

Staging an Ecological *Doctor Faustus* in California in February 2025

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The word “ecological” comes from the Greek word *oikos*, for “home,” and so to stage ecological Marlowe (or Shakespeare, or anyone) is to stage these plays in a way that brings them home, within the community in which they are performed, here on our precious Earth. From 2011 to mid-2025, I worked at the University of California Merced (UC Merced) and lived in the Central Valley of California, a place plagued by high pollution rates from industrial agriculture and scorching hot summers that get longer each year. Wildfires in the nearby Sierra Nevada mountains—home to Yosemite National Park—frequently blacken our skies with smoke, and in January 2023, the least resourced parts of our city and a nearby farm town were devastated by floodwaters.

In response to these climate emergencies at home and around the world, as scholar, teacher, and practitioner of early modern drama I have been increasingly invested in studying, teaching, and creating ecologically inflected theatre. To that end, I co-founded Shakespeare in Yosemite in 2017, a UC Merced-sponsored project for which my collaborators and I create heavily adapted productions of Shakespeare in Merced and Yosemite National Park each April for Earth Day.

With co-writer and eco-director Elizabeth Freestone, I have argued elsewhere that comedy and tragicomedy are the most effective dramatic vessels for ecological storytelling; as many climate scientists, communications experts, and psychologists have argued, despair does not lead to action.¹ Elizabeth and I also maintain that given the adaptability of public domain texts, their attention to flora and fauna and power structures and suffering, and the fact that they can be used to evade censorship and attract wider audiences beyond the proverbial choir, Shakespeare is an ideal ecological playwright for our time.² But I am always trying to test the limits of my own theories. So it was that in the summer of 2024, when I was approached by Heike Hambley, the director of the local Merced Shakespearefest, asking if I would direct a staged reading at the start of their 2025 season, I decided I’d take on a play that is neither Shakespeare, nor a comedy: Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*.

¹ Katherine Steele Brokaw and Elizabeth Freestone, *Performing Shakespeare on an Endangered Planet* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

² Brokaw and Freestone.

As it turned out, those performances, held in downtown Merced in mid-February of 2025, ended up being, according to audiences and performers, some of the most powerful, timely, and indeed ecological on which I'd ever collaborated.³ In what follows, I will explain the thinking that went into my selection of this play, describe the adaptation and performances, and discuss audience responses and my own reflections on the production.

Preparing

When Heike asked me which play I might direct as a stage reading, I remember saying to her something to the effect of "I want to do *Faustus* as a climate change allegory. And in the final moments, as Faustus is being dragged off to hell, a screen behind him will display images from whatever fresh hell the planet is facing in early 2025." That is about as far as I had gotten in my conceptualizing at that point, and I knew that in order to make the adaptation as timely as possible, I would wait until January 2025 to work on it.

In the meantime, I watched in horror as my country elected a rapacious, amoral president in November 2024. A few months later, when Los Angeles, four and a half hours South of us and the home to many of my dearest friends, was engulfed in flames and smoke that made it look precisely like Hell on Earth, I realized that the realization of my dramaturgical dreams was a living nightmare. And by the time we got to February 2025, our president and his lackey of a vice president had appointed—without Congressional approval—the richest man in the world to destroy our government and its environmental protections in the name of efficiency, but in practice as a way to make billionaires richer. We were, and are, living in what feels to be a broadly written, cliché of a morality play, ruled by our own Lucifer-Beelzebub-Mephistopheles triumvirate, whose only consistency seems to be to embrace greed and abandon reason, to be profit-driven and future-blind. Rather like Faustus.

That January, before I began adapting the play, I wrote my director's note for the production, which was eventually printed in the programmes. It became a sort of thesis statement, articulating why I chose this play, and how I think it speaks to the climate crisis. I reproduce the note in full here, as it guided my adaptive and production process, and that of my collaborators, with whom I shared this note at the start of our one week of rehearsals:

³ A recording of the entire production is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip7Dr-DbcV4>.

There are many legends of Faustian bargains, from the legends Marlowe adapted for his play to Goethe's *Faust* to country music's "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" to the Broadway musical *Damn Yankees*. There's a reason this story sticks with us—we can all imagine ourselves as Faustus.

