

Mr. Burns, A Post-Electic Play

Production History

Summary

Upon its opening at Woolly Mammoth and Playwrights Horizon, *Mr. Burns* received mixed reviews. Though Ben Brantley's *New York Times* review was glowing, some critics disagreed. However, shows sold out enough to extend the run. Generally, the play has been considered a success.

Beginning with the positives, critics who enjoyed the show find its premise highly engaging and thought provoking. They are pulled into the challenge of piecing together plots and spotting the differences in storytelling. Critics enjoyed the themes of the play including the criticism of capitalism, praise of theatre, storytelling that changes for the needs of the people, etc. All reviews enjoyed Michael Freeman's score. Of the 17 productions that I researched, only one used a different composer. On the other hand, critics found that the play was far too long and that the storyline was pretentious and lacking cohesion as well as a thesis. Several reviewers accused Washburn of not understanding what she was writing about and identified the workshop development of the play as the culprit of its flaws.

In terms of the act structure, critics generally agreed that the opening of the first act dragged, but were invested once Gibson arrived. They found the second act too long. The third act was controversial, however. Reviewers who liked the show found the third act to be the most inspired, most interesting, and "brilliant." Those who were less impressed found the third act messy, trying too hard, arbitrary and nonsensical. Depending on the production, some reviewers left deeply disturbed by the violence of the third act, while others didn't even mention it.

The reviews noted many struggles that productions faced. One such struggle is keeping energy throughout the play. Because of the structure and repetitive nature, the cast must be completely engaged. Similarly, actors may struggle with finding depth of character when Washburn reveals little about each character and actors are playing multiple roles. Unfortunately, the reviews offered little advice for performers, as the majority of the reviews discussed the plot and concept of the play. Ultimately, ensemble work and impressions were the most well received.

In terms of design, reviews had very little to say. Many productions had audiences sit onstage for the first act and move for the second and third, but none stated whether this was effective or not. At the Almeida Theatre, live fire was used in the campfire and candles, but the critic found this highly ineffective because the space became overheated.

Many reviews pondered the level of audience enjoyment relative to the amount of *Simpsons* knowledge. Generally, they agreed that those who would get the most out of the production would be familiar with the show and "Cape Feare." However, they found that people with little *Simpsons* knowledge could still enjoy the production, though they would miss jokes and likely have to think a little harder. They did suggest that people interested in the show do some homework before attending. Similarly, many critics mentioned the use of several types of theatrical movements including Epic, Greek, Elizabethan, Commedia Dell'arte, Kabuki, and Noh. The use of these types of theatre, though obvious to a theatre reviewer, may also be polarizing for audience members who are not familiar with theatre history.

The undeniable highlights of the show were the Wal-Mart story and Gibson's Act Two breakdown. Surprisingly, neither of these revolves around *The Simpsons* or the storytelling arc, but character and given circumstances. The weakest moments of the play were the opening to Act I and the entirety of Act II (particularly the witness protection scene.)

Though the critics agreed on little, one thing is for sure- this play makes people talk. Those who saw it had strong opinions and wanted to share their experiences whether negative or positive. There is a need to talk about this play and to pull from each other's perspectives to understand it fully. While the play may not be the strongest, it is certainly impactful and thought-provoking.

Timeline

2012, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Washington, D.C.

Director: Steven Cosson

Composer: Michael Friedman

Notable: Premiere

Reviews:

- "...a breathtaking, brain-teasing evening that asks you to consider how pop culture is embraced, metabolized and reinterpreted through the filters of time and cataclysmic events.
- "Now you may be asking 'how does all of this tie together' and I am telling you, 'I don't know.'"

2013, Playwrights Horizon, New York City

Director: Steven Cosson

Composer: Michael Friedman

Actors: The Civilians

Notable: Off-Broadway. Nominated for Drama League Award. Uses Elizabethan theatre, commedia dell'arte, Noh, and opera

Reviews:

- "When was the last time you met a play that was so smart it made your head spin?"
- "The play is both scary and sweet, funny but dead serious, unique and wonderfully theatrical."

2014, Almeida Theatre, London

Director: Robert Icke

Composer: Orlando Gough and Michael Henry

Notable: Used a real campfire and candles.

Review:

- "This is a play that appears to have been calculated not just to annoy, but to actually distress, discomfort and dehydrate audiences."

2015, Theatre Wit, Chicago

Director: Jeremy Wechsler

Composer: Michael Friedman

Review:

- "Washburn's script has a very distinct kind of thrill, the one that kicks in when you have absolutely no idea where a play is going, except that it is not likely to be anyplace you recall being before in a theater."

2015, Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis

Director: Mark Rucker

Composer: Michael Friedman

Notable: Used Elizabethan tragedy, operetta, kabuki, and Brecht

Review:

- “One way to look at it is that the performance style goes from campfire stories to traditional theatre to opera, but another way is that it goes backwards from the loose, improvisatory style of the first act to the heavily ritualized Greek drama that is the third.”

