

MR. BURNS

A POST-ELECTRIC PLAY

**WRITTEN BY ANNE WASHBURN
MUSIC BY MICHAEL FRIEDMAN
DIRECTED BY KIRSTEN BRANDT**

**PRESENTED BY THE NEVADA CONSERVATORY THEATRE
SEPTEMBER 12 - 21, 2024**



**“KNOW BEFORE YOU GO” BOOKLET
AND
STUDY GUIDE**

Kirsten Brandt
Executive Director (NCT)
Produced by the Department of Theatre



PRESENTS

MR. BURNS

A POST-ELECTRIC PLAY

Written by Anne Washburn, with music by Michael Friedman

with

Director

Kirsten Brandt

Assistant Director

Martin Hackett

Music Director

Colte Julian

Scenic Designer

Dana Moran Williams

Costume and Makeup Designer

JD Anderson+

Lighting Designer

Paige Borak+

Sound Designer

Mary Alice DiRienzo

Technical Direction

David Shouse

Production Stage Manager

M William Shiner

Stage Manager

Cameron Cox+

Fight and Intimacy Coordinator

Sean Boyd

+Member of the MFA Professional Training Program with the Nevada Conservatory Theatre

The run time of this performance is approximately [TIME] with one intermission



September 12 - 21, 2024
Judy Bayley Theatre
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SYNOPSIS

Set in a dystopian future, where nuclear meltdown has resulted in the loss of electricity and, subsequently, the collapse of society, *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play* explores human connection and the role that storytelling takes in the preservation of culture.

Anne Washburn's dark comedy (and quasi musical) is a story told in three acts, each one depicting a different stage of this post-apocalyptic world. The first act is set shortly after the aforementioned nuclear disaster, and focuses on a group of survivors who are recounting an episode of *The Simpsons* as a means of connection. The second act takes place seven years later, where our group of survivors have taken their collective memories of *The Simpsons*, along with other references to the pop culture they remember, to form a theatrical troupe. The third act takes us 75 years beyond that, where we witness how, through subsequent generations, the act of storytelling has transformed *The Simpsons* into a grand mythological spectacle. It is a demonstration of how cultural artifacts are transformed over time for the sake of human -- and, indeed, societal and cultural -- survival.

The play reflects on the nature of storytelling -- the age-old practice of sitting around the proverbial campfire and telling tales of old which are then passed down to subsequent generations -- and the ways in which humans cling to such narratives as a means of making sense of the world ... particularly during tumultuous times.



Pictured above: Andrew Trevino, JoAnn Birt, Autumnn Morgan, Kate Critchfield, Andrew Bullard, and Nick Case in NCT's *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*.
Photography by Shahab Zargari.

CONTENT WARNING

Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play contains adult language, adult situations and themes, death, gun violence, and gunshots.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT ANNE WASHBURN

American playwright Anne Washburn, born in 1970, received her MFA from New York University. Since then, she has produced work known to be both innovative and thought-provoking in the world of contemporary theatre. Her plays include *10 Out of 12*, *Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play*, *A Devil at Noon*, and *Orestes*. *Mr. Burns* was nominated for a Drama League Award. She has also been awarded Guggenheim, NYFA, and Time Warner fellowships, as well as the Whiting Award, the PEN/Laura Pels Award, and the Herb Alpert Award. She was a Susan Smith Blackburn finalist and an alumna of New Dramatists.



Washburn developed *Mr. Burns* with a New York-based group called The Civilians. She brought three actors together -- Matt Maher, Maria Dizzie, and Jenny Morris -- and asked them to choose an episode of *The Simpsons* and retell the story as best as they could remember it. They then had new actors join the room, and they told the story for a second and third time. Washburn used these interactions to create the first act, some of it a verbatim, word-for-word depiction of that session.

She then wrote the rest of the script, always intending for the third act to be an extravagant opera even though she had never written a musical before. Though she wrote her own lyrics, she found the process of putting them to music quite difficult, and so she enlisted the help of resident Civilians composer Michael Friedman. With her words and Friedman's music, this post-apocalyptic play featuring *The Simpsons* was born. Washburn says that, during the creative process, she also considered using *Friends* and *Cheers* as the main pop culture reference, but ultimately chose *The Simpsons* because of its famously archetypal characters, and the way it has truly embraced American culture and history.

In addition to *Mr. Burns*, Washburn's other notable plays also explore the human experience. *The Internationalist*, for example, features dark comedy as a lens to explore the nature of communication and misunderstanding. *10 Out of 12* focuses on the chaotic world of theater rehearsals, a theme which we also see in *Mr. Burns*. Much of her work engages with complex ideas about contemporary life, the nature of storytelling, and the intersectionality that exists between personal and collective experiences.

Without a doubt, Washburn's work is impactful, and it has been recognized as such. Among the many awards she has received for her work, *Mr. Burns* received a Drama League Award nomination for Outstanding Production, and was praised by the *New York Times* as "downright brilliant."



ABOUT THE COMPOSER MICHAEL FRIEDMAN

John Michael Friedman (September 24, 1975 – September 9, 2017) was an American composer and lyricist who was also one of the founding artists of The Civilians, the theatre company who worked with Anne Washburn to help create *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*.

