

**Etudes:** an online theatre & performance  
studies journal for emerging scholars

# Generative Disruptions: Ecological Activism and Theatrical Unpredictability Within Extinction Rebellion's Protests

By Joshua Lewis

## Abstract

This article examines a protest by the environmental movement Extinction Rebellion during a 2024 Broadway performance of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. The demonstration was intended to amplify the play's message, which is often considered one of the first environmentally conscious dramas, to help bring attention to the current climate crisis. This article argues that Extinction Rebellion's intentionally theatrical protests are influenced by other theatre-related advocacy groups, such as Richard Schechner's Broadway Action Group and Larry Kramer's ACT UP. Additionally, it considers theories on the performative elements of protests, namely Susan Leigh Foster's article "Choreographies of Protest," to better appreciate Extinction Rebellion's strategies. This analysis of the organization's tactics, in turn, helps to situate their protest of *An Enemy of the People* within a lineage of other activist performances, like the "die-ins" popularized by ACT UP. In these instances, bodies acted as means for articulating injustices by claiming space, resisting removal, and continuing to speak out even though others attempted to silence them. Although some people may view Extinction Rebellion's protest during a live performance as merely a disruptive act, it can also be seen as a worthwhile intervention because it generated discussions about how theatre and other art forms must do more to remain socially and ecologically conscious.

*Etudes* Vol. 10 No. 1

December 2025

ISSN 2375-0758

[www.etudesonline.com](http://www.etudesonline.com)

# Generative Disruptions: Ecological Activism and Theatrical Unpredictability Within Extinction Rebellion's Protests

By Joshua Lewis

## INTRODUCTION

On March 14, 2024, three members of the global environmental movement Extinction Rebellion disrupted the press night performance of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* at the Circle in the Square Theatre on Broadway. The protest began during a critical moment in the play when a town meeting has been called to discuss a potentially catastrophic ecological crisis. Near the end of the scene, one of the activists, Nate Smith, stood up from his seat in the audience and approached the stage, shouting, "I object to the silencing of scientists," and then made a passionate plea for people to recognize the urgency of climate change (Veltman). Because the production planted actors throughout the house to give the impression that a dialogue was occurring with the audience, many people were initially unaware that the protest was not a designed component of the show. However, when it became apparent that this and subsequent disruptions were not an intentional meta-theatrical technique, several audience members and actors disparaged the activists, and they were thereafter forcibly removed. This antagonism towards a group with an ostensibly aligned message lends credibility to claims that much of commercial theatre merely performs activism and lacks the genuine desire or capacity to combat pressing socio-political issues.

The demonstration by Extinction Rebellion underscores the often complex relationship between activism, theatre, and ecology. Besides interrupting performances like *An Enemy of the People*, the movement has captured international attention for their provocative and highly

performative protests. As many theatrical elements can be found in their interventions, a deeper exploration of how performance, in its broadest sense, shapes their tactics and messaging is merited. Moreover, although Extinction Rebellion has undoubtedly pushed the boundaries regarding the staging practices of their protests, they are indebted to earlier traditions, such as Richard Schechner's Broadway Action Group and Larry Kramer's ACT UP. While many people view their protests as disruptive, they have nonetheless sparked a conversation about whether it is enough for theatre to raise awareness or if it should also spur audiences to change their personal habits and demand greater accountability from governments and corporations. Accordingly, by analyzing the demonstrations undertaken by groups like Extinction Rebellion, we can gain a better understanding of how performance can be employed to address climate change and support like-minded political mobilizations.

PETER. Whoa! Let's have order and calm, please!

THOMAS. Ask yourselves - is what I'm saying dangerous? Or is ignorance dangerous? You don't have to agree with me, I just ask that you listen, because I don't have any reason to be up here, ruining my career, making my family suffer, except that I care about this place.

*(Maybe things quiet down a little here)*

I'm offering you the only cure I can think of for the disease that is sickening our town. And if you won't let me speak the truth at an assembly like this, I swear to God, I'll shout it from the street corners. I'll write in to other newspapers - the whole country will find out what's happening!

PETER. It seems like you're determined to ruin this town!

THOMAS. You're right, I'd rather see it ruined than succeed based on lies!

ASLAKSEN. That's very strongly put.

