For example, Swiss artist Milo Rau’s project Congo Tribunal [13] highlighted Europe’s economic entanglements with the civil war that has been raging in the African country for over 20 years. And the artist

group Rimini Protokoll anticipated the 2015 *World Climate Conference* in Paris (COP21) with their World Climate Conference production, premiered in Hamburg in 2014 [14,15]. The audience took on the roles of the delegates, negotiated their conflicting interests in a plenary or in groups, and exchanged views with leading experts in climate and environmental research, in order to then set binding climate targets. This simulation of a global multi-stakeholder process for resource governance created awareness of the complexity and limitations of such governance processes among a broad public (**SDGs 16 and 17**). In addition, discursive artistic projects such as the Berlin-based Theatre of the Anthropocene [16], which deals with sustainability issues and the relationship of humans to nature in the age of the Anthropocene, show how productively science and theatre can collaborate on these issues. Festivals such as the Swiss-based Culturescapes, with themes such as *Amazonia* (2021) and *Sahara* (2023), are also increasingly turning to urgent questions of sustainability and climate change to impact their local theatre scenes [17].

### How does the University of Bern’s Institute of Theatre Studies incorporate the topic of sustainability into research and teaching?

At the Institute of Theatre Studies, sustainability is examined, in particular, by reflecting on cultural sustainability and cultural heritage in the history and theory of theatre and dance, in dramaturgy and performance analysis, as well as in the international dialogue on contemporary theatre.

- This [video](#) (in German) by the Institute of Theatre Studies gives a general insight into the Theatre Studies programme at the University of Bern.
- Auto\_Bio\_Graphy as Performance: A Field of Dance Historiographic Innovation. This research project, managed by Prof. Dr. Christina Thurner, investigates autobiographical productions by dancers with regard to scientifically correct, historiographically productive, and sustainable handling of their sources.

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## Further Reading

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Centre for Development and Environment (CDE)  
University of Bern  
Mittelstrasse 43  
CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland  
[www.cde.unibe.ch](http://www.cde.unibe.ch)

**Contact:** [sustainability.cde@unibe.ch](mailto:sustainability.cde@unibe.ch)

**Authors:** Ass. Prof. Dr. Alexandra Portmann, Dr. Ann-Christine Simke, Prof. Dr. Beate Hochholdinger-Reiterer, Prof. Dr. Christina Thurner (Institute of Theatre Studies)

**Series editors:** Leonie Greta Schmid, Camilla Steinböck, Dr. Lilian Julia Trechsel (CDE)

**Copyediting of German version:** Dr. Marion Leng (CDE)

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