In his work, Friedman enjoyed exploring contemporary political and social issues. He was known for using wit and humor, combined with a deep sense of humanity, to create meaningful and memorable pieces. After co-founding the experimental theatre company The Civilians, he became their resident composer and lyricist. Known for shows based on research, interviews, and real-life events, The Civilians produced a number of works featuring Friedman as composer, including *Gone Missing*, *This Beautiful City*, and, of course, *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*.

Gone Missing is a piece about things people have lost, and *This Beautiful City* explores the evangelical Christian movement in Colorado Springs. Some of Friedman's other famous works include *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, an irreverent rock musical that reimagines the life of Andrew Jackson (which premiered Off-Broadway at The Public Theatre in 2010) and *The Great Immensity*, a show about climate change (2012). Much of Friedman's work featured a lens of social and political engagement, as he believed in using theatre as a means of opening discourse. As such, he was known to create innovative music that was filled with satire and emotional depth.

In 2015, he teamed up with journalist Sarah Larson to create "The State of the Union Songbook," a series of songs based on interviews that Friedman wanted to conduct around the country during election season. According to Larson, "Michael travelled to several states, interviewing subjects with wildly varying political opinions. He had observed that many of the conversations he'd been having about the election, even casually ... had ended up being about race." She went on to say that the music he created through these interviews "evokes this country's racial agony, past and present, in a way that's sensitive, complicated, and raw." The project featured music about many other contemporary issues, but the lyrics are, verbatim, from the mouths of everyday Americans.

Friedman's ability to create innovative musical theatre out of contemporary social issues led him to be regarded as one of the most thought-provoking composers of his generation. Thus, his death in 2017 at age 41 was seen as a tremendous loss to the theatre community. After his death, The Civilians launched The Michael Friedman Legacy Fund, which supports the continued production and dissemination of his work.



Pictured above: Michael Friedman, photographed by Jared Siskin

Use the QR code to the right to view Friedman and others performing "The State of the Union Songbook," featured on The New York Radio Hour.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

KIRSTEN BRANDT

Every story ends on a dark and raging river.

We bond over story. How often do we quote a favorite line from a movie, TV show, or play with our friends or loved ones? Just the other day I said, “we’re going to need a bigger boat*”. In conversation with my students, one of them said “This is the Way” and we all echoed “This is the Way” (*The Mandalorian*). Stories, good stories, become part of who we are – our cultural makeup. They speak to our values. It’s not surprising that so many of the words and phrases created by Shakespeare are now common in our vernacular.



What struck me most when I first read *Mr. Burns, a post-electric play*, was its heart. The play is a love letter to the power of storytelling – how story creates community and helps us see multiple perspectives and by doing so, fosters empathy. Story can bring people of different backgrounds together for a common purpose. Using the long running animated show, *The Simpsons* as her inspiration, playwright Anne Washburn asks us to consider how stories, all types of stories, have shaped our lives.

A good story has plot twists and danger. A good story has characters we care about and that reflect something within ourselves. At some time in our life, we will be on a metaphorical raging river, struggling to survive the rapids and currents. Regardless of whether the river personifies a personal or professional struggle, it is all consuming. Watching characters, like our band of survivors of the apocalypse or *The Simpsons* family, overcome and persevere when all is perceived to be lost, gives us hope.

In the time of great loss, we turn to art. Art and story have the power to heal and inspire. In the bleakest of times, as we struggle on that ragging river, art fills our souls and we persevere

Kirsten

*the actual quote from *JAWS* (1975) is “you’re going to need a bigger boat.”

DRAMATURG'S NOTE

STEBOS

In her dystopian thought experiment, playwright Anne Washburn explores “what would happen to a pop culture narrative pushed past the fall of civilization.” And fallen indeed is the society she portrays, due to a slow-moving apocalyptic disaster whose origins and exact causes are impossible to fully fathom. One thing is certain: after some serious fires and the gradual interruption of nuclear plants’ regular operations, the lack of electricity has shifted priorities for everyone. Sunlight has regained its importance for activities that require sight. Without cell phones or internet, communications have broken down: news – both good and bad – travel very slow, fraught with uncertainty. Even commonly produced foods and beverages are in short supply and headed to disappearance: by the time of the third act – some eighty-five years after the epochal disaster – chic wines, hot cocoa, or even cheap bubbly sodas exist only as immaterial echoes of a distant past. Of course, appliances like refrigerators and TVs are hopelessly inoperable.

With people fleeing the areas of nuclear pollution or social turmoil, the very fabric of society has broken down: in fact, the failing of the electric grid has brought about the collapse of social networks too, and returned interactions to their “natural” state without the protections of the social contract. New small communities form out of chance and necessity, outsiders could bring in precious pieces of information, maps, or tools, but could also steal or kill: you better watch out! Luckily, guns still work with their old-time mechanisms, and a chill night around a campfire can easily turn into a sudden shoot-out. But what is there to defend? For one, storytelling: it’s stories that provide a way to connect, remember, restore order to the sequence of cause and effect, and ultimately offer a measure of relief from the doom and gloom.

