



# WHAT TO KEEP?

by Anne Bogart

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as audiences cautiously began returning to live theater, my colleague Leon Ingulsrud attended a production in New York City. When I later asked him about his experience, he expressed disappointment, shaking his head and remarking, “No one said hello to the audience.” His sentiment struck a chord with me, highlighting a missed opportunity for connection in a time when audiences craved acknowledgment and warmth after such a prolonged absence from communal experiences.

In today’s theater environment, I feel that there is a growing need for audiences to be more than passive observers — many want to feel like active participants, or even collaborators in or contributors to the theatrical experience. This goes beyond immersive theater, where the boundaries between performer and spectator are intentionally blurred, allowing interaction with the environment, actors, and narrative. Instead, it questions the very idea of the fourth wall, which feels increasingly less relevant in the current cultural moment.

Now, in the face of the escalating climate crisis, widespread displacement of populations, erratic and volatile markets, and the relentless flood of distressing news delivered through traditional media and social media platforms, many people today find themselves grappling with a profound sense of being overloaded and emotionally drained. This relentless exposure to global crises often leads to two common emotional responses: cycles of intense anxiety, where individuals feel consumed by fear and helplessness; or states of emotional numbness, where detachment becomes a

coping mechanism to avoid being overwhelmed. These reactions reflect the psychological toll of living in an age of unprecedented challenges and information overload, where the sheer magnitude and quantity of the issues affecting us can make it arduous for individuals to process their emotions or take meaningful action.

Theater can provide a unique alternative to these responses. It offers a space to be present with others — free from the isolating effects of digital distractions — to engage deeply with timeless stories that can resonate across generations, teaching us ways

to live, what to value, and how to find courage to persevere in the face of adversity. These great narratives — whether drawn from history, mythology, or contemporary experiences — serve as mirrors for our own lives. By creating an environment where people can be fully present with others and with themselves, theater becomes a sanctuary for emotional renewal, intellectual growth, and collective healing.

This brings us to BLO's current production of *Noah's Flood* (*Noye's Fludde*). By being here, you become part of the historic trajectory of an ancient tale about a flood which, in this version, was resurrected by Benjamin Britten in the mid 1950s. Around the same time, T. S. Eliot — poet, essayist, playwright, and contemporary of Britten — became passionately interested in medieval mystery plays. He believed that modern drama should incorporate poetic forms and ritualistic elements to achieve a deeper resonance with audiences. He drew inspiration from medieval plays such as *Everyman* that emphasized themes of faith, conscience, and divine purpose. Eliot's ideas had a notable influence on Britten and most likely encouraged him to explore these older biblical and iconic forms of storytelling, emphasizing their communal and ritualistic aspects, blending religious themes with artistic innovation.

Britten based *Noah's Flood* upon the Chester Mystery Play *Noah's Flood* and the biblical story of Noah's Ark, a timeless narrative of survival, renewal, and divine intervention. What makes the work distinctive is that that it reflects Britten's admiration for the dramatic simplicity and spiritual depth of medieval texts, combining this with his interest in community-oriented music-making and his desire to create works that were accessible to amateur performers, especially children. He specified that the opera should be staged in churches or large halls, not in a theater.

The idea of a "Great Flood" is a recurring theme in the mythologies of hundreds of cultures around the world, reflecting humanity's shared experiences with natural disasters and their symbolic interpretations. While each culture's flood narrative is unique, they often share common themes of divine wrath, survival, human resilience, and renewal. In the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which predates the biblical flood narrative in Genesis, Utnapishtim is warned by the god Ea about a flood meant to punish humanity for its corruption and noise. He builds a seven-deck boat, saving his family, animals, and craftsmen, and releases



Left, *Noah's Ark* Theodore Poulakis c. 1635-1692;  
Above, *Manu and Saptarishi*, artist unknown, c. 1890

birds to find dry land after six days of storms. Upon succeeding, Utnapishtim sacrifices to the gods and is granted immortality. In Hindu mythology, Manu is warned by Matsya, an avatar of Vishnu, about a flood that will destroy all life. Guided by Matsya, Manu builds a boat, preserves seeds of life, and re-establishes creation after the waters recede, emphasizing divine intervention and humanity's role in renewal. Australian Aboriginal cultures also feature flood narratives tied to spiritual beliefs and nature. One story describes Goonyah angering a Great Spirit by eating forbidden fish, causing a deluge that overwhelms him. Another tale involves lizards summoning destructive rains through rituals. These myths reflect the sacred relationship of the First Peoples of Australia with weather patterns and their environment.

The Bible's Book of Genesis tells of a time when humanity has become corrupt and wicked, prompting God to cleanse the Earth with a great flood. However, Noah, a righteous man, finds favor with God. He is instructed to build an ark — a massive wooden vessel — and to bring aboard his family and pairs of every animal species to preserve and rebuild life. For forty

days and nights, rain falls, and floodwaters cover the earth, wiping out all living creatures outside the ark. After the rain has stopped, the waters gradually recede. Noah sends out a raven and then a dove to find dry land; when the dove returns with an olive leaf, Noah knows that the Earth is renewing. Once the flood has ended, God makes a covenant with Noah, promising to never again destroy the Earth with a flood and setting a rainbow in the sky as a sign of this promise.

This ancient story resonates with our own contemporary challenges that include climate change, social and political corruption, and global crises that threaten life as we know it. The ark represents salvation and renewal in the midst of destruction. Ultimately, the story is about the preservation of life in dark times. Does this sound familiar?

Imagine yourself in Noah's position today — faced with the monumental task of deciding what to bring aboard an ark to survive a catastrophic flood. This scenario prompts profound questions about our values, priorities, and relationship with the natural world. What would be essential to preserve? Which species or resources hold the greatest importance, and how might these decisions shape the future for generations to come? Who would be saved and who or what would be left behind? The choices would not only be difficult — but also, they would reveal much about our collective values and vision for the future.

The concept of the flood — whether literal or metaphorical — resonates deeply in today's world. On one hand, it serves as a stark warning about the consequences of environmental degradation, with escalating sea levels caused by rising global temperatures reminding us of the urgent need to address climate change. On the other hand, the flood can also symbolize the overwhelming inundation of information in the digital age. This “flood of information” raises critical questions: How do we navigate these virtual deluges? What do we preserve, and what do we discard?

In the realm of theater and storytelling, perhaps what we should discard are the distractions that cloud our lives — those fleeting concerns that prevent us from focusing on deeper truths. What we might choose to save are the stories we pass down through generations, narratives imbued with wisdom meant to guide us toward richer, more meaningful lives. These inherited tales carry timeless lessons that can help humanity confront contemporary challenges with resilience and purpose.



GA:NI King of the Lizards by Munda-gutta Kulliliari/Michael J Connolly (Dreamtime Kullilla-Art | kullillaart.com.au), 2008

By revisiting these narratives, we can perhaps find elements to create a foundation for more inclusive and humane solutions to global crises rather than succumbing to despair and resignation. These stories remind us that humanity has always faced adversity, and that survival often depends on collective action, faith, and responsibility. Stories can inspire us to act before reaching a point of no return, urging us to preserve life and envision a better world even — perhaps especially — in the aftermath of a disaster.

Perhaps today's metaphorical ark is not a physical vessel, but rather a framework for addressing global challenges — a way to safeguard what is essential while charting a course toward sustainability and renewal. This ark could embody resilience, cooperation, and creativity, enabling humanity to weather both literal floods and the virtual torrents of information that threaten to overwhelm us. By drawing from past narratives while reading the signs of the times, we can build a future rooted in hope and responsibility, ensuring that life thrives even after the storm has passed.