

MR BURNS: PRESS RESPONSES

Almeida (2014)

A new play written by Anne Washburn and directed by Robert Icke

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WHAT'S ON STAGE

Michael Coveney

★★★★★

Rupert Goold's Almeida Theatre simply does not do anything safe, predictable or, unless you are a clued-up devotee of the satirical television cartoon phenomenon known as *The Simpsons*, familiar.

This will be the wildest, wackiest show of the year, no contest; it's also a brilliantly inventive and engaging production by Goold's associate, Robert Icke, an epic triptych of futuristic cultural recovery in the wake of a nuclear plant disaster on the East coast of America, with songs. That plant, of course, is Springfield, owned by the evil old capitalist Mr Burns and workplace of slobby ignoramus Homer Simpson, whose son Bart Simpson is pursued, in one of the show's most popular episodes, *Cape Feare*, by his nemesis, Sideshow Bob, to the fringes of Lake Terror.

Anne Washburn's "post-electric" play was developed, and premiered, in New York, fired by her own question of what would happen to a pop culture narrative "pushed past the fall of civilisation"? In the first act, refugees from the disaster - Boston's a mess, Providence deserted - replay the *Simpsons* classic in their own memories round a camp fire. They each have a list of lost loved ones, whose names are read out as at the annual memorial of Twin Towers victims. No-one is found or known, then the darkness is pierced by the arrival of a Gilbert and Sullivan freak who regales them not with the whole of *The Mikado* - as Sideshow Bob does in the cartoon - but with "Three Little Maids", which will do.

In the second act, which is a total theatrical blast, the group have formed themselves, seven years later, into one of several television programme and advertising companies, starting again with basic narrative adverts and a recreation, in crude theatrical terms, of *The Simpsons*. They are fighting off rivals, and each other, with basic technology and a squabble over the national drought of good new lines, a shrinking market.

And in the third act - 70 years ahead - they are performing an a capello operatic m elange of *The Simpsons*, in costume, with the opera house owner (Mr Burns, natch) cast as the heroic villain, a bad guy amalgam of Captain Hook (Bart is his Peter Pan) and Frank 'n' Furter from *The Rocky Horror Show*. The opera itself is a rock baroque pastiche composed by Orlando Gough and Michael Henry, with reference to Britney Spears and Ricky Martin.

The progress of the play is from the dark of disaster to the full-on fairy lights and electric funfair of what I take to be the tragedy of cultural retrieval, and the orgiastic qualities of theatre. The fact that this is accomplished by an episode of *The Simpsons* which references horror movies, including two Robert Mitchum titles, *The Night of the Hunter* and *Cape Fear* (in the De Niro version), is another heavily-loaded irony.

Icke's production fires on all cylinders, superbly designed by Tom Scutt and cunningly lit by Philip Gladwell. The best compliment you can pay the outstanding cast of eight - Justine Mitchell, Jenna Russell, Annabel Scholey, Wunmi Mosaku, Adey Grummet, Adrian der Gregorian, Demetri Goritsas, Michael Shaeffer - is that they do not appear to be wearing robes borrowed from the improvisatory originators of the piece across the ocean.

TIME OUT

Andrzej Lukowski

★★★★★

Bear Grylls would be so pissed off: in US playwright Anne Washburn's bracingly idiosyncratic play, the survivors of a non-specific North American apocalypse don't salvage food or weapons from the rubble, but culture. And when I say 'culture', I mean popular cartoon 'The Simpsons'. And when I say 'The Simpsons', I mean sublime 1993 episode 'Cape Feare'.

'Mr Burns' is divided into three interlinked but drastically contrasting sequences. The first, set during the disaster - the inference is it's some sort of pandemic - sees a ragtag band of nervous survivors huddle around a campfire and attempt to distract themselves from the horror by recounting the plot of said Simpsons episode (fyi a real corker, a loving and hilarious homage to classic thriller 'Cape Fear'). It's an odd but compelling set-up: the 40-minute act could almost be a stoner comedy, as this band of misfits - all of them subdued and nervous apart from Adrian der Gregorian's Matt, who is loud and nervous - stumble and

bicker over the exact details of the plot, while various asides and divergences fill us in on the horrors that have taken place away from this cosy fire.

In part two, set seven years later, society has regressed following the failure of America's power plants: the gang from the first scene now make a living acting out old 'Simpsons' episodes for paying audiences, along with medleys of popular '00s hits. And in the third sequence, set another 75 years on... not to spoil it, but things have gotten really very strange.