Something else happened after the disaster: in the absence of recognized cultural arbiters, no one can enforce established aesthetic notions. In fact, the playwright seems to suggest a material version of postmodernism: after French theorist Roland Barthes’s famous declaration of the “death of the author” (1967) and the subsequent critical questioning of all authorship/authority in many fields, who’s to



say what distinguishes high-brow from low-brow art and culture? Just like, after the barbarian invasions and the Dark Ages in Europe, theatre was reinvented as performative broadening of the Church’s liturgy, Washburn’s literal dark age again recreates the form

Pictured above: Andrew Bullard as Sam, Nick Case as Gibson, Autumn Morgan as Maria, Kate Critchfield as Colleen, JoAnn Birt as Jenny, and Andrew Trevino as Matt in NCT’s Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play, 2024. Photograph by Shah Zargari.

from scratch. Only, this time it starts from the Simpsons' TV episodes, themselves a postmodernist pastiche of genres and trove of cultural references. Shakespeare continues too, but somewhere else, not for this group.

It's theatre and it's fun to make, but it also must be entertaining: as the author points out, success and audience retention is crucial for these troupes to survive. A whole market of new "lines" for the Simpsons' characters is created, new forms of authorship develop, and competition creates a whole new genre of Simpsons-inspired shows, even while the characters lose their connection to the cartoon to become "Noble Tropes." Eventually, electricity starts to come back, at least enough to make theatre spectacular again. In portraying the rebirth of drama from the ashes of our present civilization, Washburn celebrates an art form that proves to be more resilient than many would expect.

Stebos



Pictured above: Autumn Morgan as Maria, Nick Case as Gibson, Kate Critchfield as Colleen, JoAnn Birt as Jenny, Andrew Trevino as Matt, and Andrew Bullard as Sam, all in makeshift Simpsons costumes, in NCT's Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play, 2024. Photograph by Shah Zargari.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

WORDS FROM PLAYWRIGHT ANNE WASHBURN

"This play comes from an idea which had been knocking around in my head for years: I wanted to take a pop culture narrative and see what it meant, and how it changed, after the fall of Civilization. Really just because I was curious; I write plays because that part of my brain is more entertaining to me than this part of my brain.

"I knew I wanted to start with an act of recollection, with a group of survivors trying to piece together a TV episode. And to do that, I wanted to work with a group of actors; remembering is complicated; I could make remembering up, but it would never be as rich and complex as the real thing.

"In 2008, Steve Cosson of The Civilians, an investigative theater group of which I am a member, approached me about applying for a NYSCA commission grant and I suggested this project – which had now somehow become about *The Simpsons*. I can't remember how I landed on *The Simpsons*, although I'm pretty sure it was a light decision; as I remember it, *Friends*, *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, were all in the mix—any show with a large and dedicated viewership.



"I consider myself a *Simpsons* fan, but in the loose sense of the word. I really began watching it largely in reruns, when I began my long post-college career as a temp. I would come home fried from the reception desk, or the filing, or the data entry, and cook noodles, watch re-runs, despair. *The Simpsons* was a brilliant little glimmer in that time. I didn't think to take it seriously, but I always admired it, and it always made me laugh.

"It now seems like a really fortunate choice: if any show has the bones for post-apocalyptic survival, it's *The Simpsons*. So many people enjoy remembering it: retelling it, quoting it, doing the voices, the gestures; even a terribly reduced population should be able to do a reliable job of putting it back together. And the characters, when you think about them, are durable archetypes—Bart is a Trickster, Homer the Holy Fool, Marge, I suppose, is a kind of long-suffering Madonna, and then the inhabitants of Springfield are an almost endlessly rich supply of human (and non-human) personalities.

"That summer, Clubbed Thumb—a downtown theater company—had gotten hold of a free rehearsal space they were loaning out—a disused bank vault in a sub basement deep under Wall Street. We met there, far underground and out of cell phone range, in a room with thick, thick doors and those wheel handles, under a range of flickering fluorescent lights, and asked a group of Civilians actors to remember *Simpsons* episodes as best they could. We also asked them to be mindful of the necessities of storytelling; if they couldn't remember a detail, or a plot segue, they should—as one would, in the wild, in front of a small audience—make something up.

“The episode they remembered most vividly was “Cape Feare,” a parody of the Scorsese remake of the film *Cape Fear*, with Robert De Niro playing the role originated by Robert Mitchum. The resulting narrative, which I pieced together from several attempts, is ... fairly accurate, and I used it as the starting point of the play.

“When people ask me what this play is about—and I will be honest, I hate that question; if a play can be summed up in one word or phrase it probably isn’t worth the time—I usually say it’s about storytelling. Which is true. But there are all kinds of storytelling. There are stories we create from the air, for fun, and there are the stories which are meant to be acts of remembering. Our culture—national, family, peer, personal—is defined, not so much by what has happened to us, but by how we remember it, and the story we create from that memory. And since we don’t really create stories from the air—since all stories, no matter how fanciful, are in some way constructed from our experiences, real or imagined—all storytelling is a remaking of our past in order to create our future.”

The above dialogue from Anne Washburne originally appeared through Playwrights Horizon.



Pictured above left: Actors performing in Cal State Fullerton's Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play, 2018, photography by Joshua Arief Halim. Pictured above right: Melbourne's Lightning Jar Theatre's 2019 production of Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play, photograph credit unknown.

After its inception and premiere at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, DC in 2012, *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play* moved from Washington DC to Playwrights Horizons in New York City, where it opened on September 15, 2013. Since then, it has been performed regionally, internationally, and also at smaller theatre companies and academic insitutions across the United States. It’s continued success 10 years after its premiere highlights its continued relevance in American culture.