HOVSTAD. Anyone who wants to bring down the society he lives in is an enemy of the people! (Ibsen 72)

## **EXTINCTION REBELLION**

Extinction Rebellion (commonly abbreviated as XR) was established in 2018 in the United Kingdom by a group of academics, climate activists, and scientists, most notably Gail Bradbrook and Roger Hallam (Taylor). The movement's stated aim is to use nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience to compel politicians to recognize the threat of climate change and enact more aggressive carbon reduction policies. Extinction Rebellion cites several instrumental social movements as inspirations, including the Suffragettes, the Civil Rights Movement, and Occupy Wall Street. Like other global advocacy groups, they rely on a decentralized organizational structure; as long as you adhere to their stated principles and objectives, anyone can organize a protest on their behalf. Although they have employed various tactics to generate awareness about the necessity of combating climate change, the movement is best known for their transgressive demonstrations.

Extinction Rebellion regularly incorporates performative elements (or, as some have called them, “theatrical stunts”) into their protests to make their messaging more compelling and memorable (John). For instance, they often rely on protestors' physical presence, stylized movements, props, and costuming to produce striking visuals. Their blockade of five bridges throughout London in October 2018 is a notable example of this practice. By literally using their bodies to obstruct traffic,

activists caused considerable delays and disrupted the city's daily routines, seeking to highlight the complacency of governments and the general populace towards lowering their carbon emissions (Harrabin). During the demonstration, people carried banners displaying the Extinction Rebellion logo and their mottos, played music, gave speeches, and even acted out short skits. In a similar vein, members of the movement have glued themselves to buildings, such as the headquarters of Shell, and performed choreographed "die-ins": the protestors pretend to be deceased to depict the irreversible loss of species stemming from climate change (Dwyer).

### **RICHARD SCHECHNER AND THE BROADWAY ACTION GROUP**

Extinction Rebellion is certainly inventive in how they integrate performative elements into their protests and leverage social media. However, the movement clearly draws inspiration from earlier theatre-related advocacy groups, particularly Richard Schechner's Broadway Action Group and Larry Kramer's ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Schechner, best known for his pioneering work in the field of performance studies, experimented with different forms of politically conscious theatre that blurred the line between performance and activism. In an article he wrote for *The Drama Review* entitled "Guerrilla Theatre: May 1970," Schechner discussed how he created a temporary theatre company at New York University in response to the Kent State Shootings and the Vietnam War (Schechner 163 -164). They staged numerous inflammatory performances in public spaces, such as pretending to be bystanders gruesomely killed by soldiers, which, according to Schechner, drew the ire of the city's residents and the police.

The protests by the group during three Broadway performances, though, are the most analogous to Extinction Rebellion's demonstration at

*An Enemy of the People*. In his article, Schechner describes how the group felt that a large swathe of the U.S. population was actively avoiding addressing the Kent State Shootings or was being intentionally misled by the media, so they decided to interrupt three shows to rile up Broadway audiences: *Plaza Suite*, *Forty Carats*, and *Private Lives*. Like the Extinction Rebellion protest, NYU students snuck into the venues and momentarily derailed the performances with their demonstrations. The students began by getting on stage and making a brief announcement, explaining why they were there, before they played a recording of a statement made by the father of Allison Krause, one of the Kent State shooting victims. As the audio played, other students walked through the house and distributed leaflets to the audience, which listed the goals of a concurrent national protest condemning the shootings and a transcript of Mr. Krause's statement. Schechner claimed that while the protestors were mostly met with indifferent or positive responses, there were a few instances when they got into heated arguments with the performers and audience members. On one occasion, he writes that someone demanded that the students get off stage, shouting that they "did not pay \$8 to hear this kind of thing!" (Schechner 165).

While Extinction Rebellion and Schechner's Broadway Action Group have no direct organizational connection, they share many resemblances, as they both abruptly and dramatically interrupted Broadway performances to stress the importance of their respective causes. Apart from raising awareness about disparate issues and some minor variance in tactics (i.e., using an audio recording), it is their impact that ultimately separates the two. To begin with, although some newspapers covered the Broadway Actions Group's protests, they did not receive nearly the publicity that Extinction Rebellion did for disrupting *An Enemy of the People*. One reason for this is simply the period in which they occurred; media technology was

less sophisticated during the 1960s and 1970s (there were no cable news programs or the internet), so there was nowhere near the same amount of possible coverage. The scope of the protests was also markedly different. The message of the Broadway Action Group was timely and significant, but it was a short-lived endeavor that was not closely tied to a widespread and sustained social movement, unlike Extinction Rebellion.

