

ALBERT RAU

Sila – A play about Climate Change in the Arctic

I realized that the Arctic is the canary in the coalmine, and that understanding the issues affecting it will help us understand how climate change is affecting the rest of our world.¹

Introduction

Climate change has become one of the most prominent topics around the world and some people even consider it one of the most serious global threats. For a long time, climate specialists and scientists were often regarded as exaggerating alarmists, but it cannot be denied anymore that the world is heating up, glaciers are melting, permafrost is thawing, polar sea ice is receding and sea levels are rising faster than predicted. Heat waves, droughts and an increasing number of devastating forest fires on the one hand, and hurricanes, tornados and floods on the other are only some examples of the long list of environmental scenarios that are seen as effects of climate change. The ‘Fridays for Future’ protests of thousands of youths around the world, initiated by the Swedish Greta Thunberg in 2018, are the most prominent examples of people raising their voices and taking action to fight climate change.

Canada is, on average, warming at twice the rate of the rest of the world and Northern Canada is even heating up at almost three times the global average. When, in 2007, the French-Canadian playwright Chantal Bilodeau visited the Arctic she realized the effects climate change was already having on the environment and the people and animals who were living there. As a matter of fact, the Arctic, in particular, ‘is providing the first and strongest evidence of this change’² and, even more, it ‘is being used as a benchmark by which the global community is measuring the pace of change.’³

Propelled by what she had seen, Bilodeau decided to take action and use theatre to communicate the impact of climate change to her audiences. She started to write plays, one for each of the eight countries of the Arctic: Canada, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, USA and Russia:

¹ Eleonora MILAZZO: ‘Interview with Chantal Bilodeau, playwright and translator.’ In: *Accel European Fellow*, <https://accelfellowship.wordpress.com/interview-with-chantal-bilodeau-playwright-translator/> (19.09.2019)

² David BARBER: ‘On thinning Ice.’ In: *Canadian Geographic*, Jan./Feb., 2010, 77.

³ Natan OBED: ‘How climate change is destroying the Arctic.’ In: *MacLean’s*, June 8, 2019, www.macleans.ca/opinion/climate-change-is-destroying-the-arctic-and-threatening-the-way-of-life-for-inuit/ (19.09.2019).

“I felt that people were not aware of how it was going on in the arctic with impacting the rest of us. They were not aware of the lifestyle of people who live there and then I felt that because it was changing so fast that there was value in capturing the story before they disappear.”⁴

The plays, however, do not confront their audiences with environmental catastrophes or feed them with scientific data, but rather tell the stories of people who have their home in the Arctic and how they cope with the many challenges of climate change. *Silay* is Bilodeau’s first play in the ‘Arctic Cycle’ series and is set in Canada. This article introduces *Sila* as an issue play and a political play that gives voice to the Inuit and discusses it as a possible text for use in the EFL-classroom.

The Canadian Arctic and its people

Visiting Canada’s Arctic is the kind of thing that people say changes your life. You have no idea what the planet is really like until you’ve been to the Arctic. [...] Culturally, historically, geographically, it’s different from anything I’ve ever experienced anywhere else.⁶

Margaret Atwood, who has visited the Canadian Arctic many times, expresses her fascination for this place and the Mennonite writer Rudy Wiebe sees the North in a similar way when he says that it ‘is not just geography or wilderness or cold or darkness. “North” is a complex and also you might say a state of mind, an understanding of the world.’⁷ In contrast to these two writers, only a few Canadians have ever been to the vast region north of the sixtieth parallel, let alone beyond the sixty-sixth parallel to the arctic circle or are aware of the fact that half of the Canadian landmass and two-thirds of Canada’s coastline is Arctic. Most Canadians can hardly imagine what life is like in a country where much of the huge territory is covered by permafrost.

The Canadian North is the home of the Inuit, who have lived there for thousands of years in isolated hunting societies, basically undisturbed by white people until the nineteenth century. They knew ‘that you have to live together or you cannot live

⁴ Chantal BILODEAU: *Unpublished Interview*. Graz, June 22, 2019.

