

(Not) Knowing Where It Ends: Performing Non-Knowledge on Stage in Plays by Alice Birch and Finegan Kruckemeyer

Rebekka Rohleder

What has not yet happened is not an object of certain knowledge. After all, scientific knowledge about the future can only exist as knowledge of probabilities. Yet fictional narratives of the future function as a form of knowledge in their own right, and as a way of exploring the relationship of knowledge and non-knowledge. In this article, I want to look at the way such fictions of the future are represented and performed in two stage plays, both of them recent, and both of them concerned with the actions and, in particular, the refusals to act that result from uncertainties and (presumed) certainties about the future, and the normative assumptions that accompany these actions and refusals. The first of these plays is Alice Birch's *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017), which subdivides both the stage and the printed page into three temporal levels which present the stories of women in three generations of the same family. In the last of these strands, which is set in a near future not very different from the present, the creation of certainty over her own future becomes central to the protagonist's desire to gain control over her own story and avoid the (presumed) patterns set by her mother and grandmother. The other play is Finegan Kruckemeyer's *Hibernation* (2021), which opens up a dystopian scenario set in another, altogether more catastrophic, near future in which humankind, unable to agree on any other way of preventing a likely further descent into climate catastrophe, decides to go into regular hibernation in order to give the planet time to recover. But then they go on exactly like before the rest of the time. In both cases, taking action against non-knowledge of the future results in a refusal or multiple refusals to act.

The two plays organise their engagement with non-knowledge around two (unstable) oppositions: one between knowledge and non-knowledge, and another between action and non-action. In the way in which the plays address the audience, however, each one privileges one of those oppositions. In the case of Birch's play, the audience is mainly led to reflect on the limits of its own and the characters' knowledge on mental illness, heredity, and motherhood. In the case of Kruckemeyer's play, the audience is rather reminded of its own refusals to act when faced with the knowledge it does have (but may be actively ignoring) about the causes and likely the further development of global warming.

This article will thus look at the ways in which the plays work with both theatrical forms of non-knowledge and the relationships between the characters' and audiences' scientific knowledge and non-knowledge about questions related to mental health and reproduction in the case of Birch's play, and the capabilities of medicine as well as solutions to climate change in the case of Kruckemeyer's play. Since this is an article about plays which think about these forms of scientific non-knowledge, its main concern is with contemporary culture's representation(s) of such scientific non-knowledge.

To address these issues I will use approaches that look at the social constructions and functions of varieties of non-knowledge, but I will simultaneously also approach them from the perspective of genre, specifically the transmission of information and the representation of action and uncertainty in drama. With the help of these approaches, which look at non-knowledge as a social as well as a literary

construct, I will show that the plays use non-knowledge as a social category in its own right, which is intertwined with, and constitutes, power asymmetries and social norms.

The two plays under discussion are both examples of internationally acclaimed recent Anglophone theatre that has an interest in the near future in conjunction with scientific non-knowledge. I first saw both at the *Deutsches Schauspielhaus* [German Theatre] Hamburg, where *Anatomy* premiered in October 2019¹, and *Hibernation* in January 2023. In addition to the printed play texts, which are my main source for the readings proposed below, I can therefore also draw on the experience of seeing them performed, albeit in German translation. This is particularly interesting for *Anatomy*, where the first German performance in Hamburg was directed by Katie Mitchell, who had already been the director of the play's first performance in English in 2017, and whose theatre has been seen as an experimental setup that is itself a "practice of research" (Roesner 103) and thus inherently concerned with knowledge and non-knowledge.

Not Knowing / Not Acting

Knowledge and non-knowledge are well-recognised as crucial elements of theatre. The transmission of information between characters among themselves and between characters and audience creates situations in which non-knowledge is made obvious to the audience as a temporary state that needs to be overcome, or at least as one that makes a lack of information visible. Such a discrepancy of information enables dramatic irony and deception plots (Pfister 49-57; Nünning and Nünning 90-91). Not knowing things about the world of the play, at least temporarily, is thus an important element of a stage play, for both audience and characters. Indeed, for much of the time in a play, there are different levels of knowledge – and there is, thus, necessarily non-knowledge. Here, non-knowledge becomes visible and significant as the recognisable absence of a knowledge that others possess.

But non-knowledge does not have to function exclusively as the absence of knowledge on the theatre stage either. Not all situations of non-knowledge in a play are necessarily resolved on stage – or at all. *Anatomy* and *Hibernation* do resolve some but not all information deficits between audience and characters. As we will see below, even though the character Bonnie in *Anatomy* craves certainty, the audience cannot be sure that the premise on which she bases her solution is correct – whereas audiences of *Hibernation* can arguably see with much more clarity than any single character on their own can that the play's central scheme is a bad idea. And this is where other forms and uses of non-knowledge come into play.