Furthermore, because the issues Schechner's group addressed with their protests were also not at all aligned with the themes of the plays they interrupted, they seemed somewhat extraneous. Extinction Rebellion, on the other hand, was better able to mesh their protest with what was occurring on stage, which enabled the activists to actually echo the message of *An Enemy of the People* and the objective of the movement: getting a passive populace to accept that they will have to fight back against powerful interests to resolve an impending ecological disaster (Veltman). Nevertheless, the Broadway Action Group's willingness to defy theatre norms to address a contentious but consequential issue served as a model for subsequent generations of performative activists. It should also be noted that later in his career, Schechner wrote at length about the ability of the media to extend the reach of these kinds of performative protests, which he referred to as "direct theatre," and how these performances are consciously staged for both present and absent audiences (Schechner 464).

THOMAS. Fine, that's enough about our old leaders, they're well on the way to being obsolete without any help from me. I'm not here for them. I'm here for you. *You.* (He addresses the CROWD) You're free people. You have a right to the facts. You can tell these frightened, cowardly men up here that you demand to hear my report, you have the power.

ASLAKSEN. Doctor Stockmann! Several times now you've gone back on your promise not to discuss the report.

THOMAS. I'm not allowed to say the word "report"?

ASLAKSEN. There is an imminent danger to this town.

THOMAS. Yes, there is. It's you, Mr. Aslaksen! It's you, silencing me.  
(Ibsen 68)

## **LARRY KRAMER AND ACT UP**

ACT UP is another organization that has had a tremendous impact on Extinction Rebellion, as evidenced by their adoption of many of the same strategies and organizational principles. The coalition was co-founded in the late 1980s by the playwright Larry Kramer in response to the AIDS epidemic, as he believed that a more confrontational form of activism was required to compel the U.S. government to respond to the crisis and to combat the increased social stigma the disease brought to the LGBTQ+ community. Like Extinction Rebellion, the organization relies on nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience to bring attention to the discrimination faced by people living with AIDS. As one might expect, given Kramer's performance background, ACT UP became known for the audacity of their protests, which were typically formulated to be highly visible to the public (which also helped to garner a great deal of publicity). According to the journalist Ann Northrop, who was one of the early members of the organization, ACT UP's actions were "always, always, always planned to be dramatic enough to capture public attention" (Specter).

As with Extinction Rebellion, ACT UP's demonstrations are intentional, meticulously planned, and often theatrical in nature: they are extensively rehearsed and utilize props and costuming. To give an example, one of their most noteworthy demonstrations occurred outside the New York Stock Exchange, where protestors unfurled pithy banners and donned white lab coats to highlight the paucity of AIDS research at the time and

demand changes to the U.S.'s convoluted drug approval process (Cotter). On another occasion, they interrupted a Catholic mass to condemn the church's discriminatory stance against homosexuality. Perhaps their most memorable protest, though, involved them wrapping the home of Senator Jesse Helms in a giant yellow condom to decry his opposition to government-funded HIV prevention campaigns (Specter). Like Extinction Rebellion, ACT UP was also known for staging "die-ins" to represent how bodies were "piling up," as people in positions of power refused to take responsibility for AIDS-related deaths. While they helped to popularize the performance strategy, the concept of die-ins did not originate with ACT UP. As far back as the 1970s, environmentalists employed it during a demonstration on Earth Day to raise awareness about the deadly impacts of air pollution (Montalvo). More recently, die-ins were utilized in Philadelphia to condemn police brutality after the tragic murder of George Floyd in 2020; dozens of protestors laid face down in the street with their hands clasped behind their back, mimicking the final moments before Floyd's death (Wehelie and Woodyatt).

Outside their radical stunts, there are other, less apparent analogies between Extinction Rebellion and ACT UP. For instance, they both rely on symbolism and employ recognizable brands that convey something profound about their causes. Extinction Rebellion's logo, an hourglass placed inside a circle, is meant to represent the urgency of climate change (i.e., time is running out). Likewise, ACT UP is known for its use of the pink triangle, which is a symbol reappropriated from Nazi Germany that was used to identify gay men in concentration camps. Another way they are linked together is their use of sayings or mottos. One of Extinction Rebellion's more popular slogans is "Tell the truth," which is akin to ACT UP's "Silence=Death," as they both demand governments and cultural institutions be transparent about the severity of the issues they would