⁵ Chantal BILODEAU: *Sila*, Talonbooks, Vancouver, Canada, 2015. *Sila* was staged at various festivals before it was professionally produced for the first time in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on April 24, 2014. Following *Sila*, Bilodeau wrote *Forward*, a play set in Norway about the polar explorations of Fridtjof Nansen. The play’s title goes back to Nansen’s ship Fram, the Norwegian word for ‘forward’. At present, Bilodeau is working on her third play of the Arctic Cycle *No More Harveys*, a one-woman play about the migrations of several females, both human and animal, set in Alaska, www.thearcticcycle.org/no-more-harveys. (19.09.2019)

⁶ Margaret ATWOOD: ‘Our Country.’ In: *Canadian Geographic*, 12/2013, 86.

⁷ Verena WEBER and Stefan SEITZER: ‘Interview mit Rudy Wiebe.’ In: *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* 17.2, 1997, 124.

there at all.⁸ Accordingly, they adapted their ways of life to survive in the Arctic's severe conditions and inhospitable surroundings and developed a great body of knowledge about the world in which they lived, its wildlife, its dangers and its life-supporting secrets.

Contact with western civilization was the beginning of often irreversible cultural changes and adjustments the Inuit had to make to their way of life, which had a serious impact on their culture and traditions. In fact, especially since the 1950s they basically had to give up their small hunting camps and winter igloos and the summer houses of animal hide have disappeared for the most part. Instead, they now mostly live in permanent dwellings, rows of small frame houses, power lines, and illuminated street lamps. In addition, the introduction of compulsory school education made the Inuit move closer to the schools to keep the family together. People do no longer wear skin clothing, snowmobiles have replaced the dog sleds and they use motorboats instead of their kayaks. Old traditions and survival techniques are vanishing or are mainly only used as tourist attractions.

The Inuit's lives are often determined by a fight for better living conditions, for better housing, health care and education. Alcoholism and drug abuse still pose serious problems and the suicide rate is significantly high, especially among younger people. Inuit often face unemployment and only a few people can make a living, for example, on handicraft and Inuit carvings, which have become the main source of income for many people in the remote settlements. Already in 1977, in his article 'We must have Dreams', published in *Inuit Today*, the Inuit John Amagoalik sadly asked: "Will the Inuit disappear from the face of this earth? Will we become extinct? Will our culture, our language and our attachment to nature be remembered only in history books?"⁹

As a matter of fact, the Inuit are still there—despite many yet unsolved problems as described above—and they can point to a number of successes, the most important being the declaration of the territory of Nunavut, which means 'Our Land' in Inuktitut, in 1999. However, the changing face of the Arctic is starting to pose a threat to the existence of the Inuit and their hunting culture as well as to wildlife and their habitats. Scientific data and computer models clearly show that the present effects of climate change are only the beginning of what will happen in the future:

As our ice and lands are being lost to melting, rising shores, and severe weather, the traditional knowledge of our lands and environment that has sustained us for millennia has come under threat. Our very cultures are now at risk of melting away.¹⁰

⁸ WEBER-SEITZER, 1997, 124

⁹ JOHN AMAGOALIK: 'We must have Dreams.' In: Robin GEDALOF, ed. *Paper Stays Put. A Collection of Inuit Writing*. Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, 1986, 163.

¹⁰ SHEILA WATT-CLOUTIER: *The Right to Be Cold*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, USA, 2018, 323.

Sila—The Play

Before Chantal Bilodeau started to write the play, she went on a three-week trip to the Arctic, where she talked to Inuit, white people, scientists, climate activists and members of the coast guard and only then she was sure what her play should focus on:

I had a very vague idea of what I was going to write about, which was a traditional good versus bad, pretty straightforward play and then, when I got there, what struck me the most was how complex and how interconnected everything was and I decided that that exactly was the most interesting part of the story and so all these different story lines are my way of trying to show this complexity and trying to give a sense of how the pieces fit together.¹¹

Sila shows a world that is determined by a dualism of opposing cultures, people and views that runs as a central thematic and structural feature through the whole play. There is the North against the South, the ways of life of the Inuit as opposed to the world of the Quallunaat¹² and there is indigenous knowledge, the spiritual world and harmony with nature in contrast to science, the secularized world of the white people and their attitude towards nature. Already in her playwright's notes, Bilodeau stresses this dual—and seemingly biased—perspective: “There are two distinct Arctics in this play: the Arctic of the Inuit and the Arctic of the Southerners. The Arctic of the Inuit is warm, raw, and fiercely alive. [...]. The Arctic of the Southerners is cold, mystical in its foreignness, and rarefied.”¹³

