

Threads: Climate Art for Radio by Ergon Theatre
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As part of #LoveLowry, The Lowry commissioned Ergon Theatre to create a piece of climate art for radio. The result, *Threads*, is a short audio play about online shopper Charley as she follows the journey of a t-shirt from inception to delivery with assistance from AI voice operator WILFRED. The piece was written by Sam Black, Robin Lyons and Noé Sébert.

The Journey of a T-Shirt

In just 18 minutes, Ergon Theatre takes us on a journey around the world. The journey of a t-shirt. From the cotton being picked in a field in Texas to it being transported via the Gulf of Mexico to Bogotá, Colombia, where it is turned into yarn; then on to Dhaka in Bangladesh so the yarn can be woven into cloth and dyed; to a Shanghai factory where the t-shirt is made; next to Milan for storage and shipping; and finally, after various planes, trains and automobiles, the t-shirt reaches your (or in this case, Charley's) doorstep.

Each stop on the journey is described by WILFRED, which by use of its “random voice generator” speaks in a different voice each time. These different voices keep the story fresh as well as each section clearly defined. The tone and intonation of each of WILFRED’s modulations also fit in well with the various locations. The Colombian part of the story, for example, is narrated in a calm, melodic voice. It gives a real sense of the Caribbean. While in Milan, the words are said with the *joie de vivre* we’d expect from the fashion capital of the world. My personal favourite is the Shanghai leg of our tour, which is spoken in the style of a beat poem.

What really adds to these various modulations is the detail with which each location is described. It sets the scene and gives you a good sense of the unique places. Together with the music and sound design (which was expertly supplied by Robin Lyons), these elements

paint the picture superbly. I could easily imagine every new destination in my mind's eye - as if I was actually travelling from Texas to Milan and beyond myself.

And then there are the facts we learn along the way. I always find a piece of art that simultaneously entertains and teaches much more fulfilling, and *Threads* does just that. We learn that it takes 30 bathtubs of water to make a t-shirt (I realise that sounds strange out of context). We also learn that the people (mainly women) who dye our clothes actually stand in the pool of dye, barefoot and without gloves, while later drinking from the rivers that the factories dump their waste into. And we learn much more besides.

Self-Destruct in 10... 9... 8...

The main point to this chronicle of the birth of a t-shirt is to show us just how unsustainable and toxic it really is. There are pesticides and insecticides used in Texan cotton fields, bleach and dye in Dhaka. Not to mention all of the fossil fuels being burned by the trucks, cargo ships, planes, trains, delivery vans, and most of all, by the factories.

The one common thread (get it?!) at each location discussed is how cities are getting more polluted and nature is becoming more scarce; how sea levels are rising and weather all over the world is growing more extreme. This industry is one of many that is killing our planet. And in a much shorter time frame, it's also killing the people who work so hard to make sure that your t-shirt looks the way you want it to and turns up when you want it to.

Oh, the Humanity!

During WILFRED's account of the t-shirt's journey, Charley is little more than a spectator, only saying a few words in reaction along the way to break up WILFRED's lengthy descriptions. It's only at the beginning, as she orders her t-shirt, and at the end when she comments on the terrible implications the manufacture and transport of our clothes has on our planet, that Charley is more involved in the discussion. But even then, WILFRED seems to have a lot more to say about how us humans should treat our planet than Charley, an actual human. It speaks volumes when the AI seems to have more humanity.

You see, Charley is understandably shaken by what she learns - how tragic the creation of just one t-shirt is, for our planet as well as for the workers breathing in toxic fumes. Yet in the end she cares more about how the t-shirt looks than the lives that it threatens. And although I won't ruin the ending, I will say that it's the perfect example of the selfishness of the human race.

Because, let's face it, we are all Charley. She is a stand-in for us. We want to do something, to help our planet, to be the change. Yet we are so used to a certain way of life, we find it easier to bury our heads in the sand; to just keep falling back into the same patterns, repeating the same selfish behaviour that will only leave our planet in disrepair; that will surely leave an inhospitable environment for future generations - maybe even our own children. In the end, talk is cheap, but survival comes at great cost.

It reminds me of my favourite film quote, from Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York*:

“We're all hurtling towards death. Yet here we are, for the moment, alive. Each of us knowing we're going to die. Each of us secretly believing we won't.”

To Conclude...

Overall, *Threads* is a great piece of art. It entertains and informs. It keeps you engaged. It makes you think. But most of all, it makes you worry. And that's something we should all be doing much more of these days.

So to end my review, I'll leave you with some choice words from WILFRED the AI:

“You are self-programmed. Say you program yourself to cut down on cheese. And then your co-inhabitants also cut down on cheese. This may carry on until your local supermarket stops stocking cheese because no one buys it anymore. That's your power. Influence through action.”

But, as it later points out:

“But what do I know? I'm an AI. I don't eat cheese.”