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**Theatre as a Platform for Ecological Critique: A Focus on *Gặp nhau cuối năm***

**Abstract I:** Due sono gli obiettivi perseguiti da questo studio sull'ecoteatro con un focus sul Vietnam. In primo luogo, discute di come il teatro possa affrontare preoccupazioni ecologiche, utilizzando antiche fonti culturali. In secondo luogo, si concentra su come queste preoccupazioni sono drammatizzate nella commedia satirica *Gặp nhau cuối năm* (*Raduno di fine anno*) trasmessa per la prima volta dalla televisione vietnamita nel 2003. La principale questione teorica è come e se il teatro, e in particolare il teatro televisivo, possa aumentare la consapevolezza della crisi climatica e generare un cambiamento culturale. Mentre affronta la crisi, il teatro non mira necessariamente a rompere le convenzioni. Può giocare con strategie retoriche per trasmettere la complessità delle interazioni tra umano e natura. Può stimolare fattori internalisti e motivazioni intrinseche che portano all'azione sociale e politica individuale o collettiva. *Gặp nhau cuối năm* è una riscrittura della leggenda dei tre Dei della Cucina che supervisionano ogni famiglia e presentano il loro rapporto all'Imperatore di Giada, il sovrano del mondo. Usando la satira e la parodia per trasmettere elogi e critiche, lo spettacolo stimola la riflessione sulla crisi sociale e ambientale e l'occasionale indifferenza degli Dei. Considerando l'impatto che la TV ha sull'opinione pubblica in Vietnam e la popolarità raggiunta da *Gặp nhau cuối năm*, si comprende come il teatro possa unire intrattenimento e critica sociale per rispondere alle questioni ambientali, stimolare il pensiero ecologico e generare un cambiamento.

**Abstract II:** This article on ecotheatre with a focus on Vietnam pursues two goals. Firstly, it discusses how theatre can address ecological concerns, utilising ancient cultural sources. Secondly, it focuses on how these concerns are dramatised in the satirical comedy *Gặp nhau cuối năm* (*Year-End Gathering*), first broadcast on Vietnamese television in 2003. The main theoretical question is how and whether theatre, and specifically television theatre, can raise awareness of the climate crisis and generate a cultural shift. While addressing the crisis, theatre does not necessarily aim at breaking conventions. It can play with rhetorical strategies to convey the complexity of the interactions between humans and nature. It can stimulate internalist factors and intrinsic motivations leading to individual or collective social and political action. *Gặp nhau cuối năm* is a rewriting of the legend of the three Kitchen Gods who supervise every household and present their report to the Jade Emperor, the ruler of the world. Using satire and parody to convey praise and critique, the play stimulates

reflection on the social and environmental crisis and occasional indifference of the Gods. Considering the impact that the TV has on public opinion in Vietnam and the popularity reached by *Gặp nhau cuối năm*, it becomes clear that theatre encapsulating entertainment and critique can respond to environmental concerns, stimulate ecological thought and generate change.

**Keywords:** Environmental crisis, theatre, *Gặp nhau cuối năm*, entertainment, commitment, public awareness.

### Theatre for the Environment

Environmental impacts are the aggregate of actions of individuals (Ehrlich & Holdren 1971). Recent enquiries into the communication of ecology have shown that the arts can deliver a powerful call to environmental action. They can enhance knowledge of and empathy towards nature and stimulate change of behaviour for sustainable consumption (Curtis *et al.* 2014). The stage is being employed as a platform for ecological discourse and contemporary theatre can be envisioned as a form of ecological doing, because in contemporary practice and theory, “[it] is seen as a predominantly performative medium, [...] with the result that the fundamental concern of scholars is no longer to decipher what the theatre text means but rather to focus on what the theatre medium ‘does’” (Lavery 2016: 230). Ecotheatre is similar to the traditional theatre, as it employs its constitutive features and does not necessarily aim at breaking with theatrical conventions. It plays with all the devices to convey the complexity of the interactions between humans and nature.