prefer to ignore (Cruz). Ultimately, the most consequential similarity between ACT UP and Extinction Rebellion is their commitment to enact drastic cultural shifts and long-lasting policy changes. Both organizations have called for their respective causes to be recognized as crises through their campaigning and have laid out clear, actionable objectives for mitigating them, although their detractors have often contended that their demands are not feasible. Through their dogged advocacy, ACT UP made tremendous strides in combating AIDS, such as changing the FDA regulatory process for experimental drugs, fighting for housing rights for people living with HIV/AIDS, and creating one of the first successful needle exchange programs in New York City. In addition to these tangible and meaningful changes, perhaps their most notable accomplishment was shifting the narrative surrounding the epidemic by humanizing it (France). While it remains to be seen if Extinction Rebellion's interventions will have a comparable impact, they have certainly been successful in publicizing the repercussions of climate change and demanding increased accountability.

THOMAS. But there's no "cause," here, Mr. Aslaksen, it's a straightforward matter.

ASLAKSEN. Maybe, maybe not. Listen, I know these fellows, and sometimes they need a little nudge. Which is why we should be prepared to demonstrate our solidarity.

THOMAS. Demonstrate how?

ASLAKSEN. Nothing too extreme, don't get me wrong. A moderate kind of demonstration, I always aim for moderation. (Ibsen 26)

### **EXTINCTION REBELLION'S PROTEST AT *AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE***

Although Extinction Rebellion's demonstration during *An Enemy of the People* on Broadway may appear to some as spontaneous or

opportunistic, it was an intentional and coordinated undertaking. Despite its age, Ibsen's play (written in 1882) was singled out by the organization because of its salient themes of pollution and the contention between public welfare and economic interests. Additionally, because the production utilized a contemporary adaptation by the playwright Amy Herzog, Extinction Rebellion sought to strengthen allusions to the current climate crisis. In an article written for *The New York Times*, Sam Gold, the director of the production and Herzog's husband, explained that they chose to stage the play for similar reasons, as its "prophetic messages about the dangers of political polarization, the way disinformation spreads like disease, and our inability to confront the threat of environmental catastrophe" paralleled contemporary America (Alter). The story of *An Enemy of the People* concerns a doctor, Thomas Stockmann, who tries to warn his town that their lucrative spas, which he oversees in his position as the medical director, have become contaminated with bacteria from local tanneries and now pose a deadly health risk. However, Stockmann's attempt to expose the truth is met with resistance from the townspeople and authorities (including his brother, Peter Stockmann, the mayor), who are more concerned about the immediate economic repercussions of closing the spas.

During an interview with Steven Starr of XRNow!: Extinction Rebellion Radio, one of the protestors, Nate Smith, explained that he was approached by a fellow member of Extinction Rebellion, John Mark Rozendaal, to participate in the demonstration at *An Enemy of the People* because of his theatre background: in addition to being an activist, Smith is a performer and producer who works in New York City (Starr). Rozendaal had previously interrupted a performance of Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at the Metropolitan Opera back in 2023, and he saw value in staging a similar protest on Broadway, particularly at a play with such a pertinent

environmental message (Mayorquin, Fadulu, Farrell, and Baron). Increasingly, Extinction Rebellion and other climate activist groups that target art and cultural spaces have refined their approach by attempting to be more discerning about when and how they protest (placing a greater emphasis on targeted messaging rather than merely creating a spectacle and getting arrested). Although these “attacks” on art are intended to critique societal values, pointing out that people tend to be more upset by the defacing of art than the ongoing destruction of the planet, they often receive negative responses from the public and media, who claim that they are misdirecting their indignation and that their protests are more bothersome than efficacious (Fadel). By aligning the message of their protest with the artwork itself, though, rather than presenting themselves in conflict with it, Extinction Rebellion sought to create a more productive conversation with their interruption of *An Enemy of the People*.

