THE SIMPSONS
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**COVER** Scenic designer Ralph Funicello’s set rendering for A.C.T.’s production of *Mr. Burns, a post-electric play*

Overview of
Mr. Burns, a post–electric play

Mr. Burns, a post–electric play premiered in May 2012 at Washington, D.C.’s Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. It was performed by the theater troupe The Civilians and directed by Steven Cosson. Cosson also directed the New York City production, which premiered at Playwrights Horizons in September 2013. Mr. Burns is a coproduction between A.C.T. and the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis.

Creative Team

Choreographer .............................................. Amy Anders Corcoran
Music Director .............................................. David Möschler
Scenic Designer ............................................. Ralph Funicello
Costume Designer ......................................... Alex Jaeger
Lighting Designer ......................................... Alexander V. Nichols
Sound Designer ............................................. Jake Rodriguez

Characters and Cast

Matt .............................................................. Nick Gabriel
Jenny .............................................................. Anna Ishida
Colleen .......................................................... Charity Jones
Gibson ........................................................... Jim Lichtscheidl
Maria ............................................................. Kelsey Venter
Edna Krabappel ............................................. Andrea Wollenberg
Sam ............................................................... Ryan Williams French
Quincy............................................................ Tracy A. Leigh

Setting

The first act is set in the very near future, the second act is set seven years after that, and the third act is set 75 years after Act II.

OPPOSITE Stencil graffiti found in New Orleans, referencing the “chalkboard gag” featured in every Simpsons opening sequence. Attributed to street artist Banksy. Photo by Infrogmation of New Orleans, 2008.
Synopsis

Act I

The United States has experienced a widespread and catastrophic nuclear-plant failure that has destroyed the country and its electrical grid. After the disaster, a group of five survivors—Matt, Jenny, Maria, Sam, and Colleen—gather around a fire and recount the episode entitled “Cape Feare” from *The Simpsons*, Matt Groening’s popular animated series about a dysfunctional American family and the zany community of Springfield. In the episode, young Bart is stalked by the murderous Sideshow Bob. The episode contains a dense collection of many stories that came before it; most prominently, it is a riff on the 1991 Martin Scorsese film *Cape Fear* (starring Robert De Niro), which is a remake of the 1962 film (starring Robert Mitchum). The episode also contains kaleidoscopic cultural references to Mitchum’s earlier role in *The Night of the Hunter*, as well as Gilbert and Sullivan operettas.

As the survivors attempt to remember the events of the episode, they discover that memory is unreliable, disagreeing over who said what and how significant punch lines were worded. They are interrupted by the entrance of a new survivor, Gibson, who offers them information about what is happening outside their camp and tells them stories of destruction, evacuation, and power plants taken offline. The survivors have filled their personal journals with the names of their loved ones, as well as the names of everyone they have met after the disaster. It is customary to compare notes with any new person’s list of loved ones, and vice versa; the survivors go through this ritual with Gibson, but find no crossovers in the people they’ve encountered. The group soon comes back to the original topic of conversation: “Cape Feare.” Gibson helps them remember a punch line, the words of which they’d previously mangled. Act I ends with Gibson entertaining the rapt survivors with a Gilbert and Sullivan song: “Three Little Maids from School Are We,” from *The Mikado*.

Act II

Seven years later, the shared experience of recounting “Cape Feare” has been formalized into a much larger endeavor. The same group of survivors has formed a theater company that specializes in performing a small repertoire of *Simpsons* episodes, spliced with “commercials” about bygone luxuries (hot baths, cold Diet Coke, and Chablis, to name a few) and pre-disaster top 40 hits (sung a cappella). As they rehearse together, we learn that *Simpsons* episodes are being performed by others, as well. Lines from the episodes are currency; the characters compete with several itinerant troupes for the best and most accurate lines, paying audience members who can offer them long-forgotten *Simpsons* snippets, for which they will then have exclusive rights. The troupe is anxious about whether or not their shows are good enough to maintain an audience. In the outside world, food is scarce, nuclear plants have completely melted down, and chaos and danger reign. Act II ends with the troupe under attack by a mysterious, unseen group of criminals. Shots ring out and many of the troupe members fall.
Act III

It is 75 years after Act II. *The Simpsons* has assumed mythic proportions, and the “Cape Feare” episode has transformed into an epic opera in which Homer, Marge, Lisa, Bart, and Mr. Burns (the show’s heartless nuclear power plant owner, who has since replaced Sideshow Bob) are figures cobbled together from elements of the television show and the aftermath of the apocalypse; in addition to the morphed version of “Cape Feare,” the chorus recounts the names of people killed in the nuclear meltdown and dramatizes events of the past several decades. The musical is a mash-up of hip-hop, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, and dialogue that the original survivors in Act I spoke around the campfire.
Survival of the Fittest Stories
An Interview with Playwright Anne Washburn

By Nirmala Nataraj

Anne Washburn remembers her formative years as a Bay Area theater artist—in fact, one of her early creative homes was A.C.T.’s Young Conservatory program. “The culminating exercise was to imagine that a great plague had taken hold of the world, and the YC participants were all doctors who had to envision what they would do in the face of disaster,” says Washburn. “It seems appropriate that I’m coming full circle to do an apocalyptic play at A.C.T.”

