

# Kyoto Review

*ARC CEO Tim Gardom reviews the award-winning drama KYOTO and reflects on telling the energy transition story then and now.*

Now at almost the end of its run in London's West End, KYOTO is a powerful dramatization of the conflicts and conversations leading up to the signing of the breakthrough global climate agreement at COP 3 at Kyoto in 1997. The play is a collaboration between the Royal Shakespeare Company and Good Chance – and activist theatre group.

The first thing to say is that KYOTO is a brilliant piece of dramatic storytelling. Performed in the round, with the actors constantly mixing in with the audience, it made you feel as if you are in the conference hall with the speakers – in fact, everyone in the audience was given a COP 3 national delegate lanyard to wear as they arrived (mine was for Canada!).



The action is fast and furious, compressing the ten years of climate pre-Kyoto negotiations in the first half of the play. Passionate speeches, secret deals, public disputes, science discoveries, data and statistics, triumphs and setbacks come barrelling across the stage in a constant stream. It's high-energy ensemble playing from a wonderful cast.

The surprise trick that the play pulls is to make the main narrator of the show the character of Don Pearlman, the man who more than any other worked to prevent the Kyoto Protocol being signed. Played superbly by actor Stephen Kunken, Pearlman challenges the audience at the start of the play. "You may not like me," he says, "but I was the only one who saw it all. I was there."



Kunken creates a strangely attractive anti-hero of Pearlman, totally convinced he is on the right side and prepared to go to any lengths to disrupt and delay the climate negotiation process. His backers, the 'Seven Sisters' global oil companies, emerge occasionally in sinister black overcoats (rather over-the-top for me) to give their orders.

Yet the overall story of KYOTO is about growing agreement for global action on climate change. This starts with the crucial acknowledgement that there is 'a discernible human impact on global climate' through to the legally binding targets and timetables of the Kyoto Protocol itself. In the end (for the world of this play, at least), agreement, not conflict, turns out to be what makes the world work.



As CEO of ARC - an agency dedicated to telling the new energy and energy transition story in today's world - it was fascinating to see both what's changed since 1997 and what's stayed same.

Many of the key issues remain unchanged. For example, the dispute between oil producing and oil consuming nations about the responsibility for emissions. Or the way that new scientific research can impact on policy. And the ever present pressure of politics and public opinion on elected leaders as they try to negotiate carbon reduction.

Also familiar were the different perspectives of industrialised and emerging economies about the right to use energy for development. One memorable line comes when an African delegate is addressing the US representative. "Yours are the carbon emissions of luxury," she says, "ours are the emissions of survival."

But some key aspects of how we talk about energy transition today are clearly very different from 1997. In KYOTO, reducing carbon emissions and shifting to new energy is talked about almost entirely as an economic negative. The opportunities of the 'green economy' didn't feature in the thinking of politicians and economists in this drama.

In another big contrast, the Chinese delegates in the play talked about their country as 'non-industrialised' and emerging economy - not a description that we'd ever use in the 21st century.

Mass public protest and climate movement were also hardly mentioned at all in the show. Was the demand for climate action more muted thirty years ago, or did the playwrights just choose to leave this out of the story?

But by far the most striking difference between then and now is how energy transition has moved from being an ambitious plan in 1977 to a global industrial sector in 2025. At COP 3, the conference spent five hours debating a sentence to acknowledge carbon trading. Today, carbon credits and markets are an established mechanism to combat emissions, complete with their own regulation, technical verification, insurance and more.

The range of voices, messages and audiences around energy transition has multiplied exponentially, while public attitudes also continue to change.

This is what makes ARC so exciting as we work with corporations, governments and organizations to discover their energy transition story and engage the audiences they most need to reach.

KYOTO was a powerful and thought-provoking play. As we stepped out of the theatre, we were met by a lone climate activist distributing flyers, reminding us again why energy transition is the most consequential story of our era.

