

# *The Rite of Spring* — Peat on Stage and in the World



## PEAT ON STAGE AND IN THE WORLD.

The dancers performing in *The Rite of Spring* are on a stage covered in peat, a spongy type of soil made from decaying leaves, stems, roots and mosses. As these materials decompose, they release nutrients that facilitate new plant growth. The performers are, quite literally, dancing on life and death, feeling, hearing, and smelling the Earth as it interacts with their movements. As Pina Bausch explored deep emotional themes in her choreography, and its effect on audiences, she also explored materiality, set design and the sensory, physical, introspective experiences her dancers had while performing. Water, soil and peat are natural surfaces on which Bausch's Tanztheater (or "Dance Theater") comes to life. For *The Rite of Spring*, peat is the material and the medium for scrutinizing the central question, "How would you dance, if you knew you were going to die?"

As a material, peat has a characteristically earthy, somewhat musty odor, the result of the organic decomposition processes occurring within it. Like sponges, peat has a porous, highly compressible structure that gives it excellent water-retaining properties. It is formed in waterlogged, low-oxygen environments which contribute to a slow, ongoing process of decay over thousands of seasons. In its own ways, peat disrupts our understanding of the finality of death.

## PEATLANDS.

Peat's story is complex and interconnected with environmental changes often driving social and economic developments and vice versa. During Europe's Industrial Revolution, peat was exploited at a staggering scale, converted into fuel known as "bog iron" or "peat coal." Peatlands themselves are considered spiritually significant places and have played a role in traditional cultures from Cameroon to Ireland, Sumatra to Scotland, Alaska to the wetlands of Florida. Peatland communities possess valuable traditional knowledge about peatland ecosystems, including which plants are edible, which animals are found in the area and how to manage peatlands sustainably.

As a raw material, peat is used for chemistry (wax, dye, activated carbon, corrosion inhibition), as a bedding material for animals (horses, chicken, pigs), as a filter and absorbent material (oil spills, heavy metal removal), for peat textiles (cotton grass fibers, paper), as building and insulating material (canals, homes, stables), in medicinal skin care (baths, cosmetics), as a growing medium (horticulture) and as flavor enhancer (whisky production).<sup>1</sup>

Peatlands cover only three percent of our earth's land surface but they store nearly 550 billion tonnes of carbon – twice as much as in all the world's forests. "Peatlands are one of the greatest allies...in the fight against climate change."<sup>2</sup>

# AFRICAN PEATLANDS.

Performed by dancers from 14 African nations *The Rite of Spring*, newly draws our attention to the Congo Basin, home to the world's largest tropical peatlands<sup>3</sup> and to urgent land-use questions that ask, "How will we live when we know the biodiversity around us is dying?" The Congo Basin Peatlands stretch across six countries: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. Like all tropical peatlands, peat in the Congo Basin forms under rainy conditions and warm temperatures which promote rapid and more varied plant growth (palms, ferns and grasses), but with slow decomposition because they are in locations that accumulate and hold water.

The peat swamp forest of the Congo Basin stores around 29 billion tons of carbon—approximately equivalent to three years' worth of global greenhouse gas emissions—while the Basin as a whole absorbs nearly 1.5 billion tons of carbon dioxide a year.<sup>4</sup> Europe's push for financially viable global plants resulted in large-scale drainage and conversion of tropical peatlands for rubber and oil palm plantations which

in turn drove all manner of global manufacturing (automotive, marine, mining, medical) and industrial food production.

In the Spring of 2023, in Libreville, Gabon, the [\*One Planet Summit\*](#) on the health of tropical forests took place alongside many other long-standing local dialogues on restoring degraded peatlands and improving community ecological and economic health. At the United Nations' *Global Peatlands Initiative* meeting held in Brazzaville in 2018, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of Congo and Indonesia signed the *Brazzaville Declaration*<sup>5</sup>, which promotes better management and conservation of the Cuvette Centrale region in the Congo Basin.

Through the use of peat, *The Rite of Spring* successfully realizes an Earth-bound and Earth-inspired expression for both dancers and audiences, simultaneously engaging the unwritten histories of leaves, stems, roots and mosses and our shared future, our lives and deaths, as the Earth heats up.

— Makalé Faber Cullen and Peter M. Groffman





During the run of *The Rite of Spring*, the Park Avenue Armory is pleased to host a special eco-theater conversations with company dancers and the Armory Youth Corps led by Makalé Faber Cullen and Peter M. Groffman.

**Makalé Faber Cullen** has a 20-year career at the intersection of ecology, culture and art. She is the founder and CEO of Lore, an ethnographic and environmental insights agency whose clients range from the Toyota Research Institute to the Smithsonian. The bubbling kansiyé stews and dance fêtes of her Guinean family's expat community ignited her interest in traditional ecological knowledge and led her to doctoral studies in Anthropology at the University of Virginia, with subsequent leadership roles documenting and promoting biocultural diversity with New York Botanical Garden, Slow Food, White Oak Pastures and the Smithsonian. Makalé was a founding Co-Director of the Urban Soils Institute's *Art Extension Service* and is a research collaborator with Dr Richard K. Shaw (USDA-NRCS) on soil, water, flora and fauna relationships along New York City's terminal moraine. For her work in ecology, Makalé was awarded an Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship with the New York Botanical Garden. For her work contributing to cultural democracy, Makalé was awarded an Archie Green Fellowship with the U.S. Library of Congress. Makalé is currently the editor of DORAMODOU, a biennial publication of our changing wet seasons and dry seasons, globally. She is a contributor to four books on biodiversity and material culture and numerous articles. Her work promoting the cultural stewards of our biodiversity has been featured on National Public Radio and in the New York Times.

**Peter M. Groffman** is a Professor at the City University of New York Advanced Science Research Center, the Earth and Environmental Sciences Program at the Graduate Center, and Brooklyn College Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences. He is an Ecosystem Ecologist with expertise in soil ecology and water quality. Peter is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies. Peter's research focuses on climate effects on ecosystem biogeochemical processes related to carbon and nitrogen cycles. He studies how microbial processes impact gas exchange - particularly nitrogen - between the soil and air. His work encompasses rural and urban ecosystems, and is primarily centered at two of the National Science Foundation's Long Term Ecological Research sites located in Hubbard Brook, New Hampshire and Baltimore, Maryland. Peter was a Convening Lead Author for the 2013 U.S. National Climate Assessment Chapter on Ecosystems, Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, and a lead author for the Second (Wetlands) and Third (North America) Assessment Reports of the Intergovernmental Program on Climate Change (IPCC).

1. Joosten & Clarke, 2002, Wise Use of Mires and Peatlands
2. <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/ecosystems-and-biodiversity/what-we-do/protecting-peatlands-people-and-planet>
3. <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/carbon-biodiversity-and-land-use-central-congo-basin-peatlands>
4. <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/critical-ecosystems-congo-basin-peatlands>
5. <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/historic-agreement-signed-protect-worlds-largest-tropical-peatland>