

# From a musical theater to listening, to ecological activism

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the findings from a study that explored the wider benefits of the musical theater play *Swifts, The Soundmark of Corfu*, which was performed for two consecutive years (2019-2020) on the Greek island of Corfu. The research focus was on the experiences of the musical theatre members, investigating whether the play contributed to any changes in the ways they listened to their local environment.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Swifts, or *Apus apus* as their scientific name goes, arrive in Corfu in the summer and make their nests in the roofs of buildings in the old town of the island. Often flying in large flocks high up in the sky at remarkable speeds, these birds are known for having weak legs, a detail that is explored in the play. Swifts produce a characteristic scream, a high-pitched, thrilling sound that serves as a seasonal soundmark of Corfu's old town. Drawing from Schaefer's conceptualisation, soundmark is defined as a "community sound which is unique or possesses qualities that make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community" (Schaefer, 1994, p. 10). Raising awareness of the local soundscape of the old town of Corfu was one of the aims of the play.*

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

The ecological movement and related scholarship have challenged the assumption of human superiority over other species and advocate for a shift towards a more ecological and ethically grounded worldview [1-2]. An ecological worldview proposes that humans may connect with nature when identifications with its entities (individuals, species, ecosystems, and landscapes) are established, creating a sense of belonging to or community with the other-than-human world [3]. Our identification with nature may lead to an understanding of common interests, "such that their successes and failures are experienced as being integral to our own" [4]. Attentive listening, as advocated in acoustic ecology [5], involves identifying sounds and its characteristics, as well as recognising the sound imbalances that may threaten the health of species and ecosystems. Such listening can cultivate awareness of the self, of society, and of the varied soundscapes we inhabit [6]. Especially now, in an

era of ongoing environmental crisis, training individuals to listen emerges as an educational, ecological, and social necessity [7].

One of the aims of the play was to create conditions that would enable the theater team members and the audience to feel connected and form identifications with the Swifts when they see and hear them flying in the sky. A performance in which sound and musical events on stage are linked to real-life events may activate participants' emotional reaction and create meaningful experiences that are registered in the memory [8]. The impact may extend to groups in the wider community, as systems in a society are inter-connected [9], contributing to the development of the ecological self for individuals who both are and are not in the audience.

## 3. THE PLAY: DISABILITY AND EXCLUSION

The main characters of the story include the grandfather of the Swifts, named *Papus Apus*, and a retired biologist named *Apus Papus*. Their names were inspired by the scientific name of Swifts, which created connections with the Greek word *papus* meaning grandfather. Beyond sharing similar names, these two characters share qualities such as disability, wisdom, and care for others. The bird grandfather has legs that, under certain conditions, may not support his take-off from the ground, while the older human character uses a wheelchair due to a mobility disability. Both characters share experiences of exclusion from human society. The play also sought to present disability as both a human and other-than-human condition, encouraging participants to recognize society's responsibility to provide accessibility for all who are different or disabled.

## 4. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

In 2022, two years after the initial performances, the researchers investigated whether the musical theater members (four actors, one musician, the director, the set

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designer, and the graphic designer) acknowledged any changes in the ways they listened to their local soundscape before and after the performances. The research question was explored through a focus group interview. Eight individuals of the 12 who were actively involved in the performance, participated in the study voluntarily. The data was analysed following a thematic approach [10].

## **5. RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

### **5.1. Prior first-hand experiences with the Swifts**

A notable difference emerged between residents of the old town of Corfu and residents from other areas of the island. Participants living outside the old town reported that they had probably seen or heard the birds but had not really paid attention to them before or developed any special awareness. In contrast, residents of the old town had oral and visual contact with the birds, mainly from childhood. They would see the birds flying, nesting, hanging off edges, falling to the ground, or hear their distinctive sound. While they had experiential knowledge about the birds, they often did not know their names or scientific facts. One participant described childhood experiences of catching the birds and noticing their strong legs and claws, which could hurt if the bird was scared and held on tightly. Through the play, they learned that the birds did not belong to the swallow family, highlighting the depth of local knowledge shaped by experience.