In a press release issued by the New York City chapter of Extinction Rebellion shortly following the protest, the organization stressed that they were following "a tradition of nonviolent civil disobedience in arts and theater, such as Parisian students' occupation of the Odéon theatre in 1968 — not to mention theater itself as a powerful medium for provoking social change" and that it was not intended as a direct critique of the play, but was merely a means to spotlight the threat of climate change ("NO THEATRE ON A DEAD PLANET"). The immediacy of the medium was another reason why Extinction Rebellion elected to protest *An Enemy of the People*. Interrupting a live performance, rather than say a film screening, will typically be seen as a more disruptive act because the immersion is broken; this also provides a greater opportunity for protestors to engage with the performers and audience members. The organization also likely selected a Broadway venue for two reasons. First, despite the relatively limited attention given to theatre in the United States, Broadway still attracts tremendous public

interest, due to its location in New York City and the substantial revenue it generates. In an interview with *Variety*, Nate Smith alluded to this when he argued that:

The reactions of like, "Why aren't you doing this to the people in charge?" Like we are doing that all the time. All the time. But how many of those have you heard about in *The New York Times*? The amount of times that I've been a part of all kinds of things — from flyering in a park to disrupting a politician's speech — the amount of times that does not hit the media cycle at all is the strong majority.  
(Tingley)

Secondly, although they proclaim it was not intentional, many people have viewed Extinction Rebellion's demonstration as a critique of the typical demographic of Broadway audiences. Due to increasingly expensive ticket prices, most audience members tend to be affluent, a segment of the population that often has a larger carbon footprint but is less likely to feel the direct impacts of climate change. In the same press release from Extinction Rebellion, another protester, Lydia Wooley, corroborated Smith's assertion that the disruption was primarily intended to draw the media's attention. She states that it was not necessarily meant to be perceived as a denouncement of the performers or the production as a whole, but it was simply a means to spread their message, maintaining that they were "not protesting the event itself; we are not protesting theater; we are not protesting the emissions that brought spectators to get here. That's not the point. We are here because we have to disrupt this public event as our last resort to draw public attention to the climate emergency we are facing today." However, Wooley's statement is somewhat contradictory. While she claims that they did not intend to critique Broadway audiences with their protest of *An Enemy of the People*, she also points out that their actions nonetheless exacerbate climate change. Similarly, Extinction

Rebellion has routinely called out the disproportionate amount of carbon emissions generated by the wealthy residing in highly developed countries.

As mentioned previously, Extinction Rebellion's protest took place during a preview performance, specifically press night. This was a conscious choice that ensured the highest media coverage of the demonstration, as critics and journalists were guaranteed to be in the audience. Similarly, the moment of the interruption was also carefully selected; it took place during a meeting at the house of Captain Horster, where Dr. Stockmann attempts to present his findings to the townspeople and make a case for temporarily closing the spas. The protestors had attended an earlier preview performance during their preparations, and this scene was singled out because it most aligned with what Extinction Rebellion hoped to accomplish with their disruption. Moreover, the staging choices mentioned earlier by the production's director, Sam Gold, also played a pivotal role. To create an immersive experience that more closely resembled an actual public meeting, he elected to place performers throughout the audience and invited select spectators to sit on stage around a bar; between the third and fourth acts, the set piece was lowered from the ceiling, and people were served food and beverages around it during the informal intermission. The stage directions in the adaptation by Amy Herzog also influenced this choice: at the top of the act, she indicates that "Some Citizens have already arrived and are noisily talking, laughing, etc. - getting ready for a good time. Ideally, these Citizens appear to be continuous with the play's audience, which also becomes part of the assembly" (Ibsen 59). This obscuring of the demarcation between the spectators and performers was attested to in a review of the production that appeared in *Vulture*, which asserted that "this tactic allowed the theatrical space to become naturally, potently blurred. We are all, always, in this together, but we're not always made to recognize the fact" (Holdren). Extinction Rebellion wanted to take advantage of this

setup, as it would allow the protest to seem like a natural extension of the production and to establish a parallel between the end of the act; after his presentation, Dr. Stockmann is berated and run off by the townspeople, who later throw rocks through the windows of his home, mirroring how scientists and activists are often silenced when they attempt to speak out against climate change.

Initially, the protesters planned to take the stage with other audience members, but had to change their course of action when they discovered they would need prior authorization to get that close. Instead, they remained in the auditorium and spoke out near their seats. Video footage capturing the beginning of the disruption, which was widely disseminated through news outlets and social media platforms such as TikTok, depicts Nate Smith responding to a line in the play directed toward the audience. When the townspeople attempt to pass a motion to prevent Dr. Stockmann from continuing to publish or speak about his findings, effectively censoring him, the chairman asks if there are any further objections. At this moment, Smith walked down the aisle, wearing a white t-shirt emblazoned with the Extinction Rebellion logo, and replied, "I object to the silencing of scientists" (Vassel). Although Smith stated that he got through about two minutes of his speech before he was abruptly cut off, the footage available online suggests that many of the performers immediately hectorated and talked over him. In particular, Michael Imperioli (who portrayed the mayor, Peter Stockmann) can be seen telling him to leave and to "Go back to acting school" while he and another actor, David Patrick Kelly (who portrayed Morten Kiil, Dr. Stockmann's father-in-law and the owner of one of the local tanneries) pushed Smith back up the stairs. When they eventually reached the top landing, Smith gave his final declaration before being forcibly escorted out of the theatre, exclaiming, "There's no Broadway on a dead planet!" (Vassel).