For a more in-depth interview with Anne Washburn on the 10-year anniversary of *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*, use the following QR code:



THEMES OF MR. BURNS

Themes -- those central ideas or messages present in a play -- are, at times, intended by the playwright, and other times they appear as thematic elements that people pick up on, even outside of the playwright's intent. So what are some of the themes of *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*?



The Impact of Societal Disaster

Mr. Burns explores how catastrophic events reshape social structures and cultural practices. These events affect people in a variety of ways, and how groups come together to support one another -- or not -- is typically a key theme of post-apocalyptic narratives. The loss of electricity and technology in this play's world forces characters to adapt and find new ways to create and share stories. The play's catastrophic backdrop also reflects on the idea of "found families" people create with others.

Cultural Memory and Mythology

One theme that we see play out in a primary way is the manner in which cultural artifacts are preserved, transformed, and mythologized over time. In *Mr. Burns*, an episode of *The Simpsons*, alongside culturally relevant songs and memories, becomes a foundational myth in a post-apocalyptic society. This transformation highlights how cultural touchstones can evolve into new forms of meaning and significance.

The Nature of Human Memory and Recollection

Mr. Burns delves into how memories are selective and mutable. What we see in the characters is that humans are able to manipulate their own memories and thought processes for the sake of their own survival. Further, the play's three acts collectively show how a single story can evolve and change over time, depending on the needs of a particular society. This emphasizes the ways in which memory can be fluid, and how collective recollections can be reshaped to fit new contexts.

The Role of Entertainment in and Pop Culture

The survivors of our play focus on *The Simpsons* as a form of collective memory -- particularly, the "Cape Feare" episode -- and also lean heavily into old commercials, pop songs, and films. This is arguably a reflection on the role of media and entertainment in shaping cultural norms and values. It questions how media influences our perception of reality and how it persists even in changed circumstances, and causes us to question which parts of our current society might survive in the same ways.

The Endurance of Storytelling

The play examines storytelling as a crucial mechanism for human connection and survival. As society collapses and technology is lost, the act of recounting and reimagining stories becomes a means of maintaining a sense of continuity and identity.

WHAT ABOUT THE “MANDELA EFFECT?”

The idea of the Mandela Effect -- that cultural phenomenon in which large groups of people vividly remember something that never actually happened -- is another thread of exploration within *Mr. Burns*. Named for the situation in which many people claimed to have remembered Nelson Mandela dying in prison in the 1980's, despite him living until 2013, the Mandela Effect is seen throughout American pop culture. Do you remember, for example, Darth Vader once saying, “Luke, I am your father?” Many people do, but this is an example of The Mandela Effect, as the character never actually said that!

So, how does the Mandela Effect play into *Mr. Burns*?

Namely, it comes into effect when we see, throughout the story, how narratives evolve, and how the power of collective belief plays such a critical role in how stories are remembered.

In *Mr. Burns*, we witness the gradual evolution of the “Cape Feare” episode of *The Simpsons*, until it eventually, after 82 years, becomes a mythic, operatic performance. The story transforms as it is repeatedly told and retold by different people, who misremember, embellish, or reinterpret the details. This reflects the core concept of the Mandela Effect, in that collective memory is not fixed, but rather fluid and susceptible to change.

Shared beliefs and memories gain strength and legitimacy over time, even when they deviate from objective reality. In the play, the group’s communal narrative around *The Simpsons* eventually takes on a new, almost sacred meaning. As we see, similarly, in examples of the Mandela Effect, widespread belief in the evolving narrative lends to its credibility, regardless of its accuracy.

In short, *Mr. Burns* dramatizes how stories, especially culturally popular ones, are preserved, adapted, and mythologized over time. As the survivors in the play retell *The Simpsons* episode, it eventually mutates into something much larger, just as false memories or alternate histories can evolve within a culture when passed from person to person. This process mirrors how the Mandela Effect can arise — through cultural transmission and reinterpretations. Human memory is imperfect ... and the process through which collective memory and popular culture can become distorted over time, turning mundane or simple events into complex myths or alternate realities, is fascinating, to say the least.



Pictured above: Autumn Morgan as Maria and JoAnn Birt as Jenny in NCT's production of Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play, 2024. Photography by Shahab Zargari

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SIMPSONS

Since its debut in 1989, *The Simpsons* has become America's longest-running animated series; its longest-running sitcom; and its longest-running scripted primetime series. It has clearly affected America's cultural zeitgeist throughout the years, and has become a television institution. But what is it about the beloved Simpson family, and their neighbors in Springfield, that has caught so many people's hearts?

It Changed the Way We View Cartoons

Before *The Simpsons*, cartoons were created primarily for children. Though Walt Disney is known for his groundbreaking approach to animation (including the first full-length animated feature film), it was *The Simpsons* which used edgy humor, pop culture references, and truly engaging storytelling to appeal to adult audiences. This paved the way for a future of cartoons targeting an adult audience. These have included *South Park*, *Rick and Morty*, *King of the Hill*, and even a late-night, adult-oriented cartoon programming block called Adult Swim.



Its Satirical Social and Political Commentary Keep People Engaged

The Simpsons has never shied away from a witty, satirical look at American life and culture. It often holds a reflective mirror up to the things many of us face everyday, including politics and the quirks of suburban life. Many episodes have taken on questions involving religion, the environment, and corporate greed, among other things. Some even say *The Simpsons* has been known to accurately predict the future of America! The aforementioned witty satire used to approach these issues, however, has made it palatable and intriguing for many audiences.