In the Christian worldview, selling your soul means selling what is sacredly human in you: your conscience, your personhood. But it also means selling off your future, and that's why Faustus does it. Twenty-four years feels like a long time: Faustus can convince himself that the time will go slowly (something he pleads for directly in the final monologue) and more dangerously, that his judgement won't *really* come, that, as he says to Mephistopheles, "hell is a fable."

And so it is with the climate crisis. We are told that by 2050 the oceans will contain more trash than fish; that feels a long way away, so we carry on producing and disposing of plastics. We know that catastrophes like the recent fires in Los Angeles will become more frequent the more the Earth's average temperatures increase, and yet we continue to burn fossil fuels.

We convince ourselves, too, that we won't *really* have to pay for our lifestyles, that climate change—and its ability to destroy life on Earth—is a myth, or at least an exaggeration.

Or, we tell ourselves, as Faustus does over and over in the play, that it is too late to act, that we cannot repent, change our ways, remake an earthly paradise. The sin of Pride—of thinking that climate change won't affect us, and the sin of Despair—the fatalism that says it's too late and we can't make a difference: these are the twin sins of *Doctor Faustus*, and the twin sins of the climate crisis.

It is not, in fact, too late. The Earth is resilient, the solutions are being developed. *Doctor Faustus* ends in tragedy. But humankind, let us make sure that the story of the only known planet in the universe to harbor life does not.

In these notes, I frequently use the pronoun "we," referring to we humans. Not long after this production, I read Genevieve Guenther's *The Language of Climate Politics* and I am persuaded by her argument that the use of the word "we" masks the fact that most of the living human souls on this planet are not, in fact, responsible for the climate crisis: gas and oil executives and slow moving or climate change-denying governments are.⁴ That said, we in the Global North emit far more carbon and consume far more resources than most other humans, and I believe that taking some responsibility for this—seeing ourselves as part of the "we" who needs to emend our ways—is both humbling and empowering in ways that are emotionally necessary for collective action. Additionally, as I say above, I believe that Marlowe's play does a good job, particularly in the B-text, of depicting a trio of powerful, manipulative evil-doers who have others (Faustus, Valdes, Cornelius) in their thrall, doing their bidding.

⁴ Genevieve Guenther, *The Language of Climate Politics: Fossil-Fuel Propaganda and How to Fight It* (Oxford University Press, 2024), ix–xi.

For this staged reading, I recruited a cast of folks I had worked with on both Merced Shakespearefest productions and Shakespeare in Yosemite productions, including several of my UC Merced students. I asked Greg Ruelas and Charlene West, veterans of the Merced Shakes stage, to play Faustus and Mephistopheles, respectively, and asked my frequent Yosemite Shakes collaborator Tonatiuh Newbold to be a musician for the show and play Lucifer. As I adapted, I worked with side-by-side A- and B-texts, using what was most fit for purpose from both throughout the show, and cutting all the Robin and Rafe clown scenes. This process yielded a roughly 80-minute show.

My initial idea was to perform the play without changing a word, and to simply project twenty-four years of climate catastrophe images on the screen behind the actors as the play progressed. But I quickly realized that the show would be more powerful, and its messaging clearer, with additional adaptation. As I always say when it comes to my eco-theatrical work, I owe much more to the twenty-first century than the sixteenth. Marlowe won't mind; if he would have minded, I don't care.



Figure 1: Greg Ruelas (Faustus) and Charlene West (Mephistopheles) in rehearsal.



Figure 2: Tonatiuh Newbold (Lucifer, Musician) in rehearsal.

The script I gave my actors for our week of rehearsals was almost entirely Marlovian, but, as I will describe below, we changed a few words here and there to make clear that the devils were to be seen as powerful corporate and governmental forces and that God and Mother Earth were related forces. We also added quotations from environmental writers between scenes to offset Faustus's greedy worldview with alternative ways of being, as well as several songs. All that being said, I was continually struck by how relevant many of Marlowe's sixteenth-century lines were in February 2025. The most resonant lines were projected on the screen when said, in between photographic images that helped tell the ecological story and ground it in California, 2025, right here on our Earth.

Because I was working with such a talented and thoughtful team, a week of rehearsals yielded a staged reading that was very staged indeed. All scenes were fully blocked, even though the actors were using their scripts. We utilized a desk and chairs, costumes and props (including devil horns handmade by UC Merced student Miranda Cruz). The show included several live songs played on guitar and piano, a choreographed devils' dance, and an 86-slide deck of images and quotations that were projected throughout.