### **5.2. Ecological knowledge acquired in the performances**

Members of the theater team acknowledged that through their involvement in the play, they became able to identify the Swifts and distinguish them from swallows. They developed a deeper understanding of the Swifts' functions and behaviors and learned how to rescue a Swift that had fallen to the ground. However, not all participants developed the same depth of ecological knowledge about the Swifts and their place in the ecosystem, possibly due to varying levels of involvement in the play.

### **5.3. Developing identifications with human and other-than-human beings**

The connection between the old Swift's weak legs and the biologist's motor disability was highlighted by participants during the interview. They reported becoming more aware of and sensitive to social exclusion and reflected on how different life must be for people with disabilities. They also realized that when society does not allow diversity, it creates a social and ecological imbalance. One participant developed deep empathy for the Swifts, imagining herself in their position. She acknowledged that there are many different perspectives of the world and shared her reflections. By thinking of

what it feels like to be a bird flying thousands of meters above the ground, she realized how differently humans and Swifts perceive the same environment.

### **5.4. Developing a new, specialized visual and auditory perception**

Participants emphasized that their involvement in the play led to a new, specialized visual and auditory perception of both human and other-than-human beings. They reported that they began seeing and hearing their surroundings with greater attentiveness. For example, one participant mentioned observing people's behaviors and actions towards disabled individuals, such as how they park in designated spaces. Participants also noted the benefits of observation itself, with one participant stating that noticing sounds can open a window in one's mind. They contrasted this focused observation, gained through the play, with the usual experience of hearing a buzz of indistinguishable sounds in everyday life. After their experience, when walking in a forest, one could no longer just watch their steps, but they would also listen to the rustling leaves, other birds, or the wind whistling through tree branches.

### **5.5. Actions and deeper realizations triggered by the play**

One team member shared a story about how, about a month after the performances, they witnessed a couple rescuing a Swift who had found on the ground, even consulting a veterinarian. Another participant expressed a desire to be actively involved in a similar musical theater project aimed at raising awareness about sea urchins, which are endangered due to careless fishing. Regarding the various realizations triggered by the play, two participants highlighted theater's power to create compassion, which can lead to meaningful actions and behaviors. In their own words, it is hopeful that a performance can change one's consciousness and shape their personality. Some participants also claimed that, alongside the island's traditional music and local food, Swifts are an essential part of Corfu's identity. It seems that they reached a new understanding of what constitutes the island's identity. They valued the musical theater play as part of Corfu's cultural heritage and suggested it should be preserved and performed for future generations.

Participants agreed that the musical play conveyed the message that ecology is not just about nature or the environment. Ecology also includes humans and their behavior, emphasizing the importance of fellow human beings. In their words, "ecology cannot exclude humans—it is also about disability and the other person next to you. How you treat fellow humans is as important as how you treat nature."

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Three main conclusions emerged from our analysis. First, the musical play provided theater team members with opportunities for increased perceptual differentiation and specificity regarding the Swifts as unique agents in their environment, illustrating what Gibson referred to as perceptual learning [11]. Also, participants' words and actions reflected an extended ecological self [12, 3], formed through their identification with disabled humans and Swifts. The participants developed feelings of empathy and solidarity, acquiring a sense of belonging to the same community as other beings [2]. Additionally, participants' references to activism, such as rescuing Swifts, demonstrated how the experiences from the play were transferred into the local community. These conclusions reinforce the argument that musical theater can be an effective tool for creating conditions that enable the development of empathy and identification with human and other-than-human beings, raise awareness of the local environment, and inspire activism within the community.

Our conclusions could be depicted as an expanding cycle, which is an adaptation of Niesser's perceptual cycle [13]. The musical-theater play acts as a powerful, embodied, and emotionally infused source of knowledge, which may lead to a more specialized ecological perception of the human and other-than-human world. This specialized perception may in turn fuel an ever-expanding awareness that could function as a natural motivator for local and global ecological actions.

## 7. REFERENCES

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