2015, R-S Theatrics, St. Louis

Director: Christina Rios

Composer: Michael Friedman

Notable: Audience sat onstage and Maria is pregnant during the first act.

Review:

- “You have never seen anything like it. That’s in a good way- albeit in a really, really strange one.”

2015, ACT Theatre, Seattle

Director: John Langes

Composer: Michael Friedman

Review:

- “After I summarized Mr. Burns for her, she said: ‘Yeah, that’s how Christianity started.’ Walsh described an ancient literary marketplace teeming with writers. Messiah stories were hot. The synoptic gospels as we know them began as ‘competing narratives that got ironed out in the public sphere, and some were more aesthetically successful than others,’ Walsh said. Some got canonized, some-the ones that were ‘a little freaky’ didn’t.”

2015, Unicorn Theatre, Kansas City

Director: Theodore Swetz

Review:

- “It challenges the audience to think and talk about the show... Some got it. Some did not. Some had different ideas about the show. And, that’s probably exactly what the playwright intended.”

2015, Phoenix Theatre, Indianapolis

Director: Courtney Sale

Review:

- “I won’t say much more because a big part of the pleasure here is having no idea where the piece is going.”

2015, Stage West, Fort Worth

Director: Garret Storms

Composer: Michael Friedman

Review:

- “Perhaps the most surprising thing about Mr. Burns, a play littered with surprises, is just how scary it is... We tell ourselves stories about ourselves, about each other, about the world around us, and about what we just saw to make sense of what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen next. It reminds us to believe that what we are doing here matters, because our greatest, most palpable fear is that it doesn’t.”

2015, Mary Moody Northern Theatre, Austin, TX

Director: David Long

Composer: Michael Friedman

Notable: “Cape Feare” played in the lobby before the show.

Review:

- “Washburn’s work is a think piece with worthy aims, but it fails to connect with the audience precisely because of its thesis. As a theatre audience we become intensely involved in the stories of the characters we meet in the first half... Once those personal touches are stripped away, we’re left with the grotesque outlines of the characters from the animated series, equally stripped of their distinctive qualities. The intellectual point is made- something to do with the power of myth- but it’s delivered in the first five minutes after the intermission. The music, the stark story bereft of nuance, and the stylized movement do little to elaborate or reinforce it.”

2016, Ringwald Theatre, Ferndale, MI

Director: Joe Bailey

Composer: N/A

Notable: The conductor was visible and costumed. They also had audiences sit on the stage during the first act and move their chairs for the remainder of the play.

Review:

- “But while the play, by Anne Washburn, can tax one’s patience and at times even beg the internal question, ‘What the hell is happening here?’, and is most certainly 15-20 minutes too long, the totality of the play, and this production, should put a smile on one’s face by the final curtain.”

2016, Illinois Theatre, Urbana, IL

Director: Lisa Gaye Dixon

Composer: Michael Friedman

2016, Cleveland Public Theatre, Cleveland

Director: Matthew Wright

Composer: Michael Friedman

Notable: Aspects of Greek drama, melodrama, MTV, hip hop, and Noh

Review:

- “...only truly delivering on the brilliance of its concept in Act 3, with a jaw-dropper of a musical number... But the rehearsals for ‘The Simpsons’ recreations go on far too long, a risky proposition should we begin to get bored and realize we’d rather be watching the real thing on Fox.”

2016, freeFall Theatre, St. Petersburg, FL

Director: Eric Davis

Composer: Michael Friedman

Review:

- “It seems as though the playwright and cast are having fun, and who would want to begrudge that? Well, the audience, perhaps. The central premise is, for me, a little hard to buy, even for a vaguely avant-garde treatment of culture... it’s not exactly challenging, nor does it reflect the resourcefulness in human history.”

2016, Lyric Stage, Boston

Director: A. Nora Long

Composer: Michael Friedman

Notable: “Performers peel off masks, revealing a series of masks underneath, recalling the ‘face changing’ Bian Lian performers in the Sichuan opera.” They also used the lighting rig to lower in found objects in the closing.

Review:

- “Still, it is way too convenient that no one wonders why America’s nuclear power plants simultaneously vented waste across the country. No curiosity, no anger, no vows of revenge for lost loved ones; there isn’t even a hunt for a scapegoat. American paranoia doesn’t exist: no anti-Semitic conspiracy theories... no talk about government tyranny, no anti-immigrant sentiments, nothing about Islamophobia. The bottom line is that Washburn and her collaborators among The Civilians decided to play it safe, offend no one, and avoided bold artistic and political choices.”

2016, Forward Theatre, Madison, WI

Director: Jennifer Uphoff-Gray

Composer: Michael Friedman

Notable: Re-used set pieces in different ways. Ie. a garbage bag was used as a backdrop and curtain.