Performing

When audiences entered the black box theatre of the Merced Multicultural Arts Center in downtown Merced, they saw a large screen on which was projected a 1962 quotation from scientist Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*:

We stand now where two roads diverge ... The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road—the one “less traveled by”—offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.⁵

This quotation, as well as the program notes in their hand, set up the ecological allegory. Faustus had a choice; humans, too, have choices. On the heels of the LA fires—which indirectly affected almost everyone in the audience—it was easy to see that in the sixty-three years since Carson's book, we had indeed been travelling on a superhighway leading towards disaster(s).

Further reflection on the choices we face was prompted by an opening song. Tonatiuh Newbold, accompanying himself on guitar, sang Tracy Chapman's “All That You Have is Your Soul.” Its chorus implored the doomed protagonist and the audience: “Don't be tempted by the shiny apple, don't you eat the forbidden fruit/Hunger only for a taste of justice, hunger only for a world of truth/'Cause all that you have is your soul.”⁶

While beloved local actor Dennis Brown (Chorus and Old Man) pronounced the play's opening exposition, the audience was introduced to Ruelas as Faustus as well as his university friends, Wagner and the three scholars (played by UC Merced students Joey Serrano, Phillip Gallo, and David Patridge, with Rachel Wohlander), who would play an elevated role in this production. Once at his desk, Faustus held up books as he cycled through his options for the subject on which to “settle [his] studies” (A 1.1.1).⁷ When he was contemplating Jerome's Bible, we substituted verses that contrasted a vengeful planet (and God) with one teeming with abundance. Faustus noted the harshness of the Old Testament prophet Hosea in book 4, verse 1:

The Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land. Therefore shall the land mourn, and

⁵ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring & Other Writings on the Environment*, ed. Sandra Steingraber (Library of America, 2017), 241.

⁶ Tracy Chapman, “All That You Have is Your Soul.” *Crossroads*. Elektra, 1989.

⁷ All line numbers refer to Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus: A- and B-Texts*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester University Press, 1997).

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everyone that dwelleth therein shall languish with the beasts of the field and with the fowls of heaven; yea, the fishes of the sea also shall be taken away.

But Faustus was also displeased with the anti-capitalist nature of Jesus's rhetorical question in the Sermon on the Mount, from Matthew 6:26: "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?"

As he rejected fields of study, Ruelas's Faustus physically threw books (not the Bible) on the ground, dismissing a stack of literature before pronouncing his joy at finding the books of necromancy. That subject, in a slight emendation, promised power, honour, and omnipotence to "the studious artisan of commerce" (based on A 1.1.57). Faustus flipped through books about, for example, how to amass "Tax-Free Wealth." To highlight the magical thinking involved in capitalism ("A sound magician is a mighty god" [A 1.1.64]), the screen behind him displayed the cover of David Schwartz's *The Magic of Thinking Big*. The books left discarded on the ground were all environmental books that the scholars would pick up and orally excerpt later in the show.



Figure 3: Greg Ruelas as Faustus. Production still (film by William Serg George).

Dressed in business attire and peppering their conversation with handshakes, Cornelius and Valdes (David Hambley and Heike Hambley) made their conversation with Faustus seem transactional: he was making a deal with them. Some of Cornelius's lines were put on the screen, creating relevant new meanings in the 2020s:

The spirits tell me they can dry the sea
And fetch the treasure of all foreign wrecks—
Ay, all the wealth that our forefathers hid
Within the massy entrails of the earth. (A 1.1.146–9)

The lines were displayed with pictures of offshore drilling and strip mines. By the time Cornelius asked “what shall we three lack?” if they took these treasures from the depths of the ocean and rock, it was clear that Faustus was joining forces with extractive industry (A 1.1.150).



Figure 5: Greg Ruelas as Faustus talks to Heike Hambley as Valdes and David Hambley as Cornelius as Joey Serrano as Wagner looks on. Production still.

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During the transition to Act 1, Scene 3, Newbold began playing the Rolling Stones's "Sympathy for the Devil," different verses of which were sung between many of the scenes involving Faustus's deal-making and choices to continue down the "smooth superhighway" leading to destruction.

By the time Faustus met Mephistopheles, embodied by West as a gorgeous blonde businesswoman, images of industrial destruction were being used to highlight descriptions of the hell that Faustus could not believe existed. "Why this is hell, and I am not out of it," said Mephistopheles (we slightly altered the line for clarity), her words displayed above an image of a polluting factory (adapted from A 1.3.78).



