

THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED MEETS THE CLIMATE CRISIS!

After many gains over the last few years, including a price on carbon, the election of Doug Ford and his rush to dismantle climate programs has left myself and other ClimateFast members aghast and dismayed. We are now faced with starting all over again. The thought has us saddened and discouraged.

I and the other members found this sense of hopelessness an obstacle at a time when we needed to stay motivated and ramp up our efforts. One of our members suggested an evening of Theatre of the Oppressed as way to explore the power dynamics of the current crisis and express our thoughts and feelings about it.

We learned that Theatre of the Oppressed is a type of participatory theatre where audience and actors work together to explore collective struggles, the history of a conflict, and to imagine ways to transform it. It is popular around the world and we were eager to give it a try.

Twenty of us gathered together on a Wednesday evening under the guidance of Pavla Uppal, theatre artist and facilitator. She first had us work through a series of short, creative, impromptu exercises in small groups involving movement and feeling. The effects were immediate as we got an incredible release from expressing pent-up feelings.

In the second half of the evening we explored personal experiences of being oppressed on the theme of climate. We first acted them out in small groups exploring how each one could be changed into a situation of empowerment. After selecting the one we felt most passionate about, we presented it to the other groups who then selected one for us all to work on. I felt honoured to have my experience chosen.

In 2011, I along with over 100 activists were demonstrating on Parliament Hill against the tar sands and calling on the then Harper government to transition to a renewable energy future. Needless to say the government was not happy and decided to have us arrested.

I and the others were brought over right next to the statues of the 5 women who won the person's case in 1927 to be fingerprinted and processed. It was watershed experience, as I stepped over the line, taking a stand for a sustainable future.

But I had no real tangible evidence of that moment, as no one had taken a photo of me! As an activist, I was sad that my actions, which required some courage, were not recorded. It was something that has sat with me ever since.

Our small group presented a tableau of the moment where I was arrested with a police officer holding my arm and line of activists behind. The audience was then invited to come up and make changes to our tableau. One moved the officer's hand connecting him with the activists, and another put a halo over the mediator symbolizing a transformation. After the audience had finished changing our tableau into a scene of empowerment, they acted the role of reporters and photographers and took our pictures and interviewed us.

It was a fun experience for everyone and in a deeper way allowed each of us to get a creative release for what was for many a painful experience. For me, I found it to be a healing experience. At the time of the arrest, I felt that the state was naming me as a criminal - and not the polluting companies. Now, I was able to imagine a different ending, one that represented the way it should be.



You can see how much fun we had in our smiles in the photo we took at the end of the workshop. Pavla Uppal is standing to the right of the flipchart stand. The question on the flipchart was one of the ones we considered in the workshop: what is my role in the struggle to act on climate change?

Many thanks to Pavla for her brilliant facilitation of this workshop. You can reach Pavla at her website: pavlauppal.com

We plan to use this model of workshop in some of the community tours we are planning for next spring and fall throughout Ontario as part of the Community Futures Tour project in development.