



## SAVING THE SCENE: SCENERY BAGS CASE STUDY

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Stage managers are at times called on to “save the scene,” but one stage manager found her calling “saving the scenery.” Jennifer Kahn spent 17 years as a theatrical stage manager and four years writing a blog on ethical style and giving back. Through this work, she realized that used theatrical backdrops posed a particular environmental challenge as textile waste. Since they are painted, often many layers thick, they cannot go through the regular channels of textile recycling. So, Jennifer was inspired to turn this unwanted material into fashionable, one-of-a-kind handbags themed to the theatrical production from which the drop was retired. Since that initial inspiration, her company, “Scenery” has diverted 29,150 lbs. of theatrical material from the landfill.<sup>1</sup> They have also expanded their product line to include jewelry made from retired show decks (the floor of a theatrical production).

### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH TEXTILE WASTE?

Textile waste is a massive problem across the globe, and particularly in America. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 17 million tons of textiles were sent into the waste stream in 2018, which accounted for 5.8% of the total Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) generation for that year. Of that amount, 2.5 million tons were recycled (14%), 3.2 million tons were incinerated, and 11.3 million tons were sent to landfill (7.7% of MSW sent to landfill that year).<sup>2</sup> Fabrics made from natural fibers act like food waste in the landfill, producing methane as they slowly breakdown, and yet these fibers cannot be composted like food waste because they have been chemically treated in the process of being made into clothing. Meanwhile, synthetic fibers which are made of petroleum derived plastic take hundreds to thousands of years to breakdown in the landfill.<sup>3</sup> This problem of textile waste led Scenery to tackle a small corner of the issue specifically related to the entertainment industry.

## A CLIMATE POSITIVE MISSION

While the primary mission of Scenery is to reduce textile waste in landfills, they also want their factors of production to be as sustainable as possible. The United Nations defines sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>4</sup> With this critically important global challenge in mind, Scenery is taking action to be a “Climate Positive” company. Climate Positive, or carbon negative, practices and actions go above and beyond carbon neutrality by drawing down more atmospheric carbon than the company's carbon footprint emits.

To achieve a climate positive agenda and maximize positive impact on textile waste, Scenery is enacting sustainable solutions in three areas:

1. Responsible Material Consumption and Production
2. Renewable Energy and Carbon Offsets
3. Education and Partnerships

## RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

The mission of Scenery to divert theatrical materials from the landfill is, in and of itself, responsible consumption. To date, the company has diverted 29,150 lbs. of textile waste from the landfill.<sup>1</sup> Unused material is stored in two storage units for future products. Cloth is cut for zero waste and all remnants are saved with plans to create future up-cycled designs. And Scenery doesn't stop there. They want their resource consumption to be sustainable at every stage of production.

There are a few product components that must be sourced new, such as bag lining and zippers. The company is constantly seeking the most ethical and sustainable option for these components such as unbleached muslin for the bag lining and zippers made from recycled materials.

Scenery has only one manufacturer for handbags and one for jewelry. These manufacturers receive and clean the theatrical materials, manufacture the products and ship them to customers. The efficiency of this one-stop-shop reduces the emissions and packaging waste of shipping between multiple middle-men.

The company's primary material waste is the packaging used to ship to consumers. Scenery has already sourced environmentally-friendly, compostable and recycled/recyclable packing materials through [Eco Enclose](#). The Eco Enclose Recycled Poly Mailer is made of 100% recycled content. It is also recyclable, but needs to be taken to a grocery store or location that offers #4 recycling. The packaging presents a good educational opportunity for the Scenery customer. An insert is included with each order sharing the sustainable properties of the product, the sustainable actions of the company, and how to responsibly recycle the packaging.





## RENEWABLE ENERGY AND CARBON OFFSETS

There are certain Scope 3 emissions (emissions from sources not owned or controlled by the company) that cannot be reduced: the emissions from diesel freight shipments of materials and air shipment of finished product. To account for these unavoidable emissions, Scenery is launching a Carbon Offset program in April 2021 to coincide with Earth Month. This Climate Positive offset program will go beyond “carbon neutral.” It will not only offset the metric tons of CO2 equivalents from Scenery shipping, it will overshoot that amount in an effort to draw down more carbon than it emits.

## EDUCATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

As a give back company, Scenery has partnered with the [Theatre Development Fund](#), donating 10% of proceeds to programs that bring children to see Live Theatre through the Introduction to Live Theatre Program and the Accessibility for Students Program. The accessibility program “provides access to Broadway and Off-Broadway performances for elementary and secondary school students who are blind or low vision and/or deaf or hard of hearing.”<sup>1</sup> Scenery also designed bags specifically to support certain causes affecting the theatre community, including the “Only Intermission” bag which supported the [Broadway Advocacy Coalition](#) and the WICKED “Green Bag” with partial proceeds supporting the [Broadway Green Alliance](#) mission to make theatrical production more sustainable.

When it comes to collaborative partnerships, Scenery has already begun creating a network of resources for diverting usable scenic drops and decks to businesses who can reuse them. These businesses include local, high school, and college theaters, and non-profit reuse groups like Materials for the Arts. Jennifer Kahn is continually seeking the most responsible sources for her raw materials, including her current search for jewelry makers and metalsmiths using recycled metals. Any resources she finds, she is happy to share, wishing to provide a road map for others who want to make their own companies more sustainable. Jennifer's ultimate hope for Scenery is that it can expand beyond theatre and be a resource for the entertainment industry at large, helping all areas of the entertainment world upcycle their retired scenery into fashion accessories.

## CONCLUSION

For Jennifer Kahn, trying to make the most ethical, sustainable choices for her company has posed challenges. She says the perfectly sustainable solution for every facet of business operations is hard to find, so you weigh your choices. “Do you NOT make the thing because it isn't perfectly sustainable, or do you make it as best you can in order to upcycle this large thing otherwise destined for the landfill?” Her answer: “You do the best you can, and do a little better every day” and in doing so, Scenery is making the planet a little cleaner and theatre fans' fashion accessories a little brighter!



## RESOURCES

1. Scenery. 2020 [accessed 2020 Dec 9]. <https://scenerybags.com>
2. EPA: Facts and Figures about Materials, Waste and Recycling. 2020. [updated 2020 Oct 7, accessed 2020 Dec 6]. <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/textiles-material-specific-data>
3. Wicker, Alden. Fast Fashion Is Creating an Environmental Crisis; Textile waste is piling up at catastrophic levels thanks to the fast-fashion industry. Newsweek. 2016. [accessed 2020 Dec 6]; 167(9). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A462213629/AONE?u=esc&sid=AONE&xid=3fa31e20>.
4. UNESCO. 2019 [accessed 2020 Nov 3]. <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development/what-is-esd/sd>