Theatre can respond to the environmental crisis by revisiting ancient legends, myths, and folklore, which are already familiar to people of all ages. The popular satirical comedy *Year-End Gathering* streamed on every Lunar New Year’s Eve exemplifies the revival of traditional legends in Vietnamese theatre. The show attracted a large number of viewers and in 2003 it proved to be a great success as it borrowed the legend of *The Kitchen Gods* to discuss the most prominent social problems of the year, among which ecological concerns. Its popularity raises the question as to whether a Vietnamese theatre show based on an ancient legend can raise ecological awareness and willingness to act, considering that in Southeast Asian countries people are not inclined to practice the 3Rs – Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle.

### Asian Theatre and Ecological Critique

‘Asian theatre’ is a wide term, especially because it depends on the definition of Asia and on how the Middle East relates to South, East, and Southeast Asia (Liu 2016). A number of countries in South, East, and especially Southeast Asia, where Vietnam is located, share certain similarities with each other, especially with the Indian theatre (Chaitanya 2013; Tàì 2014). Chaitanya highlights similar basic dramatic principles and conventions in Far East countries like China or Japan and India, explains that high stylisation creates an aesthetic distance between the performers and the audience comparable to the *Verfremdungseffekt*, and indicates the features of the traditional Asian theatre:

- Elements such as dances, music, poetry, and the stage installation contribute to the plays' theme and aesthetic.
- The script is not as important as the harmony between sung words and gestures.
- Unlike the linear plot of Western dramas, each part of an Asian drama can be performed as a separate play.
- Religion is at the root of Asian theatre.
- Gestures and appearance such as masks or make-up define groups of characters.
- Unlike the popular chronological order and switches of location in Western dramas, the conventional act division in Asian dramas depends more on thoughts or moods.
- Shifting of space might be more metaphysical than physical. A trip might only happen in the mind.
- Speech is conventional, poetic and musical.
- Most Asian plays are temple plays and thus most likely comedies, with elements of sentimentality and irony (Chaitanya 2013).

Verbal play, the most popular form of performance in modern Asian theatre, shows similarities with Western versions (Wetmore *et al.* 2014), especially in countries colonised by Western countries, such as Indochina (Tài 2014). Many Asian stages now also perform Western plays, including verbal and Broadway musical plays in their own language (Wetmore *et al.* 2014).

Throughout history, Vietnamese culture has developed more than one form of traditional theatre performances. Besides verbal theatre plays, other forms that incorporate acting, singing, dancing, and folk music performances are well known to Vietnamese people. Not only do these forms of art often tell stories based on folklore and legends, but they have also benefited from people's strong belief in them. A celebration held from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of August in the Lunar calendar honours the ancestor of theatre (Đặng 2018), which attracts a large number of artists. However, at the turn of the century, theatre seemed to involve traditional culture less frequently. Plays focused on new themes such as individuals in the new society after the Vietnam war, or the war itself. Folklores and legends remained popular in plays for young audiences. Ecotheatre is a new concept and besides exhibitions, art installations, short movies about the environment (Vũ 2020), only few projects have focused on ecotheatre (Thu 2015; Lê 2018).

### 21<sup>st</sup>-century Vietnam

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnam had fully recovered from the war and was trying to catch up as a late starter in the fast-paced development. After the initiation of Đổi Mới in 1986, the national reform with the goal of establishing a socialist-oriented economy, Vietnam rapidly became a member of ASEAN in 1995, of APEC in 1998, and then WTO in 2006. The country has opened its door to foreign investors and encouraged private sectors to take part in the economy. The result is clearly shown in the high GDP growth rate over a decade (6.5-7%), and the priority placed in manufacturing, mining, services, and agriculture sectors (Bùi & Bùi 2017). While the life of the Vietnamese people has improved significantly compared to the period right after the war, urbanisation has caused deforestation, pollution, social crimes. People flock to big cities in search of job

opportunities, leading to serious air pollution; factories dump waste into water and pollute rivers and the sea; tourism has devised strategies to attract tourists, but also posing threats to culture and the environment.

