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## “We Hear You—A Climate Archive”

By Jacob Hirdwall, writer and director of the play “77 messages to the future” for Dramaten and leader of the project “We Hear You – A Climate Archive”.

*The project is a global performance project exploring youth perspectives on the climate emergency. Seventy-seven young people from around the world have contributed their thoughts on the climate crisis. The performance “77 Messages to the Future” is based on these collected stories, gathered as part of the project. The production was staged at The Royal Dramatic Theatre (Dramaten) in Stockholm in 2024. The project has also presented parts of the material at COP in Dubai and Sharm El-Sheikh, as well as in various locations in Washington, D.C. The presentation also includes the play “We Hear You – Greta Thunberg’s Speech,” which was performed at Dramaten in 2020.”*

### Origins of the Project: From Greta Thunberg to the Stage

#### 1. The Initial Spark

In 2019, **Jacob Hirdwall**, dramaturg at the **Royal Dramatic Theatre** (Dramaten), read *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* by **Greta Thunberg**. The book, a collection of her speeches, struck him as inherently dramatic. He immediately felt the text needed to be transformed into theatre.

In 2020, this impulse resulted in *We Hear You*, staged at Dramaten’s main stage. Seventy-seven actors, extras, and children stood silently for one hour, listening to a recorded montage of Greta’s speeches spoken by fifty different voices. No dialogue. No narrative progression. Only bodies listening.

The silence itself became a performative response to Greta’s question posed to the British Parliament: “*Can you hear me?*” The production was described as deeply powerful, creating an atmosphere of collective witnessing.

#### 2. From Listening to Giving Voice

Following this production, Hirdwall was contacted by cultural representatives and soon partnered with the Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics and the Earth Commons at Georgetown University.

The new objective was clear: move from listening to young voices to amplifying them.

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Thus began a global storytelling project aimed at collecting testimonies from young people around the world about their lived experience of the climate crisis.

## Building a Global Climate Archive

### 1. Collecting 77 Stories

Between 2022 and 2023, over 250 young people responded to an open call. Seventy-seven were selected: activists, students, ecologists, farmers, engineers, artists, politicians, and movement leaders.

Many came from MAPA regions (Most Affected People and Areas), where the climate crisis is not abstract but already lived reality.

Through Zoom sessions held across time zones, participants shared personal reflections, fears, anger, and hopes. These conversations were shaped into texts and made publicly available online as part of a climate archive platform, accessible to artists and educators worldwide.

Hirdwall describes this process as actively listening and transforming digital voices into physical theatre.

### 2. From Archive to Stage

Out of this material, Hirdwall wrote and directed the play **77 Messages to the Future**, which premiered in April 2024 at Dramaten.

The piece featured:

- Seven professional actors
- Nine theatre school interns
- A hybrid structure blending documentary testimony and fictional framing
- Music, choreography, video, and photography

Each story became a “message to the future.” Hirdwall also described his own reflections as potentially the “78th message.”

Excerpts from the project were presented internationally, including at COP27, COP28, the Kennedy Center, and the Stockholm+50 UN conference. The project evolved into an artistic network spanning Stockholm, Washington, Dubai, and beyond.

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## Rehearsal Conflicts and Artistic Tensions

### 1. Unexpected Resistance

Although Hirdwall assumed shared values among the cast—belief in the urgency of climate action and the importance of youth voices—the rehearsal process revealed deep tensions.

Many actors felt:

- Some texts were too dark for young audiences.
- Certain political passages were too controversial.
- Some statements conflicted with their personal values.
- Academic language needed rewriting.

Several actors refused to perform specific lines. This was unprecedented in Hirdwall's thirty-year career.

A long section imagining a future where *Homo sapiens* is replaced by a new species adapted to climate change was entirely rejected by the ensemble.

As a result, the original three-hour version was reduced to 1 hour and 35 minutes.

### 2. Climate as a Political Fault Line

What surprised Hirdwall most was not collaborative rewriting, but the actors' sense of personal responsibility for the political statements voiced on stage. Some declared: *"I cannot say this."*

He questioned whether the climate crisis—although scientific—had become so politicized that it divided even artistic communities.

Rehearsals were marked by ongoing debates:

- Is it acceptable to frighten children with hard scientific facts?
- Are we self-censoring?
- How directly can theatre address national politics?

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### 3. Reception

The audience response, particularly among young people, was often positive. Many expressed relief at seeing their climate anxiety represented.

The Swedish press, however, was lukewarm. Critics claimed they were tired of “climate plays.”

This contrast revealed a generational divide between critical discourse and lived experience.

## Art, Science, and Activism

### 1. Art as Mediator

Hirdwall reflects deeply on the relationship between art and science. He recounts a conversation with a climate scientist who admitted he had never been interested in culture—until he realized it could mediate scientific truth to audiences who shield themselves from hard facts.

Theatre, in this sense, becomes a bridge between:

- Data and emotion
- Facts and empathy
- Science and lived experience

### 2. Recurring Themes

Water emerged as a dominant theme across testimonies:

- Flooding
- Drought
- Scarcity
- Plastic pollution

A key distinction became evident:

There is a profound difference between fearing climate change and living its consequences.

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In some regions, religious interpretations discouraged climate action (“God intended this”). In others, lack of education prevented awareness.

The project revealed the uneven geography of climate knowledge and impact.

### 3. Hope and Magical Thinking

Contrary to his fears, Hirdwall found many young participants surprisingly hopeful. Some displayed what he calls “magical thinking”—a belief that storytelling itself matters.

He reframes activism not as radicalism but as belief in the future. If greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, activism will continue to grow.

The process reshaped his understanding of activism as a hopeful, future-oriented force.

## Sustainability, Archiving, and the Future of Climate Theatre

### 1. Sustainable Production Practices

The production reused set materials and costumes. Travel was minimized; most meetings occurred online. Touring was limited, though participation in global forums such as COP was deemed important.

Yet contradictions emerged. In a previous production (*A Play for the Living in a Time of Extinction*), bicycles used to generate electricity on stage were discovered to have been manufactured in China—revealing the complexity of aligning ecological ideals with global supply chains.

### 2. Archiving for the Future

A central ambition of the project is preservation. In collaboration with Stockholm City Archives, the team seeks to store both the artistic material and the creative process.

Hirdwall reflects on the fragility of digital media:

- Hard drives decay.
- Formats become obsolete.
- Long-term storage requires innovative solutions (glass engraving, Arctic archives, plastic film storage).

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The archive aims to answer a future question:

*What were they thinking at the moment when action was urgently needed?*

It is not merely a technical archive, but an emotional and intellectual one.

### 3. A Shifting Political Climate

In Sweden, public attention has shifted to geopolitical crises such as the war in Ukraine. Climate discourse has receded. The right-wing government shows limited interest in strong climate action.

Within theatre institutions, discussions focus more on sustainable production techniques than on storytelling as a tool for systemic change.

Hirdwall expresses disappointment that so few artists are willing to engage directly with the political dimension of the climate crisis.

## Conclusion

Jacob Hirdwall's presentation highlights:

- The transformative potential of theatre as a space of listening and amplification
- The politicization and discomfort surrounding climate narratives
- The generational gap between critics and young audiences
- The importance of archiving artistic responses to this historical moment

The project *We Hear You – Climate Archive* evolved from a silent performance into a global archive and artistic movement.

In response to Greta Thunberg's question—*"Can you hear me?"*—the project answers:

Yes. We heard you. And we tried to respond.