Its Longevity Within the Realm of Pop Culture Endures

From Marge Simpson's tall, blue hair to catch phrases such as "D'oh!", *The Simpsons* is filled with examples of how it has become a prominent part of American Pop Culture (and, indeed, around the world). "D'oh!", known to be spoken in frustration by Homer Simpson, has actually been added to the Oxford Language Dictionary. Songs have been written about the show and its characters (including a cover of the theme song by Green Day), and some universities have offered courses analyzing *The Simpsons* and its ever-growing cultural significance.



The show's ability to evolve with the times while remaining maintaining its core appeal has contributed to its continued success as a global pop culture icon.

Pictured above right: The Simpsons, as featured in the television show, from Britannica.com

Pictured above, left: JoAnn Birt as Jenny, taking on a semblance of Marge Simpson, in NCT's Mr. Burns: A Post Electric Play. Photograph by Shahab Zargari.

WHICH ONE WAS THAT EPISODE, AGAIN?

In Act I of *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*, our survivors do their best to recount an episode of *The Simpsons* -- an episode titled "Cape Feare." In Act II, they have created a theatre troupe that performs it. And in Act III, we see what the episode might look like after an ever-evolving culture has turned it into a musical piece of ritual theatre 75 years later. But just what was this episode about?



The Entire Episode was a Pop Culture Reference

In 1993, *The Simpsons* premiered "Cape Feare" as the second episode of its fifth season. It was based on the 1962 film *Cape Fear* (and its 1991 remake). In it, the villainous Sideshow Bob tries to take murderous revenge on Bart Simpson, and he follows the entire family onto a house boat in a retelling of the live-action films.

We See the Evolution of the Episode in Real-Time

When discussing the episode in Act I, the characters remember many real details of the actual episode, as well as details from its source materials (the *Cape Fear* movies, and also films *Night of the Hunter* and *Do the Right Thing*). By the time we get to Act II, many of these elements are still in place, including a scene in which the FBI grants the Simpson family a new identity. We begin to see some subtle differences, however, such as our survivors using the name Terror River instead of Terror Lake, as it appeared in the episode. By the time we reach Act III, many elements of the original episode -- and even many elements of the original show -- have been lost and reimagined, including the main villain being Mr. Burns (instead of Sideshow Bob).

Pre-and-During-Show Activity:

If you're able, watch the "Cape Feare" episode of *The Simpsons* (the entire series is available on Disney+, and you may also be able to find clips on YouTube). Then, when you see *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*, see how many similarities and differences you can spot!



Pictured above left: Sideshow Bob and Lisa Simpson in "Cape Feare."

Pictured above, center: Sideshow Bob and Robert De Niro striking similar villainous poses, courtesy of Cathal Gunning.

ABOUT THOSE REFERENCES...

Aside from *The Simpsons*, there are many other pop cultural references made in the show. Let's have a look at them!

***Cape Fear*, 1962**

Cape Fear is a psychological thriller movie based on the novel *The Executioners* by John D. MacDonald. It follows a criminal named Max Cady, who stalks his former defense attorney, Sam Bowden, and Bowden's family, for purposely withholding evidence during Cady's trial which might have led to an acquittal. This film starred Robert Mitchum as Max Cady.



***Cape Fear*, 1991**

This remake of the 1962 film starred Robert De Niro as Max Cady. In 1993, *The Simpsons* would use this film, and its predecessor, as reference material for its episode "Cape Feare," in which Sideshow Bob takes on a Max Cady-esque role in stalking Bart Simpson and his family.

***Night of the Hunter*, 1955**

Night of the Hunter is a film noir thriller directed by Charles Laughton and starring Robert Mitchum. It follows a clergyman named Harry Powell, who is also a serial killer. In the movie, Powell uses his tattoos -- the word L-O-V-E on his right knuckles and H-A-T-E on his left -- as props in his sermons.



***Do the Right Thing*, 1989**

This comedy-drama by Spike Lee is an exploration of racial tensions set in Brooklyn. The movie features a recreation of *Night of the Hunter's* L-O-V-E and H-A-T-E tattoos, using, instead, knuckle rings. The character who wears them, Raheem, gives a speech about love and hate, which is referenced in Act III of *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*.