To tackle these problems, the government has tried to involve organisations and individuals. Among the attempts to raise awareness and encourage people to take action, theatre seems to play a promising role. From 2003 to 2019, *Gặp Nhau Cuối Năm* (*Year-End Gathering*), better known as *Táo Quân* (*The Kitchen Gods*) was broadcasted on Vietnam Television (VTV) every Lunar New Year's Eve. Rooted in the legend of the Kitchen Gods who every year visit the Jade Emperor to present their report, the show effectively mentioned important events, illustrated problems, and sometimes proposed solutions. The satirical humour of the show attracted large audiences: while small children simply enjoyed the enthusiasm of the cast and their parody songs, elder viewers were encouraged to reflect. Throughout their seventeen years of streaming, many social problems were dramatised, allowing the show to provide entertainment as well as serious reflection. Its success suggests an opportunity for theatre to become more deeply involved with social issues and shows that the arts can stimulate social awareness.

Vietnamese people do celebrate the Western New Year, but the most important festival is Tết, which is New Year according to the lunar calendar. The preparation may start about one month before the Lunar New Year's Eve and during the last lunar month of the old year, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December is an important date. On this day, three spiritual figures known as Táo Quân – the Kitchen Gods ride their carps to heaven and meet the Jade Emperor. They must report to his majesty everything that has happened in the mortal world during the year. The legend of the Kitchen Gods is told not only in Vietnam but also in China and Korea and varies from country to country, yet the one thing in common is that the Gods all have one duty, that is to answer to the ruler of the world. The story of the Kitchen God(s) from China and Vietnam shares more cultural similarities than the one from Korea. While many Koreans believe that their Kitchen God is a female deity named Jowanggaksi or Jowanghalmæ (Kendall 1987; The Korean Foundation 2017), Buddhists worship a couple or a male god. Jowanggaksi takes the form of a white bowl of water that is placed in the kitchen. In China, however, the popular version of the Kitchen God tale is of a man named Zhang who neglected his wife (Chang 2000; Winter 2016). After having been blind and poor as a consequence of karma for this bad deed, he re-encountered his wife, who treated him nicely. Feeling ashamed for what he did, Zhang jumped into the stove and died. The Jade Emperor then made him the Kitchen God. Every lunar year on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, every household takes his paper figure down from the kitchen shelf, put some sugar or molasses in his mouth to encourage sweet words when he reports to the Jade Emperor, and then burns this figure as a ritual to send him off (Lufkin 2016; Zhao 2015; Wong *et al.* 2012). In Vietnam, legend has it that the Kitchen God used to be a mortal man named Trọng Cao:

Once upon a time, there was a couple named Trọng Cao and Thị Nhi. They often quarrelled over domestic affairs. One day the husband beat his wife. Thị Nhi ran away from home and became homeless. Eventually, she met a man named Phạm Lang and married him. In the meantime, Trọng Cao lost his fortune and became a



beggar. One day he came to beg at the house of Phạm Lang. The lady of the house recognized him as her former husband and gave him food and drink. While they were talking over old times, Phạm Lang returned from a hunting trip. Afraid that Phạm Lang would misunderstand, Thị Nhi hid her former husband in the haystack. Phạm Lang had brought back some game meats and burned the haystack to roast them. He unwittingly burned Trọng Cao before Thị Nhi could explain the situation. Thị Nhi realized her mistake and jumped into the burning haystack to die with her former husband. Because he loved his wife, Phạm Lang also leapt into the flames to be with her. Thus, all three died in the fire (Trần 2018: 99).

As told in Nguyễn Đông Chi's *Kho Tàng Truyện Cổ Tích Việt Nam (Collection of Vietnamese Fairy Tales, 2000)*, another popular version of this legend tells the story of a poor couple. When the husband decided to seek fortune away, he told his wife to wait three years and then get married to someone else. Three years later, he went back and found that his wife had remarried, as promised. He immediately wanted to go away, while the new husband wanted her to leave him and go back to her previous husband. Thus, the ex-husband hung himself to end the suffering and when the wife heard the news, she drowned herself in the pond, and the new husband took some poison and died. When they went to the Underworld, Diêm Vương (Yama), the supervisor of all dead souls, asked for the reason, was moved by the story, and turned them into Kitchen Gods who would always stay in the kitchen. In both versions, the three Gods are described as three legs of the stove that cannot be separated. Other variants of the legend involve a servant in the house of the new husband. He either tried to help the new husband save the other two and ended up getting caught in the fire or felt guilty for setting fire to the haystack and followed his master. The servant is transformed into a ball of clay to keep the fire burning in the stove, fulfilling his role as a helper to the three Gods (Nguyễn 2000).