Figure 6: Greg Ruelas as Faustus and Charlene West as Mephistopheles. Production still.

With Act 1, Scene 4 (a clown scene) cut, the transition to Act 2 scene 1's deed signing scene was marked by Scholar 1 picking up Octavia Butler's *Notes for Predicting the Future* and reading out a searching passage: "Why try to predict the future at all...? Because making predictions is one way to give warning when we see ourselves drifting in dangerous directions... Because our tomorrow is the child of our today."⁸ Caring to predict the future is, of course, what Faustus fails to do: in the play's early scenes, he is unable to see what kind of progeny the choices he's making today will bring forth tomorrow.

⁸ Octavia Butler, *A Few Rules for Predicting the Future* (Chronicle Books, 2000; 2024), 55.



Figure 7: David Patridge as Scholar 1 reads Octavia Butler.

At the top of act 2, when Faustus asks if he must “needs be damned” (2.1.1), his words were slightly emended so that he implored himself to “Abjure this magic, turn to Mother Nature, to God again” (adapted from A 2.1.8). The words of the Good Angel (UC Merced grad student Sabreena Niles) were accompanied by images of trees, animals, and the natural world; when the Evil Angel (played by me, substituting for a sick actor) spoke, we displayed images of industry and climate catastrophe. When Faustus began to waver after the words “*homo fuge!*” seemed to appear on his bloody arm, Mephistopheles’ distractions “to delight his mind” included images of yachts, mansions, Cryptocurrency, and swelling stock portfolios, which were pointed out by Cornelius, Valdes, Evil Angel, and Beelzebub (Hannah Maulden) while Newbold, now wearing his Lucifer crown (a reused Oberon crown from a recent *Dream I* directed in Yosemite, in which Oberon was a fire king), accompanied the sequence on his guitar (A 2.1.82 and S.D).

The deed being signed, the transition between Faustus’s deal-making scene and his next conversation with Mephistopheles was marked by Scholar 2 picking up Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *The Serviceberry* to read out a quotation, one that I hope in some way echoed the verse from Matthew that Faustus had disregarded:

Enumerating the gifts you’ve received creates a sense of abundance ... Recognizing “enoughness” is a radical act in an economy that is always urging us to consume more ... Climate catastrophe and biodiversity loss are the consequences of unrestrained taking by humans. Might cultivation of gratitude be part of the solution?⁹

⁹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World* (Scribner, 2024), 12–13.

By the time the action moved to Faustus's conversations with the angels and Mephistopheles and the presentation of the Seven Deadly Sins in 2.3, the screen began showing periodic reminders of the passage of time; at the start of that scene, it said "Year Four" over a picture of a factory polluting a river.

For the presentation of the sins, Tonatiuh *qua* Lucifer played manic, minor chords on his guitar while each of the seven personified sins' lines were accompanied by a topical picture: a Gucci bag for Covetousness, a bombed hospital in Gaza for Wrath, someone playing video games for Sloth, etc. For the dance, six of the seven actors embodying the sins held their script folders up to create the number seven as actor-dancer David Patridge (Covetousness) leapt and pirouetted around them, always to laughter and applause.



Figure 8: The Seven Deadly Sins. Production Still.

Sin was made to look fun, but when the scene ended, Scholar 3 picked up *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*, edited by Rebecca Solnit and

others, and read a sobering but not despairing quotation from Solnit: “It is late. We are deep in an emergency. But it is not too late, because the emergency is not over. The outcome is not decided. We are deciding it now.”¹⁰ The title of the book—*Not Too Late*—echoes a frequent thread between Faustus and the Evil and Good Angels:

FAUSTUS Is’t not too late?

EVIL ANGEL Too late.

GOOD ANGEL Never too late, if Faustus will repent.

EVIL ANGEL If thou repent, devils shall tear thee in pieces. (A 2.3.78–80)

Whenever given the chance, we attempted to highlight the way that Faustus’s despair—his worry that it was too late to change his fate—mirrored that of climate catastrophizers and nihilists. Indeed, one of the consistent messages climate scientists and activists convey is that giving up—whether out of fear or resignation—is not an option. Environmental solutions are being developed every day, and it is still possible to mitigate the worst projections for a climate apocalypse. To look at the headlines and decide that it’s all hopeless and sink into an understandable but unproductive depression, or to just shrug and think “it is what it is” before ordering a steak or prepping off the grid or simply going on with one’s life: both of these responses, while not denying the crisis, commit the sin of giving up hope on a situation that is not, in fact, hopeless and is, in fact, desperately in need of our full powers of attention and stamina.