Sila is set in and around the town of Iqualuit on Baffin Island in the territory of Nunavut and it provides insight into individual yet interrelated stories of diverse characters in this arctic community. Moreover, the concept of dualism is also continued and reflected in the characters' personal relationships, as there are, for example, mothers and daughters, old and young people, Inuit and white people or English- and French-Canadians: “In *Sila*, in particular, it's stories that people have told me. Some of the characters are a combination of different people I've met, some are a mixture of fact and fiction. These [Arctic Cycle] plays are fact-based, but they're fictional.”¹⁴

¹¹ BILODEAU: Interview, 2019.

¹² For the Inuit writer Minnie Aodla FREEMAN the word Quallunaat '[...]' implies humans who pamper or fuss with nature, of materialistic habit. Avaricious people.' Mini Aodla FREEMAN: *Life Among the Quallunaat*, Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 2014, 88.

¹³ BILODEAU: *Sila*, 5.

¹⁴ BILODEAU quoted in: Sophie Yeo: 'Chantal Bilodeau Brings Climate Change To The Theatre.' *Pacific Standard*, Jul. 9, 2018. psmag.com/environment/chantal-bilodeau-bringing-climate-change-to-theater. (19.09.2019)

The play zooms in on the various characters to tell their stories in ‘rapid-fire short scenes, cutting back and forth between indoor and outdoor locations in Iqaluit’¹⁵. Three languages are spoken, Canada’s official languages English and French and Inuktitut, the third official language in Nunavut. Leanna, an Inuit climate activist and her daughter Veronica, a high school teacher, have a tense mother and daughter relationship, because Leanna is so engulfed in her activities that she has become estranged from her family and does not listen to the problems of her daughter and grandchild Samuel, anymore. While Leanna is politically active all across Canada and even beyond, Veronica rather works locally for the Inuit cause. She organizes environment awareness days in her school and performs spoken-word poetry and throat singing to strengthen Inuit identity and culture. Nevertheless, Veronica is thinking of going down South with her son Samuel: ‘[...]’Cause between a father who drinks himself stupid every night and a grandmother who spends more time on jets than in her home, Samuel doesn’t have much of a family.’¹⁶ In addition, Samuel’s school education is poor and Veronica does not see any future for him in Iqaluit. Leanna vehemently disagrees with Veronica, because she, herself, went to school in the south: ‘...I KNOW it’s like to be uprooted from your family and culture.’¹⁷ At the beginning of the play, Leanna passionately describes Nunavut, her Inuit home, as a place, where animals, people and spirits used to be natural allies, existing in harmony with each other, a place that it is, now, severely threatened: ‘our land, is only as rich as it is cold. And today, most of it is melting.’¹⁸

The audience also meets Jean, a Québécois climate scientist, who specializes in sea ice and two officers of the Coast Guard, Thomas, an English Canadian and Raphaël, a young French-Canadian. Thomas has run the local station for many years and is now about to retire from his position. Raphaël, who has a degree in environmental studies from Montréal’s McGill University, is going to replace him. He has a girlfriend, Mary, who will give birth to their baby soon and who constantly calls him on his mobile phone to inform him about the latest news. Thomas represents the position of the government, who want to exploit the natural resources of the Arctic, because there is ‘much money at stake.’¹⁹ After having been in the Arctic all these years, he still seems ignorant of the Inuit and their relationship to the land and even thinks that they will rather benefit from drilling for oil. Thomas strongly supports the plan to build a deep sea port: ‘A state-of-the-art, environmentally responsible, military and civilian loading and refuelling station.’²⁰ Thomas and

¹⁵ Megan SANDBERG-ZAKIAN: ‘Introduction.’ In: Chantal BILODEAU: *Sila*, Talonbooks, Vancouver, Canada, 2015, i.