Also in his book, Trần explains that these three people then were assigned by Ngọc Hoàng (the Jade Emperor) to be "the three-in-one Kitchen God but each with a different responsibility: Phạm Lang was to be Thổ Công (Duke of the Soil), caring for the kitchen; Trọng Cao was to be Thổ Địa (Earth Deity), caring for the home; and Thị Nhi was to be Thổ Kỳ (local guard), caring for the household transaction" (Trần 2018: 99). In some other sources, for example the *Encyclopaedia of New Year's Holiday Worldwide*, the Kitchen Gods are addressed as three separate figures (Crump 2016). Here the plural form will be adopted to avoid confusion, especially in the following part about their figures in the television play.

The Kitchen Gods supervise all households and protect them from harmful spirits. While the Chinese smear sweets on the Kitchen Gods' mouths, the Vietnamese buy paper carp or real carp for the Gods because this type of fish is their means of transport. To help the Gods reach the Jade Emperor in time, they burn the paper carp and release the real carp into rivers. The similarity between Chinese and Vietnamese culture is the feast they organise during that day as a tribute to the Gods who then fly to the sky and report to the Jade Emperor what each household has done in that year. This ancient feast during the Lunar New Year in both countries should not be considered as an enticement but an expression of gratitude to the Gods for having supported their household for the whole year. Đinh Hồng

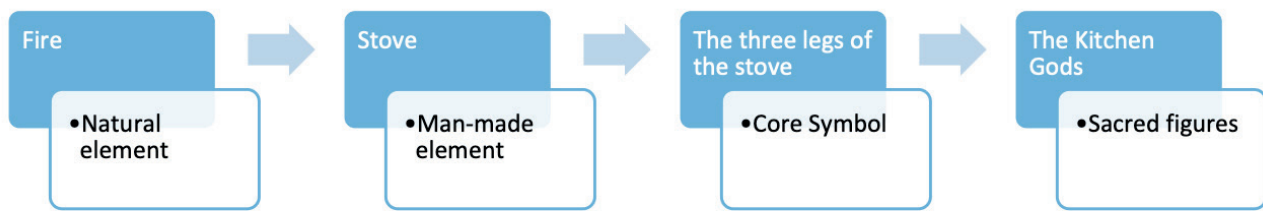


Fig. 1. The connection between natural, human, and sacred elements in the legend of the Kitchen Gods (Đinh Hồng Hải 2015).

Hải observes that all the variants of the legend in Vietnam share a love triangle that results in the death of all three people involved, and then salvation from a higher deity, who turns them into supernatural beings. He illustrates the connection between natural, human, and sacred elements [Figure 1], and explains that the religious figures gradually originate from many cultures and undergo slow changes, which in recent years they have created new cultural elements, one of which is theatre adaption (Dinh 2015: 87).

### The Adaption of the Kitchen Gods in Vietnamese Theatre

*Táo Quân* (*The Kitchen Gods*) introduced Nam Tào (Southern Star Deity) and Bắc Đẩu (Northern Star Deity), two deities who always wait upon Jade Emperor and help him supervise the mortals. They are able to grant good luck to the good people and punish the bad people. Southern Star Deity keeps the book of the living and Northern Star Deity keeps the book of death, so they can decide who will be born and who will die (Luong 2016). They were only supporting characters in the premiere show but became protagonists later on. In 2003 the Jade Emperor was portrayed as a more energetic and less solemn person, while from 2004 onwards, when another actor was cast for the role, Jade Emperor became calmer and more serious, at times amusing and satirical.

The first show had three Kitchen Gods, one of whom was a male and the other two females. The male Kitchen God appeared first, and then the females appeared on stage together, claiming to be twins cloned from the male god. The male Kitchen God was not in charge of anything specifically, while one female god presided over the nation's culture and the other over the arts. In the following years the Kitchen Gods multiplied and represented a specific domain, such as transportation, education, healthcare, economy, society, and culture [Table 1]. Other fields varied from one year to another, depending on the striking problems that year had.