Doctor Faustus is not a simple *de casibus* tragedy, an example of the wheel of fortune lifting a person to the highest heights before dramatically dropping them, with little agency on the tragic hero’s part. Nor is it the case that he continues to believe that hell is a fable, that he continues to deny his reality. Faustus’s tragedy is that he insists on tragedy: that, deep into his allotted time before his soul becomes Lucifer’s, he will not repent; he refuses to change. Humans need to listen to our version of a Good Angel: it is “never too late,” but we (and “we” here primarily refers to gas and oil executives, governments, and other powerful figures in the Global North) need to repent.

For his trip to Rome, images of modern Rome and the papal palace were used but little was changed, and the antics of the “invisible” Faustus knocking the script out of the hands of the Pope (aptly played by Merced Shakespearefest director Heike Hambley) always elicited laughs, as did the friars’ mock-serious dirge.

¹⁰ Rebecca Solnit, Thelma Young, and Lutunata Bua, eds., *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility* (Haymarket Books, 2017), 3.



Figure 9: Charlene West as Mephistopheles and Greg Ruelas as Faustus in rehearsal.

By the time Faustus met with Emperor Charles, it was Year Twelve, and he was halfway through his twenty-four allotted years. The year was illustrated with a picture of carnage from a mega storm: upside down cars, buildings reduced to rubble. In a quick contrast, the background changed to an opulent marble interior for Faustus' conjuring of Alexander the Great and his paramour.

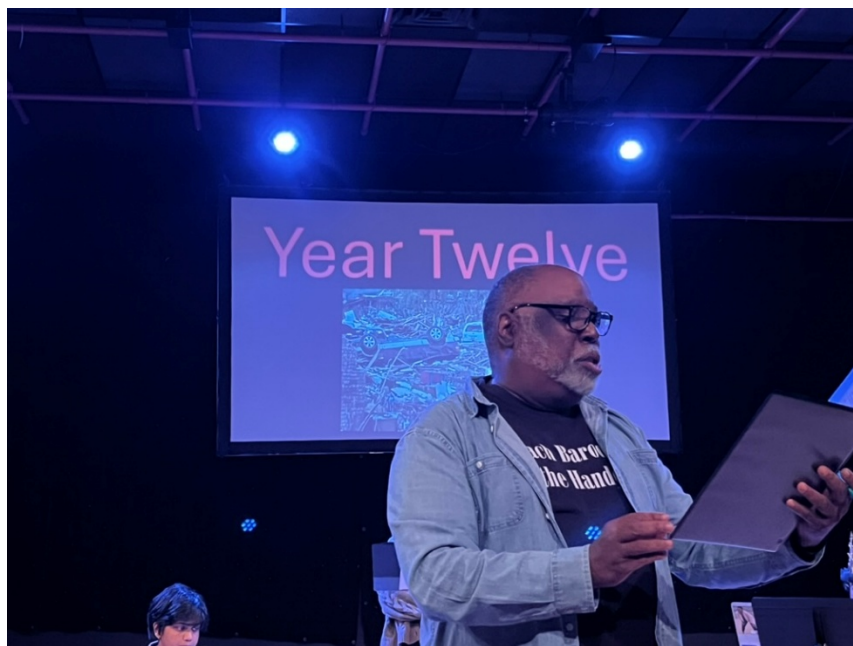


Figure 10: Dennis Brown as Chorus.

Faustus met with the Duke and Duchess of Vanholt in Year Sixteen (image: a flood, cars and people stranded in several feet of standing water). When he fulfilled the Duchess's request for out-of-season grapes, the screen displayed the sorcery that makes this modern magic possible: a cargo ship and a diesel truck stacked with grapes from the Southern Hemisphere.

Time began to move more quickly as we moved into act 5, which was prefaced by the scholars reading three quotations, two from religious sources: "The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently" (this quotation is from David Graeber).¹¹ From Job 12:7: "But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, they will tell you; ask the plants of the Earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you." And from the holy Qur'an 25: 63: "The true servants of the Most Compassionate are those who walk on the earth humbly."