After all, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick noted in 1990, it may be useful to think of ignorance as "a plethora of *ignorances*" (8), which do not have to "obey identical laws identically or follow the same circulatory paths at the same pace" as forms of knowledge (8). One such type of ignorance can be captured by her observation that, under certain circumstances, ignorance can in fact be power: that "[i]gnorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons" (4). This is in Kosofsky Sedgwick's examples, specifically the (wilful) ignorance of those who are already relatively powerful and privileged. The discussion of ignorance comes in the Introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet* and thus in a discussion of forms of knowledge and their political (including gender related) implications, since, as Kosofsky Sedgwick observes, there are "ignorance effects" which can be harnessed, licensed, and regulated on a mass scale for striking

enforcements – perhaps especially around sexuality” (5). The observation is, however, also open to other fields in which power asymmetries in a society play a role.

The observation that there are many types of non-knowledge has more recently been explored in a number of publications that have developed typologies of these forms and their functions. Robert Proctor has distinguished between different cultural concepts of ignorance: ignorance as a “native state” (4), a void that needs to be filled with knowledge; ignorance as a selective choice (“passive” ignorance, 6); strategic, actively fostered ignorance, e.g. through the keeping of secrets (8). Proctor also explores the idea of “virtuous ignorance” (20): of justifiable forms of ignorance that protect privacy or avoid forms of knowledge or methods of arriving at them that are regarded as objectionable, while the norms that govern the limits of such virtuous ignorance in a society are subject to continual redefinition (see also Kempner; Smithson). A. J. Agnolo, who follows Proctor’s categorisation of native, passive, and active ignorance, thus understands ignorance as the result of activities: something that is made rather than simply a given (5-6). Similarly, Thomas Kirsch and Roy Dilley look at ignorance, in their case from the perspective of anthropology, as “not simply the absence of, or a gap in, knowledge [but] a social fact” (15). As a social fact and the result of various types of activities, non-knowledge functions as a site of social norms and their renegotiation or enforcement: as “part of [...] an economy of ignorance” (15). This economy of ignorance is something that I want to observe in the two plays.

It is important here that non-knowledge, as a social fact, too, needs to be differentiated, as Peter Wehling observed in 2006 in a work on the sociology of non-knowledge, since, as he explains, the social consequences of wilful ignorance will differ from those of unintended ignorance, and society tends to differentiate between non-knowledge that is seen as unavoidable and that which could easily be avoided, as well as that which is only temporary, as opposed to that which is seen as impossible to overcome. However, the point of this differentiation, as Wehling observes, is that these types of knowledge are all themselves social constructs and diagnosing one or the other is itself an act with a social function (30).

On the theatre stage, those instances where non-knowledge is not simply resolved are of particular interest for its function as a site of the renegotiation or enforcement of social norms. In order for this to work, the audience needs to be aware of someone’s continuing non-knowledge: its own or that of the characters, or both. It will be seen below that the two plays under discussion are concerned with such an awareness as well as with the production of non-knowledge.

The other significant opposition for the two plays is the one between action and inaction, specifically about problematics that are also associated with different forms of non-knowledge. The two questions are thus connected. Action on the theatre stage is of course a constitutive element of drama. Yet, the actions that are central to the two plays are also political in the sense in which Hannah Arendt discusses action in *The Human Condition*: as ways of setting something irreversible in motion without the ability to know the consequences in advance (188-92). This political status of action is at the same time its connection to non-knowledge. In her book, Arendt distinguishes action from labour – necessary to acquire the non-permanent necessities of life – and work – the creation of durable objects that can be used rather than consumed. In contrast to these two forms of doing something, action takes place in the political sphere and has permanent but unforeseeable consequences. It is thus always already connected to non-knowledge – and, as Arendt also points out, it can be

imitated on the theatre stage, which makes theatre as a cultural form inherently political (181-88).

This connection creates another link between theatre and non-knowledge, since the theatre imitates actions, the consequences of which are of necessity unknown and unknowable in advance. On stage, audiences can witness one set of possible consequences of an action in so far as a play uses action as a starting point of its plot. On the other hand, action performed at the end of a play has consequences that remain unknowable for the audience as well as the characters. Both plays under discussion prominently use the possibility of action as an element of the conclusion of the play after already having shown the audience the consequences of actions that were taken earlier in, or before, the play.

