



Mr. Burns, a post-electric play

Anne Washburn

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"What will endure when the cataclysm arrives--when the grid fails, society crumbles, and we're faced with the task of rebuilding? Anne Washburn's imaginative dark comedy propels us forward nearly a century, following a new civilization stumbling into its future. A paean to live theater, and to the resilience of Bart Simpson through the ages, Mr. Burns is an animated exploration of how the pop culture of one era might evolve into the mythology of another."--Publisher's website

Mr. Burns, a post-electric play Details

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From Reader Review Mr. Burns, a post-electric play for online ebook

Astrid says

I saw it twice, read it once, and I'm obsessed. It's an amazing script to analyze if you're into that, and the story is an interesting examination of the importance of oral history and theatre.

Eric Walker says

I loved the first two acts of this play but I think it fell apart in the third act. I feel like I get what it was trying to say by having only remnants of The Simpsons remain amid this extremely dramatic play but I still didn't like it. I'm a sucker for post-apocalyptic stories and with the addition of The Simpsons the first two acts earn a 5 star rating. Too bad the third act has to count too.

Jonathan Lee B. says

Mr Burns is hot coffee on a cold porch.

PatrickCS says

I first heard about this play several months ago when it was being performed in my area. I made a half-assed attempt to convince some friends to go see it (us generally not being 'play' people) because it was one of the most refreshingly unique stories I've heard of in quite a while. We ended up not going.

Lo and behold, I found a copy of the script at my local library and read it today.

Act One takes place "in the near future", and consists of a group of people recounting an old Simpsons episode around a fire not long after some unnamed apocalyptic event has occurred in America (I have no clue whether the events purported to be in the episode in question actually occur in the real one, or whether these characters are woefully unaware of how badly they're botching it - my hope is that it's the latter).

Act Two takes place seven years later, and follows the same group of characters as they rehearse a performance - commercials included. There's talk of rival Simpsons troupes. It's charming.

Now, these first two acts come across exactly as I'd hoped they would. The premise is intriguing...especially the numerous hints and implications about the apocalyptic event in question and the current state of society beyond what we're seeing.

Act Three, taking place 75 years after Act One, is a total botch job. It's an actual performance of the episode, played by unnamed actors, which should have the biggest payoff of the three (because of course, as audience members, we want to see how much it differs from the episode described in Act One), but OF COURSE they

made it a fucking musical with fruity, hoity-toity lyrics and a grandiose sense of...whatever...that is just outright unsatisfying to read. It's probably riddled with clever references to other turn-of-this-century pop culture items that I failed to pick up on (I did notice a few, including what I believe to be a Ricky Martin lyric) and that would have changed my opinion completely had I bothered to read every lyric instead of skimming them to get to the stage directions, but such is life.

I'd totally see this play if I got the chance to, but would definitely save my piss break for the third act. Fuck musicals.

Julia says

no i do NOT want to talk about the scant/negative amount of recreational reading that has happened this quarter. anyway after talking it up for months my friend finally lent me his copy of mr burns on halloween so when i made the drunken journey back to my dorm it was with a couple plays, which is the right way to make the drunken journey back to one's dorm. a professor in one of my classes last week said, Every disturbance is a genuine disturbance, which freaked me out and I have thought about it at least once a day since. Every disturbance is a genuine disturbance. This is relevant right now; it is always relevant. I thought of it because of this one line in Mr Burns, Meaning is everywhere whether we like it or not. And so I was texting my friend about the play after reading it—he's been badgering me about reading it and i haven't had the TIME and then today at 11:54pm, the minute I finished Mr Burns, he happened to text me a reference—and i said, everyone in the classics department should read mr burns, maybe, and i said, explaining Every Disturbance Is A Genuine Disturbance:

"i brought up the berlant thing bc this was during a discussion about robert mapplethorpe, and also bc one (rly smart) student was like, why must we always try to make these artists and these traditions capacious, why must we keep trying to make them more than they are when it is so much work and it can hurt so much to find capaciousness and meaning in art that is hostile to you. why must we keep going back, why can't we do and study new things. i'm paraphrasing, what she said was more concise. and i was sitting there during this discussion like, Here I Am, A Classics Major. like, why keep studying this same thing, hasn't this thing been studied enough. but that's why i like it, which i feel bad about. i like classics because, yeah, it is cool to study a thing that is foundational and has been invested with so much power and is sort of the root of story, the essence of story. (of western story.) and it's crazy because it's in no way inherent in classical literature, it's an accident of time and of history. and mr burns gets that, it gets how things blur and get muddled and the power and real capital-s Story arises from the muddle. (the poem i've been reading in latin class this quarter, a poem from, you know, after vergil's time, is actually our source text for the 'achilles' heel' thing! that's crazy! there is no literary documentation earlier than that! but you would have no idea. you feel like it's in homer, or something equivalent.)"

what is a story-world, and what does it mean to create one? how do you do it? how is it successful? something i've been thinking about in my latin class, for which i'm reading statius' achilleid, but also in general. in relation to the thorne miniature rooms at the art institute, to joseph cornell boxes, to therese's set models in the price of salt, to what i mean when i say i want to study literature. there's a reason anne washburn has written "transadaptations" of two euripides plays. anyway, i liked mr burns.

