

Head: An immersive theater production educates audiences about pollution in South Los Angeles

Subhead: Environmental activists are taking creative approaches to tell stories about families living in sacrifice zones

By Jasmine Kwok

The stench of traffic exhaust lingers in the air. It wafts into the kitchen, where two sisters bicker over planning a surprise birthday party for their mother. Children play soccer in the backyard despite advisories to stay inside. While preparing for celebration, the family is constantly reminded of how difficult it is to breathe. For some Los Angeles households, this is reality. This time, however, the fumes are simulated and the family consists of actors performing in a museum.

Through their immersive theater exhibition, “Sacrifice Zone: Los Angeles” (SZLA), filmmaker Michael Bodie and playwright Paula Cizmar teamed up to raise awareness about local areas heavily polluted by industry. Displayed in the [Natural History Museum](#), SZLA prompted visitors to interact with text, art and live performances to enter the world of a family living along the Interstate 710 corridor.

“There’s pollution, and it’s harming the health of the fenceline communities that are often the least powerful group in our society,” Bodie said. “By providing multiple ways into this story, folks who are participating can walk away with a much deeper understanding and, hopefully, an emotional connection to the individual.”

Nicknamed the “Diesel Death Zone,” South Los Angeles neighborhoods from Wilmington to San Pedro experience some of the worst air quality in the country from port-related activities, with 50,000 diesel-fueled trucks traveling the Interstate 710 every day, according to SZLA’s [webpage](#).

Detailed in a [Grist investigation](#), Wilmington has the fourth youngest population out of 264 Los Angeles county neighborhoods yet has seen an uptick in deaths from conditions exacerbated by air pollution, such as heart and lung disease. This raises concern for young residents; a [2023 Keck School of Medicine study](#) found that children more exposed to pollutants are prone to develop a myriad of health issues that could hinder brain development.

Bodie said they translated this research into an educational yet entertaining experience to spur audience engagement. From oil drilling at AllenCo Energy to Wilmington's health crisis, the exhibit addressed broader environmental concerns by pinpointing personal anecdotes.

"It became a much bigger project but was ultimately focused on bringing the community's stories to life," Bodie said. "Although it was fictionalized, the elements of these stories were very real and came out of conversations we had with the community."

USC MFA dramatic writing students in Cizmar's "Creating Characters" class developed the exhibit's driving narrative: a multigenerational family prepares for their matriarch's birthday while expressing distress over living with unhealthy air quality.

To uplift their scenes, students collected stories from members of [People Not Pozos](#), a local grassroots campaign dedicated to eliminating oil drilling in residential communities.

"No one knows better than the community the specific impacts to their health and what the campaign has consisted of," said campaign coordinator Hugo Garcia. "The producers of the play can produce what they feel is going on, but the community is the one that informs them."

Eliza Kuperschmid, a USC graduate writer for SZLA, said discovering shared experiences with community members enabled her to find her personal stake in the project.

"I come from New Jersey—the suburbs— and I didn't really know about sacrifice zones," Kuperschmid said. "But I told the story of my family and what I believe in, and it ended up relating to these issues. My grandmother makes flan, so that was a big part of it. Turns out that something specific became universal."

"That banality of everyday life is something we all experience," Bodie said. "Sometimes, it's just having a normal conversation with our family. You get frustrated but still love each other, and that's true across every culture across the world. By providing that way in, you open up everyone's hearts to those folks and these issues."

Bodie said that experimenting with the media arts offers creators like Kuperschmid the opportunity to use mediation to connect with audiences on an intimate level.

"I want to create something that people feel comfortable seeing," Kuperschmid said. "Something that has an accessible message that speaks to people."

According to Garcia, the next step would be to put activists' triumphs on display. Most recently, People Not Pozos members persuaded regulators to plug in AllenCo's oil wells to halt the spread

of toxins. With this achievement, Garcia said he imagines an onstage rendition of SZLA that will culminate the victories at AllenCo and include community plans to remediate the space.

“Up to now, we’re discussing things in the context of the harm that’s being done and that there are campaigns fighting it,” he said. “But guess what? There’s light at the end of the tunnel. It’s important to demonstrate that we can win these battles.”

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