

ENCORE MICHIGAN

“Mr. Burns” mixes “The Simpsons” with classic theater
by Bridgette Redman



REVIEW: Mr. Burns
Summer Circle Theatre

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How many years without an electronic memory would it take before “The Simpsons” became Shakespeare?

That’s the unusual question that Anne Washburn’s “Mr. Burns, a post-electric play” asks at Michigan State University’s Summer Circle. All right, it poses many other questions as well and perhaps comparisons to Simpsons and Greek tragedy are more apt than to the Bard. “Mr. Burns, a post-electric play” takes place in “the near future,” an apocalyptic future in which the electric grid fails, as do all the nuclear power plants. A nuclear winter is setting in and the world is without electricity. New rules and traditions are being formed as people try to figure out a way to survive.

There are no lead actors or actresses in this futuristic play, only an ensemble of eight actors that each contributes something to the journey of memory and theater and storytelling.

In the opening act, they're gathered around a living room trying to remember the details of a Simpsons episode, "Cape Feare." And yes, it does help if you are familiar with the Simpsons and have watched enough episodes to understand how it uses cultural references and storytelling. In fact, it helps to be up to date with pop culture and music as it makes much of the play more meaningful and humorous.

Amid the memory and the attempt to reconstruct an episode, the play slowly reveals that the world has fallen apart. When a stranger arrives (Gibson, played by Blaine Mizer), they go through what has obviously become a ritual of trying to learn what has become of loved ones. They also hungrily trade news and wonder about whether they are safe or not.

In the second act, the people we've met in the first have formed a theater company, one that relies on people's memories to reconstruct the scripts. Even while attempting to reconstruct, they create something new, for memories are flawed and no one gets everything right. It is stretching it a bit, though, to suggest that in seven years, adults who grew up in our society would forget how to pronounce "refrigerator."

But that's a small point. Of greater interest is how theater is being rebuilt in a world where there are no lights or recorded sound.

The third act moves forward seventy-five years and shows what later generations have turned these scraps of memory into. The plays are now complete, but Matt Groening would recognize only the names of the characters and none of the episode. "The Simpsons" has become high art, stylized in the extreme, and a mix of music and drama, complete with Greek chorus and masks. It's Shakespeare with light sabers and sub sandwiches.

While "Mr. Burns" is more of a play than a musical, the score and lyrics play an important role. Director Rob Roznowski and the entire cast are credited with the choreography, while Andrew Buck, the actor who plays Matt, Homer, and Mr. Burns, doubles as the dance captain. The choreography borrows movement from modern dance and viral videos. It captures tidbits of popular dance and puts them together in ways that are sometimes accurate and sometimes made new.

Roznowski runs a tight show with this intelligent comedy. Actors fit their roles well and perform neatly as an ensemble. He fills the stage with people, not wasting the new space that this play inaugurates. He even sends them out into the audience at points, covering the large space between the stage and audience that audience members for the most part shied from sitting in.

Kirk Domer's scenic design was clever and able to be adapted quickly between the three acts to show the different time periods and the evolution of the storytelling and theater. There were some microphone issues on opening night, though they were fixed during the first intermission and the actor compensated for it.

The play also comes with pre-show entertainment. Opening night saw a cello and violin duet that played while audience members arrived. Thursday night will have Dance Lansing performances and Friday and Saturday will have a performance of "A Tail of Peter Rabbit." "Mr. Burns, a post-electric play" is intelligent and thought-provoking, a comedy that gets its laughs from amid the tragedy.

Run time: 8 p.m. to 10:09 p.m. with two 10-minute intermissions

SHOW DETAILS:

Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play

Summer Circle

Michigan State University, Lansing

June 10-13, 2015

Evening performances at 8:00 p.m.

Price: free

[Summer Circle](#)