This openness ties in with recent discussions of the utopian potential of drama and the theatre, even in its apocalyptic forms. Thus, Siân Adiseshiah insists on the "co-creation" (160) of a shared world in the social setting of the theatre, which has the potential to explore the "utopian unpredictability of unknown futures" (167). And while Adiseshiah tends to dismiss present-day dystopian drama of the kind to which *Hibernation* belongs as "a staple of subsidized theatre venues associated with new writing" (4), Dan Rebellato reads exactly such plays as "a constructive response [...] to a key feature of contemporary neoliberal capitalism: its totalizing absorption of realism" (par. 38). There is thus an insistence on an open future, which cannot yet be known, and which therefore carries utopian potential through its unknowable nature. An insistence on non-knowledge can even open up a utopian potential in the theatre.

The Need to Know Where It Ends

Alice Birch's *Anatomy* consists in three temporal strands which are printed next to each other in the play text: the stories of Carol (column A), Anna (Carol's daughter, column B), and Bonnie (Anna's daughter, column C). Most scenes have the three columns set at different moments in time and are centred on one of the three protagonists. Some near the beginning and end of the play have only two columns or only one because they do not feature all three protagonists: scene 1 only features Carol's column A, scene 2 only Carol's column A and Anna's column B, scenes 3-14 have all three columns. In the last two scenes, 15 and 16, the process at the beginning is reversed: Carol's column A is absent from scene 15 on, and Anna's column B is also absent in scene 16, in which only Bonnie's column C remains. In the printed text, in which the columns are marked with letters and each column in each scene has a heading, the play insists on how interlinked they (and consequently, the characters' lives) are: the column letters are repeated in the first letters of each name (but in a different order), and the one-word column headings (such as "Hospital", "Doctor", "Picnic") are repeated across columns, but never in the same scene.

The printed text does not say when each scene is set but makes it clear from biographical detail that the columns are set at different moments in time (e.g., when the child from one column appears as a grown woman in the next). However, Katie Mitchell's 2017 production of the play at the Royal Court Theatre in London (and also her 2019 production at *Deutsches Schauspielhaus* in Hamburg) marked them with years and thus put Bonnie's story in the future, while having the scenes that are printed in parallel columns in the play text acted simultaneously on stage. A review of the Royal Court production shows photos of one moment where Carol's story is set in 1973, Anna's in 1998, and Bonnie's in 2033, and of another with Carol's in 1990, Anna's in 2004, and Bonnie's in 2041 (Boles). That said, Bonnie's future setting does not imply that the world depicted in the play is different from that of the first

audiences' present. It does not feature any technology not in existence in 2017, nor a different political system. It is thus not interested in the conventions of dystopian theatre but remains recognisably and convincingly familiar – with Bonnie working in a hospital and facing problems with understaffing and disgruntled patients; with a relationship to be navigated and a house to be sold. The future setting essentially only functions to show Bonnie as an adult in a senior role at work without pushing her grandmother's story too far back in time. All three storylines are thus set in a world relatively familiar to the audience, while showing the experience of three different generations. At the same time, the unchanged future also contributes to a sense of stagnation that arguably resonates with the play's central themes of motherhood in a patriarchal society and (inherited) depression.

In accordance with the play's structural principles, scene 15, the penultimate scene, features only columns B and C for Anna and Bonnie; Carol's storyline has ended with a young Anna being informed of her mother's suicide in the previous scene. Scene 15 is Anna's last scene, in which she eventually also kills herself. Bonnie, who is a baby at the time Anna's scene 15 is set, also appears as an adult in her own column C in scene 15, and this column is, for this scene, all about non-knowledge. In it, Bonnie speaks to Diane, another doctor, about wanting sterilization. Non-knowledge works on different levels in their interaction. First of all, there is Diane's stated non-knowledge that is visible in the questions she asks about Bonnie's relationship status, sexuality, and motivations for wanting sterilization. She starts out by asking Bonnie if she is "in a relationship at present", which Bonnie answers with "[n]o relationship", which leads Diane to comment that she is "a bit confused" (Birch 231). Then she starts again with "[i]s there a reason you're concerned about becoming pregnant at the moment" and, when Bonnie answers this question with "[n]o" as well, she suggests counselling (235), which Bonnie, who repeatedly states that she does not want counselling, takes as another request for an explanation, which she duly offers in response. Some of the answers to Diane's questions are already known to the audience, which has seen Bonnie's previous relationship end. Others, such as that she does not want counselling, are not known to the audience either. Diane's requests for information are thus on one level just that and stand in the service of the transmission of information within the play. On another level, her questions are also a way of asserting her power as a doctor who can withhold her consent to the procedure if Bonnie refuses to answer or gives the wrong answers.