¹⁶ BILODEAU: *Sila*, 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸ BILODEAU: *Sila*, 12. Bilodeau refers here to Sheila WATT-CLOUTIER (see footnote 10), who demands for the arctic “The right to be cold.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

Raphaël have to deal with a German science ship²¹ that wants to do seismic testing to ‘map the sea floor’²² and they disagree on whether this will do any damage to the environment and wildlife.

Jean has often been to the arctic during the past fifteen years to observe the changing sea ice and to collect data for his climate change model. Just like Thomas, he has not shown much interest in the Inuit and their language and culture and even after fifteen years he does not speak any Inuktitut and barely remembers words such as kayak or parka. Although he basically supports the fight against climate change, he does his research only for the sake of science and says that he does not care what politicians are doing with the results and his climate models: ‘I’ve learned my lesson: science and politics don’t mix.’²³ He formed this view after he received death threats because people opposed his research into climate change and rejected his idea of a carbon dioxide tax. This is also the reason why he refuses to sign a contract that would secure financial and governmental assistance for his research. Jean has not been up North for three years, but he has come because ‘One of the last remaining sheets of multi-year ice is predicted to break away from the coast this summer.’²⁴ However, to collect his material, he needs the help of Tulugaq, a hunter and an Inuit elder, to guide and protect him in the vastness of the arctic. Tulugaq is also a sculptor and he is a guardian of the Inuit culture and indigenous knowledge. Tulugaq seems in perfect harmony with his environment. He can read the signs of nature and knows “When the time is right”²⁵ to go on a safe trip. However, the effects of climate change are also already making it more and more difficult for him to properly judge the weather conditions and he almost fails, when he finally sets out on the trip with Jean.

Bilodeau worked together with Inuit people and actors and was quite aware of the question of appropriation: ‘I did develop the play with some Inuit. There was a workshop. So there were actors [...] and there was a lot of back and forth, so from them I sensed that it was OK.’²⁶ *Sila* shows features of magical realism and Bilodeau draws from different genres and includes Inuit poetry, legends, puppetry and elements of the fable so that, in addition to people, animals and mythical figures are also given agency and voice: ‘In the play I wanted everything to exist on the same level.’²⁷ Two central characters in the play are the polar bear *Mama* and *Daughter*, her cub, who symbolize the threatened wildlife and are considered possible victims

²¹ There have been German science ships in the Arctic, but the sinking of this ship is fiction. As a matter of fact, the German science ship “Polarstern” will do research in the Arctic from October 2019 until summer 2020.

²² BILODEAU: *Sila*, 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁶ BILODEAU: Interview, 2019.

²⁷ BILODEAU: Interview, 2019.

of climate change.²⁸ Jean and Thomas observe them and express the two divergent views of the arctic. Jean is receptive to what is happening to the polar bears and calls them ‘extraordinary animals’²⁹ who are not only endangered, they are now a ‘threatened’³⁰ species, whereas Thomas only considers them ‘mean motherfuckers’³¹, he would kill right away if they came close to him. *Mama* and *Daughter* are trying to survive in the changing arctic and *Mama* is teaching her young cub how to hunt seals, but because of the breaking ice, it is becoming more and more difficult to catch them. Bilodeau has the plot revolve around the commonly known legend of Nuliajuk: ‘The Inuit goddess. [...] With the big hair and the fingerless hands’³², who reigns over the underworld, the sea and its animals. The Inuit believe that when she is angry, she traps the animals with her hair and people cannot hunt them anymore. Climate change is making her angry and her ‘rage comes to stand in for the indiscriminate destruction that we invite when we disturb the natural world.’³³ For *Mama* and *Daughter*, the two polar bears, it is obvious who is to blame:

DAUGHTER: Did the human break the ice?

MAMA: The ice broke because Nuliajuk is angry. And Nuliajuk is angry because humans have angered her.³⁴

Sila has a lot of sad moments. The little bear cub drowns in the sea, because it has drifted away too far on a broken sheet of ice. Samuel, Veronica’s son, commits suicide and in her mourning over his death, Veronica becomes mute. She loses her *Sila* and becomes ‘a writer with no words.’³⁵ Finally, Jean reveals that he had not only received death threats, but that his wife had a still-born baby after a fanatic attacked her in the open street. Moreover, the German science ship sinks in bad weather and most of the crew members die, although rescue teams, coordinated by Thomas and Raphael, desperately try to help them.