After their pronouncements, Tonatiuh began singing another song, the 1990's 4 Non-Blondes classic "What's Up?"¹² The song is widely known and catchy enough that for both performances, by the time we got to the lilting chorus—"And I say 'hey-ey-ey-ey, hey-ey-ey' / I said 'hey, what's going on?'"—every single person in both the cast and audience was singing along, both nights. In February 2025, that question, posed by Marvin Gaye in the early 1970s and by 4 Non-Blondes in the 90s—had reached a fever pitch.

It was Year Twenty by the time Faustus conjured Helen, marked by the image of an oil-drenched pelican. But as with oil spills, so with Faustus: it is not too late to reverse course. When Dennis Brown as the Old Man, himself a practicing Catholic and music director at a local church, approached Faustus, he did so singing the hymn "Touch the Earth Lightly," a Christian eco-anthem.¹³ It was important to me to not eradicate religion from Marlowe's play; it remains as powerful a force in twenty-first century American politics as it was in sixteenth century England's. More importantly, there are both secular *and* religious reasons to, as Brown's Old Man's song admonishes, "nourish the life of the world in our care." All believers and non-believers need to cooperate on climate solutions.

¹¹ David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules* (Melville House, 2015), 89.

¹² 4 Non-Blonds, "What's Up?," *Bigger, Better, Faster, More* (Atlantic, 1992).

¹³ Shirley Erena Murray, "Touch the Earth Lightly." Hope Publishing, 1992.



Figure 11: Dennis Brown as Old Man and Greg Ruelas as Faustus, in rehearsal.

In his final confrontation with Faustus at the close of Act 5, Scene 1, the Old Man quoted the Bible again, this time from Jeremiah 2:7: “I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable.” As the scene transitioned and the year moved to Year twenty-three, Good Angel quoted John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “Long is the way and hard, that out of Hell leads up to light” (Book 2, 432–33).¹⁴ We began planting the seed: this Faustus would lead us to Hell, but this production would also hint at how we might find the light.

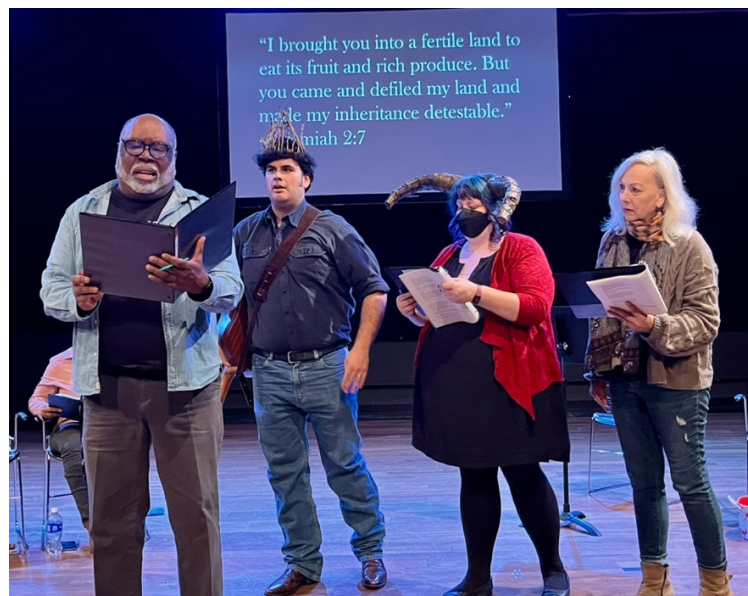


Figure 12: Dennis Brown as Old Man, Tonatiuh Newbold as Lucifer, Hannah Maulden as Beelzebub, and Charlene West as Mephistopheles in rehearsal.

¹⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (Norton, 2004).

By the play's final scenes, the images became Californian, closer to our Merced home. Year twenty-three was marked by a Sierra Nevada wildfire as Lucifer, Mephistopheles, and Beelzebub gathered around Faustus (B 5.2). For Year twenty-four, a few minutes later, we displayed an image of the 2023 Merced floods devastating an area less than a mile from the place of performance. Images flicked back and forth between giant sequoias and orange, fire-choked skies as the Good and Evil Angels made their final cases, and when the stage direction read "Hell is Discovered" (B 5.2.120 SD), an image of the Los Angeles wildfires, only recently contained, was overlaid with a clock: it was 11:00 pm. More images from that horrendous event flashed as Faustus pleaded for more time, and soon it was 11:30, then, at last, midnight. A student intern, Kat Corti, was in the light booth (the lights themselves had been set for a different show) and at our final rehearsal figured out how to make the lighting go red and then to black in these final moments, which were acoustically accompanied by the cast stamping their feet to create thunder.