Washburn's play is pretty out there in many respects, but each scenario is beautifully realised, and it presents a compelling query: faced with uncertainty, would we salvage what's 'important' for the human race? Or what comforts us? And is there really a difference?

Director Robert Icke wisely keeps things as naturalistic as possible within the escalatingly batshit confines of the text, and there are beautiful, frail performances from a fine ensemble.

There is also a lot of deadpan humour here, and there's no getting away from the fact that you'll find 'Mr Burns' infinitely more amusing if you get the multitudinous pop-cultural references (I was practically wetting myself when a repurposed snippet of Eminem's 'Lose Yourself' emerged at the end, but the same could not be said of the venerable gentleman next to me).

But even if you've somehow never seen a frame of 'The Simpsons' (though seriously, have a word with yourself), the bold vistas of Washburn's imagination are thrillingly provocative in themselves. By the end, the audacity of 'Mr Burns' has outstripped its profundity, but its message is ultimately a comforting one: just like cockroaches and Twinkies, theatre and stories will survive the end of days, no matter how strangely.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Ian Shuttleworth

★★★★

"Worst. Post-apocalyptic dystopia. Ever," as *The Simpsons'* Comic Book Guy might say. We don't know what disaster has struck the America of "soon" in Anne Washburn's play, only that it has wiped out more than 99 per cent of the population and extinguished all electrical supplies. The few who barely survive band together to reconstruct half-remembered stories that recall the old life and values. In this case, the story is "Cape Feare", one of the murderous Sideshow Bob episodes of the long-running animated television series.

Washburn covertly suggests that *The Simpsons* owes its success to being at once a caricature of American values and an affirmation of them, and if that resonates in our post-ironic age, it also would in an era that was post-virtually everything. In Act One of the play, it is not just the script's reminders of how they used to live that bring the various individuals together around a makeshift brazier; the act of recollection and retelling forms a bond in itself. In Act Two, set seven years later, surviving society has evolved to the point where travelling mummies' companies trade in these reconstructions: some Shakespeare but mostly *Simpsons*. "Our" company intersperses its Springfield material with "commercials" – mini-dramas that serve as a nostalgic paean to the days before all the Diet Coke ran out – and a bizarre, hilarious medley of chart hits.

Robert Icke directs his ensemble cast of eight with the same blend of energy and shock he brought to his version of *1984*. For much of the first two acts, however, it feels interesting and entertaining rather than convincing on any deeper level, as if in crossing the Atlantic it has lost its potency of association.

Everything comes together in the third and final act. Seventy-five years further on, stories have become rituals that combine all the elements previously seen: grand opera (Sideshow Bob sings *HMS Pinafore* in the original story; here, the score is by Orlando Gough and Michael Henry); the episode's references to both film versions of *Cape Fear* and to *The Night of the Hunter*; religious death-and-resurrection ceremonial (the company first appear in skull masks, then the family's hairstyles become ornate headdresses); and even snatches of numbers such as "Livin' La Vida Loca". Sideshow Bob is now translated into Mr Burns (hitherto a significant absence), and Bart's struggle against him is, in effect, a struggle for all this future society holds dear.

Gradually this absurd, unreal performance comes to encapsulate not just the old, now-mythical way of life and the new one within the world of the play, but also our own. It feels increasingly like one of the oldest Greek dramas which served to affirm the *polisto* which actors and audience alike belonged, and it is no surprise to find that Washburn has also made a free adaptation of Euripides' *Orestes*. The intellectual fascination of the patterned material meshes with an emotional significance on an instinctual level. Artistic director Rupert Goold considers this an exemplar of the kind of work he wants to bring to the Almeida – to which the fitting response is: "Ex-cell-ent."

THE GUARDIAN

Lyn Gardner

BEST SHOWS OF 2014

American is in meltdown following an unspecified catastrophe. So what do the survivors do? Settle around the campfire to tell stories, because it's stories we cling to in the face of disaster. Anne Washburn's audacious and provocative play, staged by Robert Icke and designer Tom Scutt with a solemn absurdity, celebrates the power of storytelling, the imperfections of memory and asks what might endure: Homer or Homer Simpson? Just electric.

THE GUARDIAN

Mark Lawson

From the Bard to Bart: how Mr Burns challenges our common culture

One of the most tantalising lost works of literature is an epic poem by Homer called Margites, which, unlike the Odyssey and Iliad, has not survived and is known from a reference by Aristotle. So a cultural commentator seeking a neat historical contrast might be tempted to observe that, while Homer's Margites has vanished from culture, Marge's Homer never will owing to the vast existing digital archive of episodes of The Simpsons.