In addition to the timing of the demonstration, the physical presence of the Extinction Rebellion protestors at *Enemy of the People* played an important part in communicating the group's message and representing the solidarity of the movement. As Susan Leigh Foster details in her article "Choreographies of Protest," bodies within protests fulfill a multitude of functions, and she suggests that:

The process of creating political interference calls forth a perceptive and responsive physicality that, everywhere along the way, deciphers the social and then choreographs an imagined alternative. As they fathom injustice, organize to protest, craft tactics, and engage in action, these bodies read what is happening and articulate their imaginative rebuttal. In so doing they demonstrate to themselves and all those watching that something can be done. (Foster 412)

Foster cites earlier examples of physical endurance during protests, such as the sit-ins during the Civil Rights movement and the previously mentioned die-ins by ACT UP, to illustrate that there is a historical precedent and intentionality behind the use of immobile and insistent bodies to dramatize injustices. Similar to these earlier movements, the Extinction Rebellion activists made their bodies not only visible but also deliberately obstructive, forcing people to either listen to their message or attempt to physically remove them. Foster explains that this strategy is effective because it evokes a kind of kinesthetic empathy which compels spectators to engage with the protest viscerally and emotionally (and, in turn, makes it more challenging for them to ignore). Unlike digital or non-material forms of advocacy, such as online petitions, embodied protests produce a shared physical and affective space that creates an immediate confrontation. This effect can be seen in other demonstrations aimed at raising awareness on environmental issues, such as those at Standing Rock in North Dakota,

where activists attempted to block pipeline construction by chaining themselves to heavy machinery and resisting police efforts to violently disperse them (Hersher).

Despite some of the performers' fervent reactions, the audience appeared to remain relatively quiet during Extinction Rebellion's protest during *An Enemy of the People*, at least for the first disruption by Nate Smith. This can largely be attributed to the fact that the interruption meshed seamlessly with what was happening in the play, as many people were unsure if this was part of the production or not; interviews with audience members after the performance corroborate this uncertainty (Carlin). Additionally, many of the actors claimed that they believed the director Sam Gold had planned the disruption, so they remained in character for its entire duration, thereby adding to the confusion. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Michael Imperioli clarified that he continued to respond as the mayor because he was unsure whether the activists had been invited to interrupt the performance, as the director had been testing different ways to make that moment in the play more chaotic for the actors during rehearsals. Imperioli also stressed that the only reason he harassed the protestors and tried to push Smith out of the theatre was because he felt that is what his character would have done in that situation, explaining that, "When that started to go down, I started calling them liars, as that would be my character's stance on climate change because that's his stance on the poison in the water - that Strong's character is lying...If I was playing another character, I would not have gone into the audience and laid hands on that person" (Grow and Richardson).

Imperioli went on to assert in this interview and on social media that he wholeheartedly agreed with Extinction Rebellion's message, stating that climate change is an "extremely pressing and immediate issue that's going to be more and more of a terrible thing as time goes by" (Grow and

Richardson). However, this insistence by Imperioli and others that they were merely staying in character and were not themselves opposed to the protest seems somewhat at odds with what actually occurred during the protest. Later, when Smith's collaborators, Lydia Wooley and Kyle Butler (who was wearing a t-shirt printed with the declaration "No Theatre On A Dead Planet"), interrupted the performance in a similar manner, the actors appeared to stop performing and broke the fourth wall in some of their responses. For instance, David Patrick Kelly can be heard telling them, "They need to go write their own play," multiple times, and receiving rapturous applause from the audience.