Yet, despite all the sorrow and grief, the play seeks to express hope and, here, a key role is assumed by Jean. On his research trip with Tulugaq, Jean almost drowns and in a near death experience he meets Nuliajuk, who has captured the sea animals and who is about to trap him with her hair, too. She only releases him

²⁸ BILODEAU strikes the emotional chord when she uses the polar bears in her play, but Sheila WATT-CLOUTIER, for example, is not very happy about the use of ‘iconic images of polar bears on precarious-looking floes,’ because “It’s not just about polar bears.’ WATT-COULTIER is quoted in: John GEDDES: ‘The climate crisis: These are Canada’s worst-case scenarios.’ *Maclean’s*, Jul 11, 2019. www.macleans.ca/news/canada/the-climate-crisis-these-are-canadas-worst-case-scenarios/ (19.09.2019)

²⁹ BILODEAU: *Sila*, 13.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 65.

³³ YEO: *Pacific Standard*, Jul. 9, 2018.

³⁴ BILODEAU: *Sila*, 55.

³⁵ Ibid., 71.

when he promises to protect her: ‘I’ll do anything you want me to do.’³⁶ Yet, when Tulugaq has rescued him, Jean only thinks that his encounter with Nulijauk ‘was my imagination going crazy.’³⁷ He still rejects the Inuit belief that ‘this spirit world is just as real as our reality.’³⁸ Jean needs Tulugaq to tell him what he has to do to appease Nulijauk and that this is only possible, if he believes in his vision:

TULUGAQ: Nulijauk is very angry. If you don’t comb her hair, she keeps all the sea animals away from hunters. Hunters have no food. You have to comb her hair so she feels love.

JEAN: You believe it was real?

TULUGAQ: I believe I see Nulijauk, I comb her hair.³⁹

Jean combs Veronica’s hair, who is, finally, able to cry tears over the death of her son and when Leanna joins him, mother and daughter are reconciled. At the same time, Nulijauk’s hair becomes loose again, too, and all animals are set free. Veronica also gets her Sila back and the ability to form words and to raise her voice: “In some of the explanations of *Sila* [...] it says that the Inuit choose their words very carefully, they put a lot of weight to things that are spoken, because when something is spoken, you create it, it becomes real, you put it out into the world.”⁴⁰

Bilodeau has the play end with Veronica performing a spoken-word poem. Although it reminds of a sorrowful past, it strongly conveys the positive notion that there ‘is no action without hope’⁴¹ as long as Sila is still there as the connecting force and medium.

while yet we breathe
it’s never too late
so they say⁴²

Sila—An Issue Play for the EFL-Classroom

Bilodeau complains in an interview that ‘plays about climate change are dismissed as “issue-based” or “political” theater, subgenres that tend to be regarded as less artistically serious.’⁴³ Hiro Kanagawa, the 2018 winner of the Governor general

³⁶ Ibid., 86.

³⁷ Ibid., 94.

³⁸ BILODEAU: Interview, 2019.

³⁹ BILODEAU: *Sila*, 94.

⁴⁰ BILODEAU: Interview, 2019.

⁴¹ Chantal BILODEAU: ‘Introduction.’ In Chantal BILODEAU (ed.): *Where is the Hope?*, Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts, www.sustainablepractice.org, 2018, xviii. (19.09.2019)

⁴² BILODEAU: *Sila*, 104.

⁴³ YEO: *Pacific Standard*, Jul. 9, 2018.

award for Drama, however, very much stresses the importance of political theatre: ‘I believe theatre, like all art, is inherently political. But I have never believed that theatre has a responsibility to *be* political.’⁴⁴

In fact, the criticism of climate change plays reminds of the same labels that are applied to issue plays for young audiences, which are often considered ‘safe, conventional, overly didactic, facile, familiar, predictable, or boring’.⁴⁵ However, issue plays tackle sensitive subjects and aim for emotional impact and audience identification. They want to evoke empathy with and understanding of the other, of those who are different, the less fortunate in society, and they want their audiences to take action and to make a difference. Playwrights always have to walk the fine line between entertainment and getting a message across, between didacticism and involving the audience in what is happening on stage by avoiding a ‘preachy’ tone. No doubt, *Sila* takes sides but it does not want to create a simple black and white or good versus bad scenario. It rather wants to give the Inuit a voice. Bilodeau wants to use plays and the theatre to ‘foster dialogue about our global climate crisis, create an empowering vision of the future, and inspire people to take action.’⁴⁶ Kanagawa is convinced that ‘We all presumably want our work to help inspire that change. How can we do it without lecturing, moralizing, pulpsteering?’⁴⁷