The God of Economy showed up most frequently, indicating the level of concern about this sector in Vietnam. The topic of the report ranged from good news like the growth of GDP and export rate to bad news like high prices of goods, bribery, corruption, and economic crisis. The God of Economy often met the Jade Emperor with confidence until he received troubling questions he tried to ignore. Throughout the seventeen years of the show, whether a God took part in the show would depend on the events of the year.

	Education	Economy	Healthcare	Society	Culture	Transportation
2003					√	
2004	√		√			√
2005	√		√		√	√
2006	√	√	√			
2007	√	√	√		√	√
2008		√	√	√		√
2009		√	√	√		√
2010	√	√		√		√
2011		√		√		√
2012	√	√	√			√
2013		√		√	√	√
2014	√	√	√		√	√
2015						
2016	√	√		√	√	
2017	√	√				
2018		√	√	√		
2019	√	√		√		√

Tab. 1. The most popular Kitchen Gods and their frequency of appearance in the show.

Recently, as the environmental problems have become severe in Vietnam and people have grown concerned, the God of Environment joined the group. In spite of the commitment by the Vietnamese government, the environment has been severely affected during the process of development (O'Rourke 2002): construction sites keep rising, mostly in big cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the number of cars continues to increase as a consequence of better incomes, and deforestation and sea pollution have not been tackled.

In 2017 and 2018 the God of Environment was a new entry. In 2017 he had to answer to the Southern star deity about sea pollution caused by factory waste from Formosa Company, which in turn has affected the life and economy of the whole country, especially of four central provinces on the coastline (Hoàng 2017). The destruction of natural landscape and the construction of skyscrapers that year also led to serious flooding in Ho Chi Minh City, which the God tried to cover clumsily by saying that the sea crisis was over, and floods were not a new problem, but no matter how hard he tried, the Southern star deity insisted he should learn his lesson of environmental and economic management, saying that Heaven would not sacrifice the environment for developmental goals. In 2018, the topic of river pollution caused by factory waste was brought up. The case of Bisuco Company and River Kon was listed as one of the ten most notable environmental events of the year 2018 by the National Committee of Clean Water and Environment. The river produced foul smell, affecting daily-life activities of residents along the bank, and although ten kilometres were polluted, the

God of Environment tried to excuse herself by saying it was only a small part of the river. Having heard the Jade Emperor's confirmation that developments were not prioritised over the environment, the God of Environment raised her voice to encourage joint action for environmental protection, only to be criticised for being cliché by the Northern star deity.

While the cast's acting skills were the core of the show, musical parody captured the audience. In 2017, the performance of the God of Environment included folk music with new lyrics praising the beauty of the ocean. Vũ Tụ Long, the actor who played the God of Environment in 2017, is a performer of Chèo, a Vietnamese form of folk and satirical musical theatre. Since his phenomenal parodic performance as part of the God of Drainage's report in 2008, Vũ's performances were one of the most anticipated parts of the show and his 2017 performance included a pop song about the flood in Ho Chi Minh City. The original song *Thành Phố Trẻ* (*Young City*) describes life in the city where enthusiastic young people work and enjoy simple moments, while the parody *Lụt Ca* (*Song of the Flood*) talks of the great flood several months prior to the show and portrays the false happiness of the people who carried on with their lives as they suffered from the flood [Table 2]:

Hôm nay mưa rào một tí tẹo thôi,	Today it rained just a little
Thế mà nước ngập	But the flood came
Sao mà vui quá lại được nhảy cầu	We happily jump from bridges
Giao thông trên đường, thùng xốp chèo thau	On the street we row
Ta cùng bơi sải	Together we swim
Ôm cả cây chuối, lại được chèo thuyền	Banana trunks our lifebuoys, buckets our boats
[...]	[...]
Dân ta bây giờ lụt đã thành quen	Now we are used to flooding
Không lụt sẽ buồn	We feel sad at its absence
Còn cào mong nhớ, chờ đợi được lụt	We long for the next flood.