Sarah says

Yeah, this was great.

Bee (Heart Full of Books) says

Detailed knowledge of The Simpsons not necessary, but pretty useful.

Greg Kerestan says

This play is not for all tastes, with its mixture of absurd high concept, stream-of-consciousness realism in dialogue, and occasional prose-poetry flights of fancy, "Night Vale" style. But there's no denying that Anne Washburn has a unique vision and asks a question I've wondered about many times; what happens to mass media after the fall of society? How does pop culture trickle down into folk culture when the lights are out and the TVs extinguished? Definitely weird, but in a good way.

Dan Schwent says

In the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse, can memories of The Simpsons pull people together?

My lady and I saw this play performed last night and now I shall seek out the book so I can better process and pick apart what we witnessed.

The first act of the play takes place just after the apocalypse. There is no electricity and a small group of survivors amuses themselves by reminiscing about the Cape Fear episode of the Simpsons. A stranger shows up and is eventually accepted into their group. This was by far the best act of the play. It was really intense and made me forget I just shelled out \$50.

The second act takes place seven years after the first. The effects of the apocalypse are still being felt. Travelling groups of actors perform episodes of the Simpsons in front of live audiences, painstakingly reconstructing the episodes from people's vague memories. This act wasn't as good as the first but I still dug it once I pieced together what was going on.

The third act takes place 75 years after the second. I suspect it is supposed to show how the Cape Fear episode of the Simpsons mutated after being retold for almost a century but I kept thinking about Robert Chambers' The King in Yellow. It was so bizarre I hoped I remembered how to drive when the act was over. I looked at my gf a few times and mouthed "This is so fucked up." Mr. Burns and Itchy and Scratchy terrorize the Simpsons on a houseboat. When a bosomy woman playing Lisa Simpsons gets groped by a demonic Mr. Burns, you don't easily forget it.

So, yeah, if Mr. Burns comes to your town, I recommend seeing it for the WTF factor of the third act alone. It wasn't my favorite play but it's definitely etched into my brain. 3.5 out of 5 stars.

Kristen Lo says

Crazy. Knowing a bit of background about the genesis of this play is really helpful (started from a recorded conversation, and ACT 1 is much of that conversation). It's playing at ACT this January and I can't wait to see it. I feel like most of ACT 3 is visual and aural, so I got very little of it. But nonetheless it was very intriguing and Anne Washburn is quite clever.

Jenny Maloney says

I really, really, really like the premise of the play. I LOVE the idea of trying to hold on to a piece of culture in a post-apocalyptic setting. (This play is very Station Eleven in a lot of ways.)

But I don't know how I feel about the delivery in this case, so that's really tough. I bought heavily into the first part -- totally loved the 'exchange of names' that happens when people are looking for their lost loved ones -- but didn't quite make the leap (the wild leaps) of parts two and three. Especially the music. Perhaps I'm just not visionary enough in this case.

Craig Werner says

Smart and funny, Mr. Burns mixes dystopian science fiction (a world where the grid has collapsed) with a set of riffs on how pop culture generally (and the Simpsons specifically) might evolve over the 75-post collapse years. Like most plays, it would be better on stage, but the first two acts particularly read well and it's not hard to see how the third would play out.

Doug says

My impetus for reading this play was a rave review for a local SF production of it. My review rating reflects two problems I had with it: A. I have never seen a single episode of 'The Simpsons', so much of the play flew right over my head. B. the entire last act is through-sung, and IF one had seen a production, I am sure it would make more sense than it does sitting on the page. Interesting idea, but unless one is a die hard Simpson fan, I doubt it would be pleasurable.

Tomas Howells says

3.5/5 i really need to see this on stage (and the fact i've never seen the simpsons mean a lot of it went over my head)

Geoff says

This was somehow simultaneously a work of genius (about how pop culture could be transmitted and transmuted in a post-apocalyptic society) and a cringe-fest. 3.5 stars.