It is worth mentioning, however, that not all the actors performing in *Enemy of the People* disparaged the protesters from Extinction Rebellion. In the videos shared online, Jeremy Strong (who portrayed the protagonist, Dr. Stockmann) can be heard encouraging the other actors to "Let them speak." While his character certainly would have been supportive of the protestors, it is also likely that Strong realized that their intentions were aligned, as he is a well-known climate advocate. Strong later reiterated his support for the protestors while appearing on an episode of *Late Night with Seth Meyers* to promote the production. Although he said that it was challenging to navigate the protest because it disrupted his immersion into the performance, comparing it to walking on a tightrope or being on the razor's edge, Strong added that:

This is a play about trying to communicate an inconvenient truth to a power structure. And I guess it says something about our inattention that these activists feel compelled to do this. Listen, I didn't want it to happen on my stage... but I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't, in a way, support what they were saying. It only underlined the message of the play, which is that we are all in this together. (Meyers)

Strong's statement, and the fact that he was discussing it on broadcast television, attests to the efficacy and reach of Extinction Rebellion's protest at *An Enemy of the People*. There have admittedly been a variety of responses; some people were upset that they derailed such an expensive performance, whereas others contend that the urgency of their message superseded the need to maintain traditional theatre etiquette. Despite the range of reactions, the demonstration has continued to remain in the public consciousness and has raised questions about the role Broadway should play in tackling the climate crisis. If we judge it based on these metrics, it certainly should be considered a successful intervention.

While many people who create and watch theatre support mitigating climate change, it is also challenging for an industry so beholden to financial considerations to push boundaries and be ecologically conscious, both in terms of production practices (i.e., reducing their carbon footprint) and the content of the plays they stage. There are non-profit organizations, such as the Broadway Green Alliance, that have worked to encourage professional theatre to adopt more eco-friendly practices, resulting in a number of tangible and lasting changes. Still, many people believe that there has not been nearly enough progress in these areas for Broadway to truly be recognized as a leader in sustainability. This sentiment is perhaps best exemplified near the end of Nate Smith's interview with Steven Starr, when he contended that:

We are not avoiding climate change. We need, in some ways, to very much start talking about battering down the hatches... and an aspect of that is a healthy, responsive artistic sector of your society. One that is actually responsible to and speaking for the people. Which we currently don't have. Three out of four Broadway shows lose money. It's a very volatile market, and that makes people more conservative with their financial gambling that they're doing to try to turn a

profit... so, you see *Back to the Future: The Musical*, and a lot of very tired programming that has nothing to do with actually trying to be a close companion of the society that it exists in. (Starr)

Smith's astute observation, in many ways, encapsulates the impetus behind Extinction Rebellion's protest during *An Enemy of the People*. While the protestors have emphasized that it was not the primary purpose of the demonstration, it nonetheless exposed and critiqued how much of commercial theatre, particularly Broadway, contributes to ongoing environmental degradation by prioritizing capitalistic concerns over fostering a responsive and socially conscious art form. With their act of defiance, Extinction Rebellion compelled both those who were present and later experienced it through the media to pause and reflect on their complicity in exacerbating climate change. Just as importantly, though, it helped create an ongoing dialogue outside the theatrical space.

The impact of the protest was further substantiated by Smith in his interview with Starr when he stated that a few days after the disruption, he randomly overheard a group of people discussing it in a café in New York City. At first, their conversation began with questions concerning why the action occurred and whether it was appropriate or not, but they quickly transitioned into talking about Extinction Rebellion's message and how Broadway had admittedly become more elitist and commercialized. Smith maintains that this discussion speaks to the ripple effect of the protest, as it illustrates that it effectively transitioned outside of "the nucleus of just theatre people. As much as you might think that theatre is irrelevant, I think this action proves that it is not" (Starr). Whether or not you agree with their tactics, the conversation overheard by Smith suggests that Extinction Rebellion's protest during *Enemy of the People* challenged conventional thinking regarding climate change and how artists and audiences have collectively responded to it thus far.

PETRA. I'm just sorry for what I've seen. What I now know people are capable of. And I'm afraid for this town. The worst has already happened to us, but for everyone else, the hardest times are still ahead. I keep having this terrible thought...that they deserve what comes to them.

(THOMAS *takes* PETRA's *hand*)

THOMAS. We must try not to think that way. And in ten years, or fifty...it will matter that we did what's right. I'll be gone, you may be gone by then, too. But maybe Eilif will be here to see it. We just have to imagine that the water will be clean and safe, and the truth will be valued. We just have to imagine... (Ibsen 90 - 91).