Tab. 2. Lyrics of the parodic song *Lụt Ca* (*Song of the Flood*).

Many other significant performances included parodies of different songs: *Hôm Qua Em Tới Trường* (*Yesterday I Went to School*) in 2011 was about school bullying, *Cô Gái Vót Chông* (*The Girl Who Makes Bamboo Lances*) in 2012 about bribery, *Em Là Bông Hồng Nhỏ* (*I am a Little Rose*) in 2016 about the innovation in high school graduation and university entrance evaluation, *Ngõ Vắng Xôn Xao* (*Beloved Quiet Alley*) in 2016 about the false moral excellence of officials, *Thật Bất Ngờ* (*Such a Surprise*) in 2018 about the overuse of social media (Trung Ngân 2015; Linh Chi 2019).

Satire was also delivered to the audience through appearance and language. The Northern star deity was portrayed as a man in a suit with an earring and a high-pitched voice in the first show, from the second show onwards the character appeared more feminine every year, wearing a wig and make up, showing feminine gestures and at times being addressed as a miss instead of mister (Mộc 2018). The role of the sharp-tongued Northern star deity was to express strong opinions, sometimes being judgemental, about the Kitchen Gods. Nguyễn quoted music critic Nguyễn Quang Long's explanation for the success of the show:



This show is both traditional and contemporary. The Kitchen Gods's annual trip to Heaven to report to the Jade Emperor is originated from folk beliefs, and VTV has creatively entwined modern issues when mentioning problems of each year. It reminds us of the traditional role of the jester in folk art, because back then only he could tell the truth without being punished by the King (Nguyễn 2019).

The three gods in the legend are sacred figures who maintain a certain distance from the humans. In the plays, being leaders of sectors in the society, they give orders, issue regulations, receive bribery, and among all, live among the people. The show took the audience far away from the legend, surprised them, and brought them back to the normal activities of the society they live in. It told the story of a world where deities joined the mortals in their daily life, casually introducing old traditions and customs in modern society to point out that the problems of the mortals are their problems.

As a comedy show, *The Kitchen Gods* used humour and satire to address social and environmental problems. Being streamed on New Year's Eve, it could be watched by everyone. The elderly appreciated the show as a cultural performance that promoted traditional values, the children were captured because they could recognise children's songs, only with new lyrics. Teenagers and young adults enjoyed *The Kitchen Gods* the most thanks to familiar song parodies and catchphrases featured in the show. On the other hand, there were complaints that *The Kitchen Gods* was repetitive, starting with each Kitchen God's report, during which the Northern and Southern star deities would interrupt and ask difficult questions or reveal the issue that the gods were hiding. The Jade Emperor would always give a lecture to the gods at the end of the show. Additionally, at one point, the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment and ICS Centre criticised the iconic LGBTQ figure of the show, the Northern star deity, for overemphasising their sexual orientation, and the show for introducing discriminating lines about the deity (An 2018). Their movement triggered a debate among the audience, with many comments of approval to the two organisations' reactions to the show. After years of spectacularisation, during which costumes and stage decoration grew more and more lavish, and music or dance performances were added, the effect faded. The audience started to wonder if social critique was still an important part, or the producer only aimed for a standard comedy that attracted the audience through songs and dances. With such macro issues, the crew had to think how to avoid going overboard and making the whole show appear insensitive. The whole cast became attached to their roles, and when new actors were introduced, a part of the audience was not completely satisfied.

### End and Beginning

In November 2019, after seventeen years, the Vietnamese Television announced that *Year-End Gathering* would still be streamed on New Year's Eve, but the plot would change. The first reaction from the audience was nostalgia, as *The Kitchen Gods* had not only become a symbol of Lunar New Year's Eve but also "the only entertainment show in Vietnam's territory that has the guts to make serious national problems hilarious" (Ngọc 2017).