Bonnie's explanation, too, is all about non-knowledge, but here it is non-knowledge of the future that she wishes to replace with certainty. She states that "[i]t's the principle of it. / [...] I need to know that I am where it ends. / [...] I have to know – biologically, completely, with absolute / certainty that I am where it ends. / That there is no further line" (Birch 235). The implication is that she does not have that knowledge at the moment, even though she is in no immediate danger of an unwanted pregnancy. She does not inform Diane, and the audience does not know whether Diane knows, what "it" means. The audience, however, has access to the family history from the other two strands of the play, as a context in which to form a guess what certainty, exactly, it is that Bonnie wants. The "line" in this case is the tradition of the last two generations of women in Bonnie's family suffering severe mental health issues and eventually dying by suicide, a constellation which Anna Harpin, picking up on the term Bonnie uses as well as on the visual arrangement of the three women on stage, calls a "line of inherited, inevitable pain" (198). Bonnie, who does not generally share much information about her own feelings but who appears, on the whole, less troubled than her drug-addicted mother and clinically

depressed grandmother, seems to believe that this tradition would continue if she herself ever became a mother.

On another level, the "line" is also equated with the fishing lines that play a role in all three strands of the play. In her own scene 15, Anna talks to herself as well as to Bonnie as a baby, saying in a sort of negative nursery rhyme: "Hook's gone, / Line's gone" (Birch 232). In scene 9, Carol says about her then young child, Anna, that "She's a line, she's a fish hook round / my middle, pulling me up when I / Want to be Under" (158). There is a line of lines and hooks between the three generations (Fakhrkonandeh and Sümbül 510). In scene 3, the hook is even used without the line, as we are introduced to Bonnie at work, taking care of the hand of a patient, Jo, who has hurt herself with a fishing hook at her own work (Birch 28). Given the addition of the fishing line and hook and their associated ambiguities as something that can hurt, hold, or both, Bonnie's use of the word "line", for that which she wants to put a stop to at the end of the play, is fraught with meaning by the time it happens, but this knowledge on the part of the audience also produces non-knowledge: We cannot be certain that we know what she implies when she refers to a "line", as the line has acquired too many contradictory meanings.

Since Bonnie is a doctor, her (apparent) beliefs on heredity nonetheless have a certain authority within the play. Indeed, critics have tended unquestioningly to discuss her sterilization as a way out of a trap ("Backpages" 288), and as a chance "to alter the hand-me-down dramaturgy of her life" (Harpin 204), despite the fact that the audience never learns if the procedure will take place. However, there is an ambiguity here, which has also been noted, about what problem exactly sterilisation would solve (Fakhrkonandeh and Sümbül 520-21). Since Bonnie does not specify what the "line" is about, of which she wants to know that it ends with her, the audience is thrown back on its own assumptions on whether the problem is, as one critic has put it, "nature, nurture, or social structure" (Matt Trueman, quoted in Fakhrkonandeh and Sümbül 521) – or indeed "all three [...] intertwined" (Fakhrkonandeh and Sümbül 521). As an audience, we cannot be sure about which one of these assumptions holds true in the world of the play since that is not spelled out. However, the play does not leave everything open here as we are likely to transfer any existing assumptions about the real world to that of the play – a transfer prefigured by Birch in an interview published in the *Guardian* just after the play had opened in London. In the interview, Birch states an interest in "whether trauma can be passed on through our DNA; how much is nature and nurture? [...] And [...] how does one break out of that pattern so the cycle doesn't become inevitable?" (Birch, "Interested"). While Birch thus encourages a transfer of the audience's assumptions about the real world to the world of the play, she does not actually offer answers to her questions, either in the interview or in the play. Nonetheless, the play, as directed by Mitchell, has been criticised for suggesting certain answers: for producing, or at least suggesting, a certain type of knowledge by inviting "clichéd modes of viewing" (Harpin 200) which "reproduce an essentialised madness that's safely over there" (Harpin 202).

A lot of things remain in doubt for the audience and can be made more apparently certain through such modes of viewing. We know that both Carol and Anna have mental health issues, both before and after the birth of their respective children; we do not know what causes them for either character. We also do not know if Carol's depression and Anna's drug addiction are meant to be read as essentially the same thing, and whether or not the one is to be regarded as a direct consequence of the other – and if it is, whether that is due to nature or nurture. After all, Carol is both Anna's biological mother and the person who raises her, and whose death has an

impact on her, so it could be read as either or both. We may well bring some knowledge of media or academic discourses around transgenerational trauma to our viewing or reading experience. Birch's interest in inherited trauma comes in the context of a larger debate (see Atkinson). We do not, however, know exactly what Bonnie believes about nature and nurture in this regard since she never explains her own position. We may also bring knowledge of media discourses about women's reproductive rights, and the difficulties which younger women without children of their own face in our world if they want sterilisation, and we can see that Bonnie faces such difficulties, so we do not know if she has a chance of convincing Diane. And, like Diane, we do not know if there is even a risk of Bonnie experiencing an unplanned pregnancy if sterilisation is not an option. After all, the only relationship in which we ever see her is with another woman.