Sila is a play about protection, responsibility and about survival and confronts the audience with a number of questions. Why can mothers not protect their young ones and why can the Inuit and Nulijuk not protect nature anymore? Who is responsible for climate change and are scientists responsible for what people do with their research results? How can the Inuit, the Arctic and the world survive the effects of climate change? Climate change is a global risk and affects all of mankind and we are all in the same boat. *Sila*, is a play about mutual respect and collaboration and about community. Do cooperation and joint efforts offer ways to solve the problem? Veronica urges Jean to learn the Inuktitut word for respect so that Inuit and white people can work together as equal partners: ‘If you want to work in Nunavut, it’s not enough to talk AT us anymore. You have to talk WITH us.’⁴⁸

No doubt, issue plays are meant to be educational and, as a matter of fact, theatre has always done this when holding up the mirror to its audiences. Moreover, despite dealing with problems, issue plays also often offer a positive view of the future, a glimpse of hope, not the perfect solution to a problem, but ways out of a dilemma. Precisely these characteristics suggest *Sila* is a suitable play for the classroom.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Hiro KANAGAWA: ‘Theatre Action and the Ripple Effect.’ In BILODEAU: *Where is The Hope*, 2018, 22.

⁴⁵ Heather FITZSIMMONS FREY: ‘Igniting Canadian Theatre With TYA.’ In Heather FITZSIMMONS FREY (ed.): *ignite: Illuminating Theatre For Young People*. Toronto, Playwrights Canada Press, 2016. xv.

⁴⁶ *Arctic Cycle*: ‘Our Mission.’ www.thearcticcycle.org/initiatives (19.09.2019).

⁴⁷ KANAGAWA: *Where is the Hope*, 23.

⁴⁸ BILODEAU: *Sila*, 41.

⁴⁹ See also the publication of a Master’s Thesis on teaching the play in the classroom: Mirijam BRODACZ-GEIER: *Ecodrama in the Classroom – Chantal Bilodeau’s Sila*, Graz, Karl-Franzens-Universität, 2018.

Needless to say, however, literature is not a true mirror of reality, but rather always remains a fictional and subjective representation of a writer's view of the world. In addition, literary texts are neither a substitute for in-depth discussions and information on various themes and topics or on different societies nor can there be any doubt that 'there will always be references we do not understand, expectations we do not meet, attitudes we do not share, experiences we have missed. Any reading will therefore, of necessity, be imperfect'⁵⁰. However, *Sila* offers students an opportunity to empathize with characters and learn about their thoughts and feelings and it gives insight into Inuit culture. Discussing a play in school must aim at inviting young people to open up and become ready to get involved in the text. *Sila* tells stories that elicit responses from students, although or even just because the setting lies outside their familiar surroundings and experiences. Against the background of the play, there is the chance to discuss the many aspects of climate change as, for example, how the Inuit try to cope with the many challenges, but also how scientists, activists and governments see the situation. *Sila* can make students sensitive to the topic, so that they start to reflect on their own situation and what they can do to fight climate change. In addition, as a text that stimulates speaking and writing in the target language, it also supports the foreign language learning process, because talking about literature in the EFL classroom always also entails the acquisition of linguistic and communicative competences and skills.

*Sila—Theatre takes Action*⁵¹

I have faith that theatre is rooted in a fundamental human need for shared experience, for communion not only with one another but with the world around us. Theatre has proven time and time again to be a powerful agent for community-building, for inspiring conversations and debate, and for empowering social change.⁵²

Hiro Kanagawa wants 'theatre to "matter"'⁵³ and he emphasizes what makes a theatre experience unique and invaluable, the possibility of close communion between audience, actors and theme and the experience of being part of it. Plays are written

.....
<https://unipub.uni-graz.at/obvugrhs/content/titleinfo/2422850>, <https://unipub.uni-graz.at/obvugrhs/download/pdf/2422850?originalFilename=true>. (19.09.2019)

⁵⁰ Ingrid JOHNSON: 'Literature and Multiculturalism.' In Mary Clare Courtland and Trevor J. GAMBELL (eds.): *Young Adolescents Meet Literature*, Vancouver, Pacific Educational Press, 2000, 309.