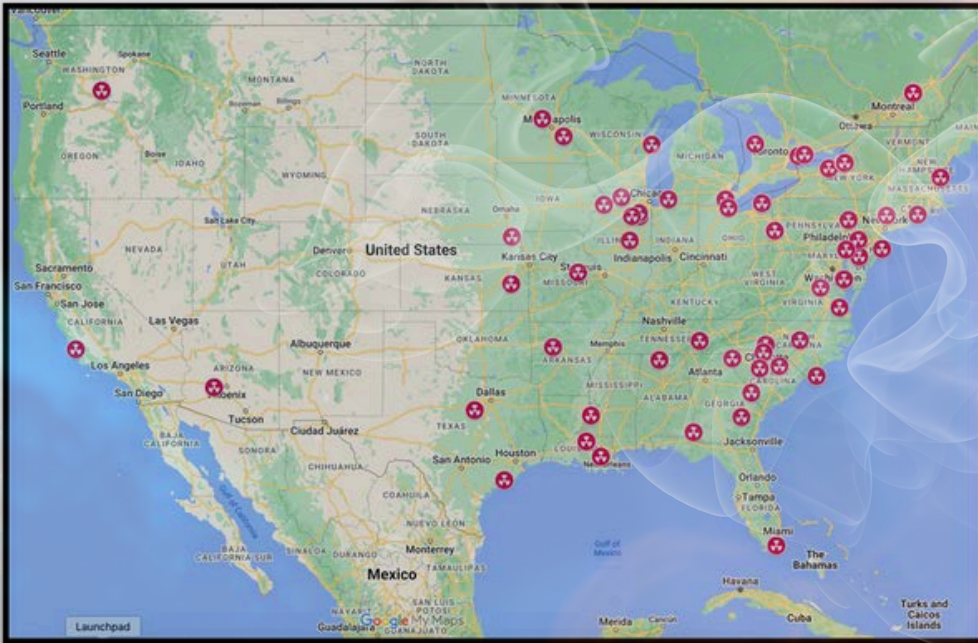
Gilbert and Sullivan

W.S. Gilbert (1836-1911) was a dramatist, and Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) was a composer. The two worked together to create 14 comic operas, including the well-known *Pirates of Penzance*. Two of their other shows are referenced in *Mr. Burns: H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Mikado*.



NUCLEAR MELTDOWN: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Below, you see a map of the United States, and the location of all of its nuclear power plants. We only need to look to the example of the 1986 nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl to understand the devastating consequences of what a mass meltdown could look like.



Nuclear power plants are a major source of clean, carbon-free energy. Since they don't burn fuel, they don't produce greenhouse gas emissions. Instead, they use nuclear reactors to generate electricity by splitting uranium atoms, which then releases energy. These plants provide over half of America's carbon-free electricity. So what would happen in the case of a mass meltdown?

A meltdown of a nuclear power plant is *not* a nuclear explosion, and is not caused by a bomb. Rather, it is caused by a nuclear reactor at the plant burning out of control, until it is damaged by its own heat. The first step is that fuel rods will melt, creating a partial meltdown. It is possible to circulate coolant and stop the process at this point, but if left unchecked it can escalate into a total nuclear meltdown -- which then becomes a race against time to cool the remnants of the core nuclear reactor before it melts through its layers of protective casing and releases harmful radioactive material into the atmosphere.

In the world of *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*, our survivors are dealing with the aftermath of a mass meltdown that spans multiple power plants over multiple states. This has created a multiplicity of emergencies: First, the danger of radioactive material, and, second, the total loss of electricity. Both have created an apocalyptic scenario in which the characters must rely on storytelling to access the past they once knew.

It's important to remember that doomsday scenarios involving nuclear power plants are mostly fiction. Still, it also does us well to remember the realities of disasters such as Chernobyl, which, nearly 40 years after its nuclear meltdown, remains inhospitable to humans.

Pictured above: A map of the United States, detailing all of its active nuclear power plants.

Pictured right: A room from a building in Pripyat, Ukraine, decades after being affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and subsequently abandoned.



STORYTELLING AROUND THE CAMPFIRE...

Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play begins with a group of survivors in a post-apocalyptic world, sitting around a campfire and telling stories. In Act II, we see this same group, seven years later, now performing those stories live on stage. And in Act III, those stories have evolved into something else entirely.

It is all deeply connected to the history of theatre, reflecting how storytelling and performance evolve over time, especially in response to cultural and societal changes. It encapsulates the development of theatre, demonstrating how stories transform, ritualize, and adapt.

The transformation of the “Cape Fear” episode of *The Simpsons* into a grand, operatic performance in Act III reflects how early human storytelling around campfires evolved into ritualistic and ceremonial forms of theatre. Over time, simple stories often evolve into myths, incorporating archetypal characters and moral lessons. In Act III, the characters have become larger-than-life and mythic, much like how ancient myths were dramatized in Greek tragedies or religious rituals. This echoes the process by which early stories about gods, heroes, and moral conflicts became the foundation of theatre in ancient civilizations.

The progression from the realistic retelling of a TV episode in Act II to the highly stylized, operatic form in Act III parallels the evolution of theatre from realism and naturalism toward more symbolic and abstract forms. This mirrors the history of theatre where, after periods of realism, theatre has often returned to more expressive, non-realistic forms. (Maria and Quincey’s argument in Act II reflects this change.)



Throughout the history of theatre, stories have been continuously adapted, reinterpreted, and reshaped to fit new cultural contexts and societal needs. Act III demonstrates this process, showing how a simple TV episode has been reimagined and reshaped into something new and culturally relevant for a future society. This echoes how classical myths were adapted by different cultures, how medieval religious plays evolved, or how Shakespeare’s works have been continually reinterpreted.

The art of storytelling in *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play* serves as a microcosm of the entire history of theatre. It demonstrates how theatrical forms change over time, and how storytelling evolves into ritual, and, importantly, how theatre functions as a cultural and communal force. By turning a modern pop culture artifact into a ritualistic performance, the play connects the dots between ancient traditions of storytelling and the future of theatre, reflecting the ongoing human need to create, share, and preserve stories.

Pictured above: Gibson (Nick Case) performs Gilbert and Sullivan, much to the delight of fellow survivors Colleen (Kate Critchfield), Matt (Andrew Trevino), Maria (Autumn Morgan), Jenny (JoAnn Birt), and Sam (Andrew Bullard) in NCT's Mr. Burns: A Post Electric Play. Photograph by Shahab Zargari.