In the end, the one action that we actually see Bonnie performing at the conclusion of the play in scene 16 is selling the family home that she has inherited: the place where she was born, and where her mother grew up and died. She will no longer inhabit this haunted property. That is one certainty created through her actions at the end of the play. Whether she has also been able to gain the certainty that she is now biologically unable to reproduce the cycle of motherhood and mental illness that has characterised the life and death of her mother and grandmother remains outside the audience's knowledge. Critics tend to assume that she does get access to sterilisation (Fakhrkonandeh and Sümbül 521), or at least that "her character is able to redirect linear 'fate' away from simply reproducing for herself the mad scenes enacted by her mother and grandmother" (Harpin 204). However, apart from the sale of the family home, nothing is certain for the audience. We are left with non-knowledge about the future of the character but also invited to consider the limits of our own knowledge about parenthood, family, mental illness, and transgenerational trauma.

Something similar is in fact true of the characters, who all make their reproductive decisions in a situation of non-knowledge. Carol and John decide to have a child together, hoping that this will effect a positive change for Carol; Anna and Jamie do the same, hoping that Anna "might be good at it / Being a mother" (Birch 161). Neither assumption works out. Carol remains depressed throughout her daughter's childhood and kills herself when Anna is a teenager. Anna develops postnatal depression, and there is never a chance to find out whether she "might be good at [...] / Being a mother". Judging from their interaction in scene 14, Bonnie is not impressed with Jamie's performance as a father either. Bonnie herself does not try to improve her life by having a child like the two generations before her did, but, on the contrary, by making a conscious decision not to do so. She is convinced that if she knew "with absolute certainty" that she cannot reproduce she "would feel better, steadier, happier, able to somehow engage with [her] life" (234). At the end of the play, she is alive, but whether she has gained the certainty she wanted, and whether it has had the desired effect if she has gained it, remains unknown. All three generations act under unforeseeable circumstances and under the influence of the actions of previous generations. The audience, who observes the lives of the three generations, sees the unforeseen consequences of the actions Carol and Anna take and is left with Bonnie's actions at the end as another instance of action with unknown consequences. Theatrical non-knowledge thus emphasises the openness of the future, even while other forms of non-knowledge constructed within the play function as social facts in their own right.

Doing Nothing One Can

While *Anatomy* is thus concerned with the characters' actions and refusals to act within the play, Kruckemeyer's *Hibernation* positions itself rather straightforwardly as a play that is meant to promote political and individual action against global warming. It thus falls into the category of "climate theatre", which is theatre that, as Theresa J. May argues, creates an "imaginative partnership" between actors and audience (132) in order to arrive at a new "way-of-knowing" (133) that "expands our capacity to empathise with the experience of others" (133). The director of its first performance in 2021, by the State Theatre Company of South Australia, Mitchell Butel, contextualises *Hibernation* as such in his introduction to the printed text, in which he asks if "theatre [can] effect social change" by offering "a fresh perspective", and warns that political and individual inaction will lead to:

more drought, stress on water resources, unviable agriculture, major conflicts, extreme weather events, species extinction, decreased biodiversity, rapid sea-level rise and coastal inundation, fragmented global communities and a substantial reduction in humanity's health and wellbeing. (vii)

Butel thus positions the play as a call to action taken to (hopefully) avoid such a dystopian scenario. In the play, set in a near future already a little closer to this scenario, the characters try to avoid it by two courses of action which are both marked as problematic. The first is space exploration, with Mars as a "fallback" planet for the moment earth has become uninhabitable (Kruckemeyer 2), which functions as a satirical take on plans for colonisation in space that billionaires, like the owner of SpaceX, frame as utopian and that others might well regard as dystopian rather than utopian. In the play, Emily, the character who first proposes hibernation as an alternative to going on to exploit a different planet, frames what she wants to do as doing "nothing we can" because "the [...] *doing's* been our mistake" (3). However, her proposal, which is adopted as the course of action explored in the play, is not really to do nothing. On the contrary, it is what we see characters around the world doing for the rest of the play, and it does constitute action in the sense specified by Arendt: it has far-reaching and unforeseeable consequences. However, the play's own call to action to the audience is clearly not an injunction to imitate this particular course of action. After all, while the audience may know less about some aspects of the fictional world of the play than the characters do, we know more about the dangers of Emily's approach than the characters seem to want to know. We do not see these characters solving the problems named above; we see them adding another problem and refusing to see it for what it is.