Figures 13 and 14: Greg Ruelas as Faustus in rehearsal.

And then: lights back up, in cooler tones. The Good Angel stood before an image of Los Angeles after the fires, smoke clearing, and quoted Kimmerer again: "There's a story that begins here. Or maybe it ends. It depends on us."¹⁵ After the scholars discovered Faustus's

¹⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Ancient Green: Moss, Climate, and Deep Time." *Emergence Magazine*, 2022. <https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/ancient-green/>

body (we did not have a prop for this, so they mimed the action), Brown as Chorus/Old Man read a slightly revised conclusion:

Faustus is gone. Regard his hellish fall
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise,
To only wonder at these things...
But not be tempted to forget our world. (adapted from B Epilogue.4–6, 8)

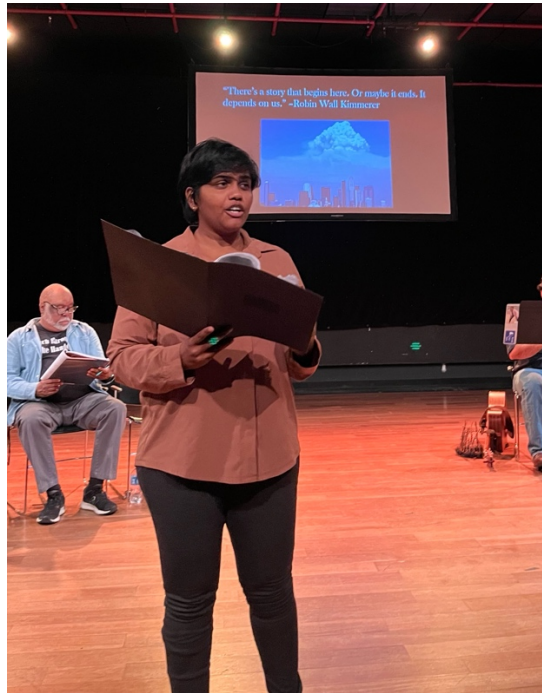


Figure 15: Sabreena Niles as Good Angel in rehearsal.

While we were in rehearsals, American writer and activist Rebecca Solnit started a newsletter and website, “Meditations in an Emergency,” to write about the mounting environmental, social, and judicial injustices of the new administration. Scholar 2 emerged, reading something she’d written days before we performed:

It is worth noting that the word “emergency” is built out of “emerge,” as in to exit or rise out of something; the opposite of merge, when things come together. An emergency is when things come apart—it can be a breakage but also opening, and it’s related to the words “emergence” and “emergent.”¹⁶

While we had chosen to produce a tragedy, we could not bear to leave the audience with the images of hell, with only the images of emergency. Something needs to, and can, emerge from this crisis (a word whose Greek origins mean “moment of judgement”).

¹⁶ Rebecca Solnit, “Welcome to Meditations in an Emergency.” <https://www.meditationsinanemergency.com/welcome-to-meditations-in-an-emergency/> February 2, 2025.



Figure 16: Phillip Gallo as Scholar 2 in rehearsal.

After Scholar 2 quoted Solnit, Newbold began playing and singing, along with Brown, the song “Beautiful City” from the musical *Godspell* on the piano. The lyrics were eerily relevant to the rebuilding necessary in the City of Angels (the meaning of Los Angeles in Spanish as well as a widely used nickname for it), beginning to happen a few hours South of us:

Out of the ruins and rubble
Out of the smoke
Out of our night of struggle
Can we see a ray of hope?¹⁷

Slightly altering the lyrics to make them gender neutral and not anthropocentric (the original lyrics call for building a “City of Man”), Newbold and Brown sang that

We can build a beautiful city, yes we must
Not a city of angels
But we can build a city of us.

¹⁷ Stephen Schwartz, “Beautiful City.” *Godspell*. Sony, 1973.

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Figures 17 and 18: cast during the finale of Doctor Faustus. Production stills.

As they sang, the entire cast came forward and mimed actions of renewal: one cluster planted a tree, another nailed and painted a house, another did clean-up. Images behind us displayed UC Merced's own solar farm, Merced's downtown, Habitat for Humanity volunteers. In the

final moment, the entire cast lined the front of the stage and joined in unison for the song's last words: "but finally a city of us."