THE ROLE OF RITUAL THEATRE

You may notice that, in *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*, Act III is stylistically different than Acts I and II. To begin with, there is little dialogue; instead, the final act is operatic, with music serving as its dominant feature. Even when there is dialogue, music underscores it. The operatic approach to the final act is in keeping with the “Cape Feare” Simpsons episode, which involves Sideshow Bob performing the Gilbert and Sullivan opera, *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

In addition to the operatic nature of the final act, the presentation of the act is ritualistic in nature. The performances are a memorialization of events from the past. Everyone participating in this ritual is removed from the events in Acts I and II -- they were not witness to the nuclear apocalypse, nor do they have any working knowledge of *The Simpsons*, as they would have never had the opportunity to see the show. When the various members of the Chorus adorn the masks, they are fulfilling a fundamental aspect of masks in ritual theatre. It is through the masks that they are able to embody the characters and tell the parable story of Act III.

But what, exactly, is ritual theatre? Simply put, it is the enactment of a mythical or archetypal story with the intention of bringing about healing. In fact, ritual theatre is one of the most ancient forms of healing that is still practiced in tribal societies today. Since ancient time, people healed themselves and their societies through exploring what they couldn't understand about the world, and they did this through dramatic ritual. Such were the beginnings of ritual theatre. It often features a ceremonial structure, symbolic content, and a sense of communal experience.

In the case of the performers in Act III, we see that society is still healing from the apocalyptic events nearly a century earlier. *The Simpsons* have become archetypal figures representing strength, humanity, and perseverance. Mr. Burns, himself, has come to symbolize disease and death. This, along with the presence of the Chorus and music, we see a timeless display of the human experience in Act III -- the deep, spiritually-structured performance art that is ritual theatre.



Post-Show Discussion:

The intention of ritual theatre is to bring about healing. What is the lesson being taught in the ritual theatre of Act III? How does the ritual of the performance bring about healing?

MORE ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

The Power of Collective Memory

In *Mr. Burns*, Washburn sought to find what pieces of culture would live on in the event of an apocalypse. She theorized that in the wake of such a tragedy, people wouldn't necessarily turn to Shakespeare or Dickens, but to the comedies that they grew up with. Though she considered many shows to highlight in her play, she landed on *The Simpsons* for its all-encompassing approach to Western culture. *The Simpsons* touches on politics, current events, and popular culture, and Washburn believed it fully documented American society.

PRE/POST SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES RELATED TO COLLECTIVE MEMORY

- 1) Each Act of *Mr. Burns* is interested in the power of memory -- what we remember, and how we remember it.
 - A) In small groups of 3 to 4, come up with a list of your collective memories -- something with which everyone in the group has some relationship. You should include at least one television show, one movie, one song, one commercial, and one book.
 - B) Once you have collected your list, select one item from the list that you will retell together. Everyone in the group should participate in this retelling. For example, for a TV show that you all know, select an episode to tell together. If you select a song, you should all be able to sing it or perform the dance moves to it if there are any.
 - C) Share your collective memories with the larger group.
- 2) In Act II, it is clear that the characters miss certain foods, amenities, luxuries, and basic necessities. Some of the items missed include hot baths, Fritos, chablis, and hot cocoa. What foods, amenities, luxuries, and necessities would you miss if you lived in the post-apocalyptic world of *Mr. Burns*?



- 3) In the wake of an apocalypse, the characters of *Mr. Burns* turn to comedy rather than tragedy. Do you agree, that comedy would prove more attractive than tragedy in such a situation? Where might stories of tragedy have a place?

Pre-Show Activity:

American composer John Adams composed a commemorative piece to memorialize those who had lost their lives on 9/11, called "The Transmigration of Souls." Anne Washburn was familiar with it, and she and Michael Friedman pay homage to it in the play. Follow the QR code to listen to the New York Philharmonic performance of it, then listen for how Washburn and Friedman incorporate it into *Mr. Burns*.



Post-Show Activity and Discussion:

Each of the characters in the show bring specific skills to the survival group (and, eventually, the theatrical group).

- 1) Make a list of the skills and attributes each of the characters brought with them.
- 2) What skills would *you* bring to a survival group? What role would you likely play in a post-apocalyptic community?

Post-Show Activity:

How would you design your favorite cartoon characters as musical or operatic characters? Draw and color what your costume design would look like.

Post-Show Activity:

In a group, choose 5-6 songs that you would use in your own version of Chart Hits in a post-apocalyptic world. How would you choose to stage it, and why?

Post-Show Discussion:

How would you design costumes in a post-apocalyptic world for a cartoon you'd never actually seen?

Post-Show Discussion:

Anne Washburn could have easily removed any one or more characters from Act I, giving more than one new character in Act II, but she doesn't. Why do you think she chose to have these characters remain together over the course of two acts (and seven years)?



Pictured above: Nick Case as Gibson, Kate Critchfield as Colleen, and Autumn Morgan as Maria in NCT's production of Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play, 2024. Photography by Shahab Zargari

WORDS FROM THE ACTORS: WOULD YOU RESPOND TO A CATASTROPHE LIKE YOUR CHARACTER DID?



