To change the world for the better, you first have to imagine what that better world might be. That’s the attitude of Superhero Clubhouse, a theatre company based in New York City. Through thought-provoking performances and education programmes, its goal is to get people talking about the environment and the future in a different way.

“We want to use theatre to model the kind of society we want to live in,” says co-director Jeremy Pickard when I ask him to define the company’s mission. “Our goal is to make theatre accessible for as many people as possible, and use theatre to promote environmental justice.”

Fellow co-director Lanxing Fu says this work – which Superhero Clubhouse calls eco-theatre – is an essential part of changing attitudes towards environmental justice and the climate crisis.

“Imagination is one of our greatest and most overlooked political tools,” she affirms. “We’ve seen over and over again that policies fail when they are not supported by a narrative. Stories help create a shift in the wider culture. On our own we can’t create the change, but we can as part of a wider ecosystem working towards shared goals.”

On one level, the company’s work is similar to that of many other theatres: it creates performances that are shared with the general public. However, these performances are always centred on environmental issues, and often the form of the performance...

WE COULD BE HEROES

SUPERHERO CLUBHOUSE IS AIMING TO SAVE THE PLANET BY CHANGING ATTITUDES TO THE ENVIRONMENT. CO-DIRECTORS LANXING FU AND JEREMY PICKARD TALK ECO-THEATRE, EDUCATION AND OPTIMISM WITH ANDREW ANDERSON
comments on the issue itself. Pickard cites its 2018 show *Jupiter* as an example.

“*Jupiter* explored the question of power: who has the power to change our climate future? The premise was that our main character – an Elon Musk type of entrepreneur – has a magic ability to make all fossil fuels disappear overnight. They then escape to a pod orbiting Jupiter. The play itself is a dialogue between the entrepreneur and the people left back on earth as they try to deal with the situation.

“We also try to be holistic in terms of our design. So in *Jupiter*, we used a lighting rig powered by solar panels, which meant the strength of the light varied depending on the conditions. And there was a monitor on one side of the stage that tracked the energy use of the production in real time. It helps the audience to think about the issue in a concrete way and promotes the dialogue we want to create.”

That word dialogue is key – Superhero Clubhouse’s plays don’t have an overt message. Instead, the aim is to get the audience thinking and talking about a particular issue or challenge. They do this through what they call ‘impossible questions’.

Fu explains: “Eco-theatre poses questions that are hard to answer, so we can instigate critical thinking from the audience. We want the audience to examine those hard questions with us – usually a moral dilemma or a paradox.

“For example, we had a piece on overpopulation and the impossible question was ‘should we have children?’ The question for *Jupiter* was ‘should we impose radical change for the greater good’. It’s impossible to answer because who is doing the imposing? Who defines the greater good? What actually is radical change? There’s no single answer for those questions, so it inspires critical thinking.”

A common problem faced by environmentalists is that the climate crisis can be overwhelming – people feel the problem is too big to solve. To combat this, Superhero Clubhouse makes sure each piece of work has a note of hope.

“Tangible hope is really important,” says Pickard. “We always have to construct our stories so they avoid doom and gloom. Fatalism and apocalyptic thinking do not serve the environmental justice movement.”

Adds Fu: “It is not wishful thinking, either. It has to be hope grounded in something tangible. We can still hold onto loss and grief, but we must be looking ahead. So the US re-joining the Paris Climate Agreement is an example of tangible hope. And the racial justice movement is, too.”

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When it comes to who works on the project, Superhero Clubhouse uses a flexible model, with Fu and Pickard as the only full time staff. Each project then draws from a pool of regular collaborators that they refer to as core members.

“They are the heartbeat of our organisation,” explains Pickard. “We meet with them monthly so that we can have a regular dialogue with people around ecology and the climate crisis. We’re always asking ‘how can theatre serve these issues?’ Our core members are not only theatre makers: they’re teachers, activists, researchers and multi-disciplinary artists.”

Notes Fu: “Each project has a different team of people with different skillsets. On each project we can work with the appropriate people who have the skills needed.”

Right now Fu and Pickard are working on a new show that will premiere at Theatre Row in New York City in 2022. But the pair are also thinking about how their work can exist outside of a theatre – and whether the traditional theatre model is the best option for eco-theatre.

Explains Pickard: “These days we are asking questions like ‘what is the most effective way to create spaces for audiences to think about our impossible questions? For example, we have a project called Hike-Play that takes the form of a walk in the woods. Is that a space that can give people the space to confront these things in a way you can’t when you’re sat in a theatre?’

Before we end the interview I ask Fu and Pickard to share some moments of hope with me – what has inspired them to keep pushing their eco-theatre project forward?”

“Our Hike-Plays have really inspired me,” answers Pickard. “I went on one with someone last year and afterwards the person told me ‘I don’t remember the last time I had the space to have this conversation’. That felt really hopeful.”

Fu’s answer, meanwhile, comes from Superhero Clubhouse’s work in local schools, where they regularly lead workshops and other educational programmes.

“In one of the classes we were diving into the impacts of the climate crisis,” she begins. “It did stir up fear in some of the students. One of them said ‘I’m scared – what is going to happen to me?’ But before any of the artists were able to jump in another student ran over and said ‘it’s okay to be scared…but we’re going to work together and figure it out’.

“What was profound about that for me is that we often underestimate the resilience of young people and the power and knowledge they have.”