However, a fascinating and provocative new American play – Mr Burns by Anne Washburn, which has just received its UK premiere at the Almeida theatre in London – imagines a world in which Homer Simpson has, like his Greek first-namesake, been partly wiped out.

The opening act plays out on an almost dark stage, illuminated only by spasmodic flashlight and the flames of a campfire, around which huddle the survivors of a near-futuristic American catastrophe caused by the meltdown of nuclear power stations. This homeland Chernobyl has destroyed all electronic entertainment present and past, with the result that groups of survivors compete to recreate, through oral story-telling, favoured episodes of network TV shows such as The Simpsons.

Seven years on, in the second act, these broadcasting restorationists have organised into a primitive industry. Rival troupes of travelling players, with names such as The Prime-time Players, The Reruns and Richard's Couch, tour the scorched states, performing by candlelight reconstituted adventures of Homer and Marge and their children – though one group resurrects instead The West Wing, with its now novel concept of national government – and buying extra lines of remembered dialogue from locals.

But, in one of Washburn's smartest touches, these mocked-up comedies are just a show within a show, framed by recreated scenes of the domestic life destroyed by the apocalypse – including coming home from work, baths, food and wine – and reenactments of old TV ads for domestic necessities that now seem as unlikely as unicorns. As one character comments of these pastiche commercials: "It's that fine line between tantalisation and torture."

A further 75 years have passed before the final section, which consists entirely of a performance of "Mister Burns", a one-act opera (composed by Orlando Gough and Michael Henry) in which Bart Simpson has become a Perseus-like hero, seeking to save his country from the evil central character, in a narrative that resembles a Chinese-whispered version of the Simpsons episode "Cape Feare" (Season 5, Episode 2, 1993), mixed up with snatches of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and early 21st-century pop songs, including Britney Spears' "Toxic."

As often happens to brilliantly original and provocative plays, Mr Burns has met critical hostility and mystification, although the main objection of detractors oddly serves to make what Washburn has written seem even more timely and apposite.

Tim Walker, in the Sunday Telegraph, accused the play of pointless obscurity: "Theatre is always an opportunity to connect with an audience and never before have I seen the opportunity so wilfully squandered. Experimentation is one thing, but this is a play that can only possibly put people off theatre." The London Evening Standard's Henry Hitchings also issued a warning to potential ticket-buyers: "If you're a fan of The Simpsons with an appetite for risk-taking theatre, its strangeness will be irresistible. Others are likely to find it impenetrable and pretentious." Though kinder, awarding three stars out of five, Michael Billington of the Guardian, concluded: "It feels like a cult show; one that will primarily appeal to Simpsons addicts."

What fascinates me about these reactions is that Washburn stands accused of writing a play with a narrow frame of reference, although the American cartoon she invokes has been seen by hundreds of millions of viewers, rather than the average thousands who attend a new play at a small theatre. Drawing on some of

the most popular images and stories of our time, the dramatist is paradoxically charged with a sort of elitism by reviewers who either don't recognise or don't respect her references. So, inadvertently, the reviews are raising the question that Mr Burns himself asks: what constitutes a common culture?

Judging which allusions are universal (or at least broadly recognisable) is a recurrent dilemma for all sections of the entertainment business. The concern that an audience "won't get it" is the most usual justification for cutting TV and radio scripts, fictional and journalistic alike. Such comments can reflect an assumption that the consumers are less educated than the producers, but it is also becoming harder to assess what people know. Tom Stoppard has said that classical and literary allusions that seemed easily recognisable when his plays *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers* were premiered in the 60s and 70s often mystified theatre-goers at revivals decades later because of a shift in the definition of what it meant to be well educated.

The increased patchiness and shallowness of the collective cultural memory is one reason that Tudor history has become so popular, through the best-selling novels of CJ Sansom, Philippa Gregory and Hilary Mantel and the current blockbuster stage productions based on Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*. Since Christianity ceased to be mainstream in Britain, the story of Henry VIII's uxoricides is one of the few narratives that a cross-section of society and generations could be expected to recognise. And Mike Poulton's theatrical adaptations of the Mantels also make canny use of one of the country's few other general points of reference – the comedy of geographical stereotype – with references to "Yorkshire" and "Stoke Newington" winning big and knowing laughs.