Andrew Trevino (Matt)

"Me and Matt are very similar with our love for The Simpsons and our humor. We both would take advantage of the new world, but I'd probably focus more on survival. Matt keeps it light. I'd be less funny and be more business-like in making sure my group was safe no matter the cost. I'd be less likely to run away from a fight, and rather take the fight to the enemy. I'd probably be a villain in the apocalypse if I made it that far -- a cross between Negan and Pancho Villa. No rules."

JoAnn Birt (Jenny)

"Jenny and I are similar in that we both care for those around us! If I were in a disaster, I think I would want to stick with a group of people so as not to have to face the new world alone."



Autumn Morgan (Maria)

"Maria and I share that we are both willing to learn what we need to, and will find creative ways to get what we need to [get] done. One way we are different is that she initially learned everything she knows about defense from watching TV and movies. Meanwhile, I have some military training."

Andrew Bullard (Sam)

"I think we're similar in that we both hold in high regard the importance of having a tribe, or a found family. It's true for both of us that the love language through which we're both fulfilled is acts of service. We are different in that Sam is more stoic than I am, particularly in Act I."





Kate Critchfield (Colleen)

“Colleen’s trauma has caused her to develop an extreme fear of losing people. One way we are alike is that she has responded to this by becoming fiercely protective of those she loves. One way we are different is that she also creates walls to protect herself from further heartache.

Nick Case (Gibson)

“Both Gibson and I look for answers. We want to know what the total damage is, where has been hit the hardest, and who I know is left. And similar to Gib, I’d only trust what I see; speculation and rumors don’t carry a lot of weight after a fallout. We wander, looking for civilization, hoping the radioactivity doesn’t get to me first...”



Sofia Virden (Quincey)

“Quincey definitely puts her all into her art and passions to escape from the worries and dark parts of her real life, and we are very similar that way. We differ mainly when it comes to our willingness and preparedness to fight. She never has a weapon and often hides behind others for protection, but I am trained with firearms and would be eager to get to the front of the line to protect my friends and family.”

Post-Show Discussion:

- 1) Which of the characters from *Mr. Burns* did you most relate to, and why?
- 2) If you were in a production of *Mr. Burns*, who would you most want to play? How would you play that character?

During-Show Observation:

In Act II, the survivors use many references to pop culture as they work on their play performance. Pay attention to which of those references wind up surviving into Act III -- there may be more than you think!

A PEEK AT TECH DESIGN: SCENIC AND COSTUMING

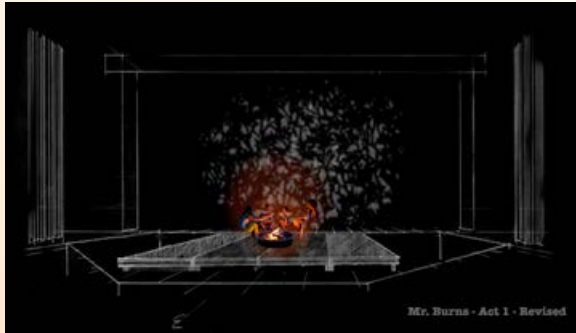
Dana Moran Williams - Scenic Designer

Inspiration: The world of *The Simpsons*; the post-apocalyptic, post-electric world; and the spiritualism of a ritual play.

Act I:

Act II:

Act III:



J.D. Anderson - Costume Designer

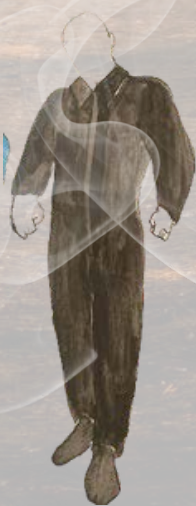
Inspiration: "They begin around a campfire ... Waiting with baited breath that this will all blow over soon..."

Act III brings elements of Dark Fantasy and high fashion, inspired by *Dune* and *The Fifth Element*. Here's a sample of some of J.D.'s designs for the show:

Act I:

Act II:

Act III:

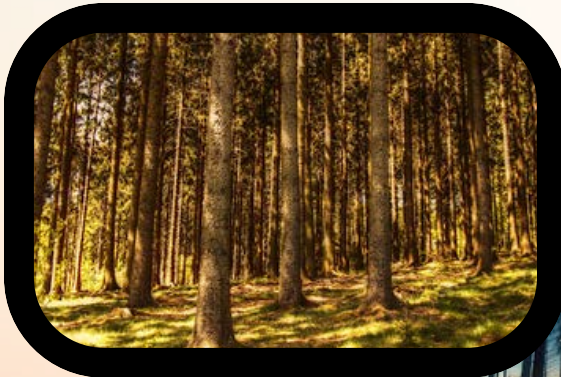


A PEEK AT TECH DESIGN: LIGHTING

Paige Borak - Lighting Designer

Inspiration: The creative element of lighting this show comes down to this: How do you light a show which takes place in a world where there is, technically, no electricity?

Inspiration For Act 1:



Inspiration For Act 2:



Inspiration For Act 3:



Post-Show Activity:

If you were to design technical elements of this show, what would it look like?

A close-up photograph of a man wearing a red turban, looking directly at the camera with a serious, intense expression. His right hand is clenched into a fist, held prominently in the foreground. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall mood is gritty and dramatic.

**“EVERY STORY ENDS ON
A DARK AND RAGING RIVER”**