## WORKS CITED

- Alter, Alexandra. "Amy Herzog on Adapting Ibsen's 'An Enemy of the People' for Broadway." *The New York Times*. February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/22/theater/amy-herzog-enemy-people-broadway.html>.
- Carlin, Dave. "Michael Imperioli, Jeremy Strong Stay in Character to Address Climate Activists Who Interrupted *An Enemy of the People*." *CBS News*, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/climate-protesters-interrupt-an-enemy-of-the-peoplemichael-imperioli-jeremy-strong/>.
- Cotter, Holland. "Act Up New York." *The New York Times*, October 10, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/15/arts/artsspecial/15galleries-03.html>.
- Cruz, Ivana. "The Story Behind Silence=Death, an Icon of the LGBTQ+ Rights Movement." *W Magazine*, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/avram-finkelsteinsilence-equals-death-image-poster-act-up-interview>.
- Dwyer, Colin. "Extreme Weather Will Tell This Truth: Climate Protests Erupt in Major Cities." *NPR*, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/07/767888055/extreme-weatherwill-tell-this-truth-climate-protests-erupt-in-major-cities>.
- Fadel, Leila, host. "We Want to Help: Why Climate Activists are Trying Something New." *NPR*, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1242840734>.
- France, David. "The Activists: How ACT UP Forever Changed Patients' Rights, Protests, and American Political Organizing as It's Practiced Today." *The New York Times*, April 13, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/13/t-magazine/act-up-aids.html>.

Grow, Kory, and Kalia Richardson. "Michael Imperoli Agreed With Protestors Who Interrupted Enemy of the People – But His Character Did Not." *Rolling Stone*, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/michael-imperoli-enemy-of-thepeople-climate-protest-1234988216/>.

Harrabin, Roger. "Extinction Rebellion Protests Block London Bridges." *BBC News*. November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-46247339>.

Hersher, Rebecca. "Key Moments in the Dakota Access Pipeline Fight." *NPR*. February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/02/22/514988040/key-moments-in-the-dakota-access-pipeline-fight>.

Holdren, Sara. "Ibsen, Translated into American; *An Enemy of the People* with Jeremy Strong, Michael Imperoli, and Drink on the House." *Vulture*. March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://www.vulture.com/article/theater-review-an-enemy-of-the-people-strong-imperoli-gold-herzog-ibsen.html>.

Ibsen, Henrik. *An Enemy of the People*. Adapted by Amy Herzog, Samuel French (Concord Theatricals Publishing), 2024.

John, Tara. "In Photos: The Extinction Rebellion Protests." *CNN*. October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/09/world/gallery/extinction-rebellion-intl-gbr>.

Mayorquin, Orlando, Lola Fadulu, Patrick Farrell, and Joshua Baron. "Climate Protestors Interrupt Met Performance of Wagner's Tannhäuser." *New York Times*, November 30, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/arts/music/met-opera-protesttannhauser.html>.

Meyers, Seth, host. "Jeremy Strong, Amber Ruffin - Season 11, Episode 83." *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024. <https://www.nbc.com/late-night-with-seth-meyers/video/jeremy-strong-amber-ruffin/9000190517>.

"NO THEATRE ON A DEAD PLANET." *Extinction Rebellion NYC*, 14 Mar. 2024, <https://www.xrebellion.nyc/news/no-theatre-on-a-dead-planet>. Press Release.

Schechner, Richard. "Invasions Friendly and Unfriendly: The Dramaturgy of Direct Theatre." *Critical Theory and Performance*. Edited by Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach. The University of Michigan Press, 2007, pp. 462 – 481.

---. "Guerrilla Theatre: May 1970." *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1970, pp. 163-168, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1444567?seq=5>.

Specter, Michael. "How ACT UP Changed America." *The New Yorker*, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/06/14/how-act-up-changed-america>.

Starr, Steven, interview with Nate Smith. "Episode 66: Nate Smith, An Enemy of the People." <https://www.xrlosangeles.org/xrnow/166>.

Taylor, Matthew. "The Evolution of Extinction Rebellion." *The Guardian*, August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/aug/04/evolution-of-extinctionrebellion-climate-emergency-protest-coronavirus-pandemic>.

Vassel, Nicole. "Michael Imperioli Stays in Character to Demand Ejection of Broadway Play Climate Change Protestor." *The Independent*, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/news/broadway-protest-michael-imperioliextinction-rebellion-b2513162.html>.

Wehelie, Benazir, and Amy Woodyatt. "I Can't Breathe: Hundreds Lie Down in Protest." *CNN*, June 4th, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/03/world/gallery/george-floyd-lie-down-intl-scli/index.html>.