The critical reception for Mr Burns illustrates the increasing discrepancies in general knowledge. A teenager unfamiliar with theatre would find Mr Burns easily comprehensible; but, to a theatre critic who doesn't watch much TV, it seems impenetrable. However, at Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* at the Donmar, another recent London opening, reviewers would be more at home than most couch potatoes. But, at these two performances, which section of which audience can be regarded as dumb or cultish? In this piece, I am tempted to say that the most suitable word of praise for Mr Burns is "excellent". If you know *The Simpsons*, you will know why; if you don't, you won't. But the fact that there is a third subset of readers who may have learned the catchword of Homer Simpson's boss through seepage from children or grandchildren is a further validation of Washburn's theme and thesis.

Mr Burns subtly dramatises the process of cultural transmission in a mass media era. In Washburn's post-apocalyptic world, the works of Joseph Conrad, William Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams apparently survive only in episodes of *The Simpsons* punningly titled "Bart of Darkness", "Much Apu about Nothing" and "A Streetcar Named Marge."

So, although the playwright says in a programme note that the choice of *The Simpsons* as the show-within-the-play was "a lightly made decision" and she might easily have gone for *Friends* instead, her play gains an extra layer of meaning from the fact that Matt Groening's cartoon series is itself a complex web of references to art of the past.

As its title acknowledges, the "Cape Feare" episode is mainly influenced by cinema, although the thriller *Cape Fear* exists in both a 1962 version directed by J Lee Thompson and a 1991 Martin Scorsese remake; a distinction discussed by the play's characters. But, as well as the quotations from those films, the script also samples Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* and *HMS Pinafore*. Some critics seem not to have appreciated that the Savoy operetta references in Mr Burns came via *The Simpsons*, rather than being a random artistic garnish on Washburn's stew, which again demonstrates how the reception of a show can be affected by what audiences know.

During the performance I saw at the Almeida, for example, there were two varieties of laughter: a communal guffaw at jokes that arise from the context of the play and a smaller giggle of recognition at the *Simpsons* references or Madonna or Chris Isaak lyrics. The reaction when a portrait of President Clinton is revealed on a wall of the set seemed to split between liberal theatregoers rippling with pleasure at the politician's image and those clocking yet another allusion to the "Cape Feare" *Simpsons* episode, in which a Clinton picture figures.

It is also possible to know things unknowingly. One of the cleverest moments is when a newly arriving survivor is able to fill in missing elements of the "Cape Feare" dialogue and the trio of three little maids from *The Mikado*, even though he admits he has never seen a whole episode of *The Simpsons*. One line had been drilled into his mind by a girlfriend annoyingly obsessed with the series, and he assimilated Gilbert and Sullivan through membership of a light operatic society.

That conversation shows a sophisticated understanding of how the diffusion of themes and ideas works. I remember an Irish writer at a literary festival once quoting the comment of a Dublin taxi driver on a Taoiseach of the time – "to be sure, he has a picture in the attic" – as evidence that even a hired driver in the city had read Oscar Wilde's *A Portrait of Dorian Gray*. But, while Ireland would be a candidate for the nation with the most-literate population, it was equally possible that the cabbie had picked up the image of the artistic deal with the devil from everyday discourse, into which Wilde's story had long ago passed.

And, while Washburn's detractors seem to have assumed that the author is endorsing a culture in which Bart is more significant than the Bard, she seems to me to be more neutrally presenting the way in which cultural history accrues through allusion, osmosis and confusion. The production (director Robert Icke, designer Tom Scutt) includes a tremendous visual gag in which, in the climatic musical performance, the spiky hairdo of Lisa Simpson has become blurred in the visual memory with the barbed helmet of the Statue of Liberty.

In that respect, the play is subject to a final irony. In the published text of *Mr Burns* (Oberon Books), there are two places where stage directions – "Microbeat of Maria doubt" and "She might be near tears at this point" – have accidentally been printed as dialogue. This raises the possibility that, in future productions of the text without the author present, an actor may, in a version of the transcription errors with which Shakespeare's plays are thought to be littered, speak these puzzling lines, perhaps delivering them as knowing Brechtian asides to the audience. As a result, *Mr Burns* itself could suffer the sort of cultural mistransmission that is its subject.

And, according to Aristotle, the protagonist of the lost poem by the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was "an uncommonly dumb man". As, indeed, is the hero of a popular TV comedy 28 centuries later. So Homer's *Margites* and Marge's Homer have more in common than we thought, but, if Washburn's pessimism about electricity is correct, may one day both be known only through flickering reminiscence.