⁵¹ Chantal BILODEAU has, among other activities, also initiated the *Climate Change Theatre Action* (CCTA), a biennial series of worldwide readings and performances of short climate change plays presented in support of the United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP meetings). www.climatechangetheatreaction.com/ (19.09.2019)

⁵² KANAGAWA: *Where is the Hope?*, 22f.

⁵³ KANAGAWA: *Where is the Hope?*, 22.

to be performed and a live performance involves and includes the audience in what is happening on stage: ‘Theatre, by definition, is the closest to life of all the arts.’⁵⁴

In the modern world of communication people hear about, read about and already see the effects of climate change everywhere on earth, but are they compelled to take action? In *Sila* Bilodeau does not openly ask this question, she rather nudges the audience to feel the audience with the urge to feel affected. ‘We must correct the global imbalances caused by the great disconnections that have grown between us.’⁵⁵ She takes her audience to places where they can understand and catch a glimpse of the interconnectedness of all humanity, especially, when it comes to the effects of climate change. No doubt, *Sila* is an issue play, it is didactic, biased and admonishing, but its characteristics also make it a thought-provoking play. *Sila* puts the arctic and the Inuit on stage to portray some of the complexities inherent in the impact of climate change on people’s lives, not only locally, but worldwide in order to bind them into a community. The Inuit have suffered from the impact of the white man for a long time, but now, with the effects of climate change and governments’ and industry’s growing interest in exploiting the arctic, different world views and values clash and the Inuit seem to be the victim, only a ‘footnote in the history of globalization’⁵⁶.

The challenge mastered in *Sila* by the playwright, actors and puppets is to involve the audience in each character’s world view so completely that, although we don’t necessarily become their allies, we feel their differing loyalties before we can argue with them.⁵⁷

In other words, while science can explore and mediate the big picture, it is the strength of literature to focus on individual tragedy and make it palpable. Science can observe nature, yet, it is unable to draw the necessary conclusions and to control it. A central idea in *Sila* is the holistic view that everything is connected and that ‘one’s very self is substantially interconnected with the world’⁵⁸ Literature, and in this case theatre, can effectively highlight the interconnectedness not only of human beings all over the world but also of humanity and the realm of the non-human. In Inuit mythology, *Sila* means air or breath and reminds us of the life-giving breath of God: “All life is breath. From the original that gave us the miracle of Creation to the world itself, *Sila* wraps all around us.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Hélène BEAUCHAMP: ‘Theatre research as (Theatrical) Practice: Recognizing Theatre for Young Audiences.’ In *Theatre Research in Canada*. 14.2 (Fall 1993), 193.

⁵⁵ Sheila WATT-CLOUTIER: ‘epigraph,’ quoted in Bilodeau: *Sila*, at the beginning of the book.

⁵⁶ WATT-CLOUTIER: *The Right to Be Cold*, 2018, 323.

⁵⁷ *Artscope Magazine*: www.thearcticcycle.org/sila (19.09.2019)

⁵⁸ Stacy ALAIMO: ‘Sustainable This, Sustainable That: New Materialisms, Posthumanism, and Unknown Futures’. In: *PMLA* 127(3), 2012, 561.

⁵⁹ BILODEAU: *Sila*, 43.

Abstract

Climate change has become one of the most urgent challenges today and the Arctic is one of the first places that is visibly affected. The Inuit have lived there for thousands of years, but can their culture survive in a dramatically changing environment? Sila is a play by Chantal Bilodeau that tells the stories of people who are living there and how they deal with the changing face of the north. As an issue play Sila can be a rewarding text to study in the classroom to elucidate the effects of climate change and discuss divergent views and experiences on how to take action.

Keywords

Arctic, Climate Change, Inuit, Issue Play, Political Theatre, EFL-Classroom