Like column C of *Anatomy*, *Hibernation* is set in a near future that seems relatively familiar. Still, some drastic changes have taken place since the time of the play's first performance in 2021. This makes the close future of the play somewhat familiar from other dystopian cultural texts of the twenty-first century, which have a tendency of placing the dystopian setting both temporally and culturally in close proximity to the audience's world, a tendency that Trish Reid also observes in contemporary dystopian drama which transfers present-day anxieties, including environmental ones to "near-future worlds" (73). Through such a "near-future-world", the audience of *Hibernation* experiences the shock of finding the world drastically altered after only a few years, but in ways which are indeed closely related to the audience's present. We learn that the play's early scenes are set in 2030 (Kruckemeyer 49), and that there have already been "[m]ass food shortages since

'26", with "ghost towns created each week! Vast tracts of farmland that can't hold enough topsoil to grow a bloody thing!" (5) in Australia, where the beginning of the play is set, and water shortages and riots in the U.S. (13-15). These developments are thus envisioned as taking place only five to ten years in the future from the play's first performance. In addition, the stage systematically shows settings around the world in order to emphasise that this is a global crisis, and thus relevant to everyone. Indeed, there is an author's note before the Prologue, specifying that "broad demographics must be present [...] in what is a global exercise" and that "Act Two takes place in the city or town where your production occurs, so as to provide the audience with the sensation of a familiar environment beset by an unfamiliar event" (Butel xiv). The catastrophe is everywhere and thus also close to the audience, wherever they are – geographically as well as historically. At the same time, the Australian setting of the beginning of Act One and the specificity of the effects of climate change in Australia, as listed by a politician in a speech early in the play, is also significant for its engagement with climate change, as Australian literature has a history of engaging with the country's particular vulnerability to its impact (White 557-59).

The play draws on what the audience already knows about the local and global effects of global warming. Yet, in the characters' reaction to this, it also includes elements that are not about the audience's knowledge about the real world. This is true of its central plot element of human hibernation. The play accordingly requires much more time to gradually familiarise the audience with this idea than it needs to recall the audience's pre-existing knowledge of the current and projected future effects of global warming. The plan to "do nothing" (Kruckemeyer 3) is, it turns out, a plan to make it impossible for anyone to do anything for a whole year. This is the speculative element of the play: a gas, originally developed for human hibernation in space on the way to another planet, sends everyone on earth to sleep for a year without affecting anything non-human.

The play's three-act structure corresponds to its use of time to reveal these plans and their effects: Act One is set before hibernation, Act Two during (featuring two characters who are not asleep), and Act Three afterwards in what turns out to be the run-up to another hibernation. Act One, which leads up to the (first) hibernation event, is chronologically the first, but within it, the story is not told chronologically. Through much of Act One, the play text makes a secret of the details of the hibernation plan, which is gradually revealed, engaging with the audience's knowledge of the world of the play and with the limits of this knowledge. Scenes are marked with temporal indications like "H-18 months", which turn out to be temporal markers indicating that a scene is, for instance, set 18 months before the beginning of hibernation. This is something the audience only learns over the course of the first six scenes of the play. Similarly, the policy of making everyone hibernate is first formulated in a written document, which characters read and react to on stage without, at first, revealing its contents to the audience or the readers. Since subsequent scenes are set at different points in time, the characters, too, have more or less knowledge of what is being planned. However, once the audience knows the details of the human hibernation plan, spectators can soon see some of the drawbacks to making all action, even reaction, absolutely impossible for everyone. The play goes on to give us drastic examples of these drawbacks. Thus, at the end of Act One we are told about people being eaten alive by wild animals and dying in natural disasters from which they cannot protect themselves since they cannot wake up on any account (Kruckemeyer 23-24). Equally unsurprisingly we learn in Act Three which is set after hibernation, that humankind does not permanently reduce its CO2 emissions after

waking up from hibernation, and that the exercise, if it is to have any permanent effect, will have to be repeated every few years. In fact, since the Covid lockdowns of 2020 and their positive effects on the environment are a context explicitly called up in the play (11), both characters and audience can draw on their shared knowledge that industry and traffic went back to their previous levels of activity as fast as they could afterwards. The characters ignore this knowledge when they plan for hibernation.