Reflecting

Both performances were relatively well attended, with around 200 people seeing the show over the course of the weekend. Comments after the first show, texts, and social media posts revealed that the first performance was well received. One reflected:

Doctor Faustus presented by Merced Shakespearefest was fantastic! The adaptation connects the story of selling one's soul to the devil to get rewards to our steadfast addiction to our way of life. Faustus eventually pays the price with his soul to the devil. This staged reading shows us that the climate crisis is our ultimate price.

Another spectator, who in the following months began to lead a community-centred garden group and tool library, reflected on the ending, saying that:

I hope it continues to be shown and other theaters around the world mount it as well. It was heartwarming when you all were putting together the city because this group I am working with came and dug up part of my yard to make a community garden yesterday. God, it's the only thing I know to do right now: be in this community, helping.

If one audience member reflected on the harrowing effects of the Global North's consumerist lifestyle and another was moved by the depiction of collective and localized action, we did our job.

After the second and final performance, we held a talkback with the actors, crew, and audience. In one of the more emotional and engaged such talkbacks I'd ever seen, our *Faustus* team and spectators alike reflected on how powerful the play was at that particular moment of crisis. One audience member said that the clock during Faustus's final monologue reminded him of how scientists say we are at 11:59 pm and some seconds on the Doomsday clock, and many others connected Faustus's refusal to listen to Good Angel and repent to humans' refusal to change their lifestyle in light of not only scientific warnings, but also mounting disasters. Student actor David Patridge confessed that it was his first time acting in an early modern drama, and he was surprised to realize how relevant it was in 2025. Several folks commented that the play made them think about their own addiction to consuming material things that don't actually make them happy, and more folks discussed the way the production highlighted how some of the most meaningful action we can take happens at the community level. When Heike asked if people would like to see a fully staged version in the

future, there was an enthusiastic response, with several folks chiming in that they'd like for more people to see and hear the show's message.

It was encouraging to hear how many people "got it," down to a few people remarking that the Lucifer-Beelzebub-Mephistopheles reminded them of Trump-Vance-Musk, despite the fact that none of the actors in any way resemble those perceived counterparts. I was particularly pleased (and also, of course, horrified) at this correspondence. Echoing Guenther's challenge to climate conversations that focus on the word "we" to implicate all humans, I think *Faustus* does a good job of showing that there are a powerful few who can manipulate the desires and lives of a susceptible and vulnerable many.

When I chose to stage this play in 2024, during the election season, I could never have predicted this level of relevance. It occurred to me that part of the reason the play was so powerful, so dramatically successful, was because we were living through such a hellish, greedy, despairing period of history. Had February 2025 been one month into a Kamala Harris administration, the production might well have been less potent. Indeed, the climate crisis would still have been in full swing, but the attacks on the environment, at least in our country, would have been less overt, more subtle.

Marlowe's play, for all its theological complexity, is not subtle: a man sells his soul to the devil and twenty-four years later, he is dragged off to hell, the end. Our adaptation wasn't particularly subtle, either: in a Brechtian fashion, relevant quotations glowed on the screen along with images of climate catastrophe, and the pictures of hell were ripped from a recent news cycle. Early in my career, I studied medieval and Tudor morality plays that influenced Marlowe's dramaturgy in *Doctor Faustus*. When I taught them, students often interpreted their lack of subtlety as crude, inartistic, bombastic, which was my initial impression, too. But I now feel a kinship with the periods that produced *Mankind*, *Everyman*, and *Respublica*, a play whose title we could translate as "The Common Good." Morality plays make big, broad universal claims that may be unsubtle, but they are precisely the kind of claims that help us address ourselves as a whole, to, on a planetary level, identify evildoers in the world, and vulnerability to temptation and despair within ourselves. Mankind is at risk, Every Man is at risk, and we need to all work toward the common good.

It is 2026, and a man whose last name means to defeat or outrank someone in a game or in life is colluding with the world's richest man to make life easier for the rich, harder for the poor; if they are not stopped and if there are worldwide imitators, any life on Earth, including that of their own descendants, will be impossible, our Earthly paradise replaced with the fires of hell. But if we don't despair at this fact, we can change our fate; we can do

what Faustus continually refuses to do. *Doctor Faustus* is, for better or worse, a play for our time.

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