On 2020 New Year's Eve, the new edition of *Year-End Gathering* finally premiered. The plot was significantly different, but the satirical purpose and the mixture of Vietnamese

literature and popular culture were still the main features of the show. Topics such as vain social media users trying to grab attention with their '3S' slogan (shocking, sensitive, and shabby news), frauds from online shops, or the growth of traditional homestay service in every corner, were displayed to the audience. The climax was reached with the story of a young man who went back to his village after many years and with his newlywed tried to create a new tourist attraction, threatening the environment, heritage, and cultural identity. After envisioning the future, the villagers decided to keep it as it was as they did not want to destroy their birthplace. The villagers' realisation is another confirmation of the point made in 2017 and 2018 that preserving the environment and heritage is of the same importance as pursuing developmental goals.

With both similarities and differences from *The Kitchen Gods*, the 2020 *Year-End Gathering* was still contentious. The acclaim was the same, but disapproval concerned new problems: the sensitive jokes, the description of violent actions, and the overwhelming and irrelevant performances (Kỳ 2020). A simple Google search highlights more articles expressing criticism than previous years as well as the audience's negative attitudes towards the obvious sensationalism of the show. Some opponents said it was just another comedy show that could not be as special as *The Kitchen Gods* (Vi 2020). Significantly, some neglected the show because it was no different from the 1977 Vlog (An 2020).

### **What Future for the Theatre as a Form of Environmental Critique?**

Theatre indeed has the potential to encourage critical thinking and sense of responsibility. *The Kitchen Gods* has raised the people's awareness of the serious environmental issues affecting the country. Never before has a show about popular culture been able to achieve this goal. Nguyễn Xuân Bắc, the actor who played the Southern star deity, proposes his own theory about the audience's loss of interest in the show being caused by the cast that remains the same while the awareness of the audience gets better every year (Nguyễn 2019). If this is the case, the show has made its contribution to ecological doing by stimulating viewers to watch yearly and express their views on social and environmental topics.

McAllister and Luckman suggest that making fun of very human actions and attitudes of the Gods allows the audience to "grapple with these issues and possibly come to term with them through laughter" (McAllister & Luckman 2015: 124). However, they also recommend that the show should not "point fingers [...], but the humour is pointed enough for it to be clear to the audience" (McAllister & Luckman 2015: 125). Theatre should also be careful about the government's censorship when producing a play. In Vietnam, the visual arts and journalism must apply for permission from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. The content of the arts might be altered after the censorship, mostly because of their political sensitivity (Cain 2013). Vietnamese censorship has a blurred perimeter as the country is torn among Confucian-based values, the Communist party, and a Western market economy (Libby 2011). This may lead to severe consequences regarding how the arts are perceived and enjoyed because Vietnamese people tend to think there should be a 'right' way of doing so.

Another question inviting inspection is whether awareness and concern about social and environmental problems were formed before or after watching *Year-End Gathering*. The

audience may consist of two groups: those who have already gained knowledge of the issues in their daily life, and those who became aware of the issues after watching the shows. In the second group, there were people who simply considered the show as entertainment and had no critical thought after watching, while others would have wanted to read more about what they had watched. This points to the hypothesis that the impact of *Year-End Gathering* in particular and ecotheatre in general varies significantly across groups of audience.

Differences in the reception by television viewers and theatre spectators should also be assessed. *Year-End Gathering* was streamed on television, which means it was for free to watch and the audience could multi-task when they watched it. Theatre, however, requires that the audience spends money on tickets to watch the shows on site. An average theatre ticket in Vietnam often costs double or triple the price of a standard cinema ticket, which is 100,000 VND (approximately \$4.5). Even though the price is not high compared to other countries, the Vietnamese audience tends to spend money on a movie. They are unable to do anything else while watching the show at the theatre, but these are minor disadvantages since the venue brings a vibrant atmosphere different from the television show.

One of our goals is to unveil the discourse and the devices that fuel the popular narrative attributing the environmental crisis to unstoppable forces. The arts and the humanities are agents of change, of course, only when we decide to act. To understand whether a new form of committed theatre, especially television theatre, delving into ecological topics can generate willingness to act may require more than *Year-End Gathering*. One thing we learn from the show is that humour and satire are two strong assets that stimulate intergenerational reflection and debate. With a better understanding of the environmental crisis through theatre, we will be one step closer to sustainability.

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