After the year is over, those who do the planning also do not seem to take the trouble to look into the consequences of hibernation in parts of the world other than their own. Thus, they add the wilful ignorance of not looking into the effects of their actions to the play's other form of ignorance, namely ignoring consequences which were easily foreseeable before hibernation. Those in power thus exercise the power of defining something as unknowable, that they have in fact decided not to enquire into, as other characters note. Here, the question of what category of non-knowledge this is emerges as a socially relevant question in the manner proposed by Wehling (30). After hibernation, a Nigerian character discusses the ignorance of the powerful after Lagos has flooded during the year of hibernation and her son has drowned. This character, Chidera, speaks to another character in another country in a video call, asking him if he even knows where Lagos is, and when he admits that he does not, she explains:

It's exactly my point. *The rules for Hibernation* were made in Washington, in Shanghai. In Berlin. And we can point to them on a map. But *the price for Hibernation* – it was paid in Lagos. And no-one knows where to find me. To find me and say sorry to me. (Kruckemeyer 53)

Chidera does not discuss the power structures behind such ignorance, but the audience should be well aware that it is not a law of nature that people can more easily point to some urban centres on a map than to others. Those who are in charge of the planning have not only conveniently forgotten to think about the consequences for people in places like Lagos, but are also protected from any consequences for themselves by their continued convenient ignorance. Here, "[i]gnorance and opacity" do indeed, as Kosofsky Sedgwick observes in another context, "collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons" (4).

On its own, knowledge seems quite powerless in the world of this play. The real inventor of the hibernation plan, Emily, is at first not credited with it, since the politician Warwick takes all the credit, and no one is interested in the knowledge of the select few who are aware whose plan this was. Similarly, a journalist later learns that Warwick does not care about the environment at all and plans to hunt the animals whose populations have recovered during hibernation. He is told by the politician that if he "write[s] any of that in [his] paper", Warwick will simply "deny every fucking word" (Kruckemeyer 58), so this knowledge is useless to the journalist, as it cannot be passed on. Here, Warwick's power equates the power to devalue knowledge and create ignorance. Nor is the journalist's the only example of devalued knowledge. The play also features a government adviser who is in charge of official announcements about the second round of hibernation and who is well aware of some of the consequences of the first round but is still unable to escape the momentum of the movement Emily has created. He is even aware of the story of Chidera, although he also proves her point by not remembering where she lives, describing it as "Africa somewhere" (62).

Emily, however, equates knowledge and power, declaring at the end of the play that she knows "lots of stuff now" since she is "powerful now" (59). Consequently, she frames the next round of hibernation as a test intended to generate knowledge about the quality of governments, since "[i]f your systems are weak [...]. Then buildings fall. Then people die. And the survivors will be angry. And systems – fundamentally flawed systems – will topple" (60). Hibernation is supposed to generate knowledge, and this knowledge is supposed to lead to action. That said, the play does not support Emily in this assumption. After all, her own system is marked as fundamentally flawed, and people still put it into action a second time.

The audience is in a position to see the flaws very easily: We are shown scenes taking place in many different places and featuring characters with various perspectives on the hibernation scheme, so we are made aware of these perspectives as well as the fact that those in power do not take the trouble to enquire into them. As an audience, we thus have a panoramic view of hibernation and its consequences. We can see where the characters go wrong. We can also see that those characters who are in charge know enough to be able to see that they should not be doing what they do – and that they do it, nonetheless. While these characters can still plead ignorance in front of other characters, the audience cannot do the same. The audience cannot feel superior to the characters for very long, however. After all, while we can see that what they are doing does not solve the problem, we can also see that we are faced with the same problem of climate catastrophe that they are trying to address – and not solving it either. If the world of the play is where it is in its early scenes, then the knowledge that was available for a long time prior to that has not led to any meaningful action.

Emily's simplistic translation of knowledge into action and power is thus marked as flawed, not only within the world of the play but also within our own. What the play explores and performs is essentially uncertainty: about its own impact on the audience as well as about the impact of any possible actions of each individual audience member. The first director's introduction to the play text appropriately opens with questions and uncertainty ("Can art, can theatre effect social change? [...] Maybe. Maybe not." Butel vii). If the theatre works to create an "imaginative partnership" between everyone in the room (May 132), and thus also a "utopian space of coming together" even when the plot is dystopian (Tönnies and Voigts 2), then the community created in this space is one that can only be certain that it is uncertain about the future and about their own part in it. Conversely, not acting will certainly have unforeseeable consequences, just as much as the actions taken in the play do. Here, it is again not possible to know where anything ends.

Conclusion

Both plays thus explore various forms of non-knowledge and open up the question which forms of non-knowledge we see as essential to the problem of action within the world of the play as well as that of the audience. It matters if non-knowledge is avoidable or unavoidable, whether it is uncertainty about the future or the result of neglecting to inquire into the past or present; whether it is a way of exercising power over others or an aid to questioning the status quo, and it matters who gets to decide which category different kinds of non-knowledge belong to. In *Anatomy*, we are faced with a character who acts on the basis of what she seems to think that she knows, but spectators do not know if she is correct about what she thinks she knows – or even what exactly she thinks she knows. In *Hibernation*, the audience may consistently know more about the consequences of the characters' actions than many of the

characters themselves, but this only serves to show the audience what it does not know about the consequences of its own actions or refusals to act. The plays thus draw attention to the uses of non-knowledge as a "social fact" (Kirsch and Dilley 15) and as a site of the renegotiation of social norms through their various forms of the (theatrical) production of non-knowledge. In both plays, knowing where an action ends is not possible, but it is not therefore impossible to act.

Notes

1. The *Schauspielhaus* homepage currently (17 Jan. 2025) gives the premiere as October 2020 (<https://schauspielhaus.de/stuecke/anatomie-eines-suizids>), but this is incorrect.

Works Cited

- Adishesiah, Siân. *Utopian Drama: In Search of a Genre*. Methuen Drama, 2024.
- Agnolo, A.J. "Ignorance." *Miseducation: A History of Ignorance-Making in America and Abroad*, edited by A.J. Agnolo, Johns Hopkins UP, 2016, pp. 1-10.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. U of Chicago P, 1958.
- Atkinson, Meera. *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.
- "Backpages 30.2" *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2020, pp. 287-96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2020.1733288>.
- Birch, Alice. "Alice Birch: I'm Interested in Whether Trauma Can Be Passed on through DNA." Interview by Liz Hoggard. *The Guardian*, 04 Jun. 2017.
- . *Anatomy of a Suicide*. Oberon Books, 2017.
- Boles, William C. "Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare and *Anatomy of a Suicide* by Alice Birch. Performance Review." *Miranda* 15, 06 Oct. 2017, <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.11025>.
- Butel, Mitchell. "Introduction." *Hibernation*, by Finegan Kruckemeyer, Currency P, 2022, pp. vii-x.
- Fakhrkonandeh, Alireza, and Yiğit Sümbül. "I am underneath and oxygen is running out': Suicide as Genetically Inherited or as the Melancholy Identification with the Suicidal Mother in Alice Birch's *Anatomy of a Suicide*." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2021, pp. 490-527, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2021.0035>.
- Harpin, Anna. "'You Were an O. Your Black O in the Middle of Your Face': Madness and Catastrophe in Katie Mitchell's *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide*." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2020, pp. 193-210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2020.1732954>.
- Kempner, Joanna. "The Production of Forbidden Knowledge." *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, edited by Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey, Routledge, 2015, pp. 77-83.
- Kirsch, Thomas G., and Roy Dilley. "Regimes of Ignorance: An Introduction." *Regimes of Ignorance: Anthropological Perspectives on the Production and Reproduction of Non-Knowledge*, edited by Thomas G. Kirsch and Roy Dilley, berghahn, 2015, pp. 1-30.
- Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. U of California P, 1990.
- Kruckemeyer, Finegan. *Hibernation*. Currency P, 2022.
- May, Theresa J. "Climate Theatre: Enacting Possible Futures." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*, edited by Adeline Jones Putra and Kelly Sultzbach, Cambridge UP, 2022, pp. 131-45.
- Nünning, Vera, and Ansgar Nünning. *An Introduction to the Study of English and American Literature*. PONS, 2014.
- Pfister, Manfred. *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, translated by John Halliday. Cambridge UP, 1993.

- Proctor, Robert. "Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study)." *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, edited by Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, Stanford UP, 2008, pp. 1-36.
- Rebellato, Dan. "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Theatre: British Drama, Violence and Writing." *Sillages Critiques* no. 22, 2017, n. pag, <https://doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.4798>
- Reid, Trish. "The Dystopian Near-Future in Contemporary British Drama." *JCDE* vol. 7, no. 1, 2019, pp. 72-88, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2019-0006>.
- Roesner, David. "'An entirely new art form: Katie Mitchells intermediale Bühnen-Experimente [Katie Mitchell's Intermedial Stage Experiments]" *Forum modernes Theater* [Modern Theatre Forum] vol. 24, no. 2, 2009, pp. 130-121.
- Smithson, Michael. "Afterword: Ignorance Studies: Interdisciplinarity, Multidisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity." *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, edited by Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey, Routledge, 2015, pp. 385-99.
- Tönnies, Merle, and Eckhart Voigts. "Anger, Anxiety and Hope: The Complicit Realities and Engaged/ing Communities of Contemporary British Dys/Utopian Theatre." *Twenty-First Century Anxieties: Dys/Utopian Spaces and Contexts in Contemporary British Theatre*, edited by Merle Tönnies and Eckhart Voigts, DeGruyter, 2023, pp. 1-10.
- Wehling, Peter. *Im Schatten des Wissens? Perspektiven der Soziologie des Nichtwissens*. [In the Shadow of Knowledge: Perspectives from the Sociology of Not Knowing]. UVK, 2006.
- White, Jessica. "Uncertain Futures: Climate Fiction in Australian Literature." *The Cambridge History of the Australian Novel*, edited by David Carter, Cambridge UP, 2023, pp. 557-574.