Washburn’s plays are a testament to her interest in how, why, and when stories are told—as well as how they mutate over time. Her range is versatile, running the gamut from a musical adaptation of Euripides’s Greek tragedy *Orestes* to a linguistically complex dark comedy about globalism and cultural confusion (*The Internationalist*), gothic vignettes that evoke the scariest horror films (*Apparition*), and a droll feminist epic about dictators and the women who love them (*The Ladies*).

Washburn’s stories are difficult to categorize, but they might best be described as comic dramas and tragic comedies about a global state of affairs. In *Mr. Burns*, large-scale catastrophe underpins the story, but Washburn’s world doesn’t offer up the familiar wasteland we’ve come to associate with the apocalypse genre. This landscape isn’t riddled with zombies, plagues, and brute survival—at least, not overtly. The desperation of her characters is rendered in their passion for the story—a persistently memorable episode of *The Simpsons* entitled “Cape Feare”) that they attempt to cobble together from memory. This pastime provides the backdrop for the world of the play, in which the death, continuity, and resurrection of specific stories is directly tied to the characters’ survival.

“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,” Washburn has written. *Mr. Burns* has accordingly been lauded as a celebration of the human instinct to tell stories—and a reminder of how deeply this instinct is tied to our endurance as a species.

Washburn recently gave us some insight into the role of myth in *Mr. Burns*, as well as the circuitous route that stories take when they are cranked through our culture’s unpredictable translation machine.
You’ve said that *Mr. Burns* emerged from an idea that had been knocking around in your head for years: you wanted to take a pop-culture narrative and see what it meant and how it changed after the fall of civilization.

I recently realized that the idea partially stemmed from September 11, 2001. I was in New York then. We were convinced that the city would come under some other attack, so we were thinking about things in a very drastic way. As I was pondering the end of civilization, I imagined that in the midst of a catastrophe, people would tell stories if they had any down time. I was interested in which stories would be told, how they would be told, what media makes the transition from the visual to the spoken, and how these stories mutate. We are used to telling stories about things we’ve seen and books we’ve read, and in the context of an apocalypse, people would be most interested in something everyone would have in common, so that’s where the idea of basing the play on a TV show came from.

Did you look at the trajectory of other stories that have mutated over time?

A huge example of a story that has changed over time is *Batman*. I remember the old Adam West show, which was charming and kitschy, while the movie directed by Tim Burton, starring Michael Keaton, was a crazy reboot. It’s a story we tell incessantly, making it more extreme over time. This is also true of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*; they are stories people will not let die. But of course, we live in a world where there are copyright laws. So there is fan fiction, and then there’s the accepted mainstream story, and the two are not allowed to meet. In a world without copyright protection, fan fiction can have as huge an impact on the continuation of the story, for good or ill, as the official version.

*Batman* and *Star Wars* are archetypal stories in our culture that change to reflect what’s currently happening in our world. That also seems true for your play; the stories within it continually get updated to parallel what’s happening in the world of the characters.

We’re drawn to different stories depending on the circumstances of our lives. I find it interesting that many of the stories that have changed within our lifetimes are science-fiction pieces that were considered to be cartoonish in their initial phases but have gradually acquired adult gravity. I think it’s easier to update something like *Batman* or *The Simpsons* because they are so archetypal and essentially deal with large-scale topics. It’s not as satisfying to update something like *Anna Karenina*, because you’d probably make it a completely different tale.
How does this play fit into your overall body of work?

My plays tend to be quite different from each other, but almost all of them include found material, either in the form of something I’ve overheard or an incorporated text. With my play *The Ladies*, which dealt with dictators’ wives, we assembled a group of actors with The Civilians and had them read abbreviated accounts of these historical characters’ lives—two pages at most—and we didn’t give them enough time to do it. Then we had them retell the story of the women’s lives and try to come up with a proper account. We deliberately wanted it to be the kind of thing you devise when you don’t have enough information to go on. That kind of reconstruction is in more than one of my plays. There’s a little bit of an interest in the apocalypse, as well.

You used found dialogue in writing *Mr. Burns* when you developed it with The Civilians back in 2011. What was that like?

We got together and asked actors to come up with any *Simpsons* episode they could recount. “Cape Feare” was the one they had the best memory of. Matt Maher muscled his way through it with them, and Maria Dizzia and Jenny Morris chipped in. Then we had a second telling, and a third one at which there were a couple actors who hadn’t previously been in the room. From these three iterations, I made a master version of the play and edited it a lot and did tiny bits of rewriting, but basically, all the material in the first act that has to do with the actors telling the episode came directly from this spoken dialogue. I wanted to do this because written English is so different from spoken English. We are trained as writers in written English, but this is limiting. Even if you are an exact observer, you can only kind of come up with believable dialogue between two people, but to recreate a group-think process without actually hearing people talk it out is really hard.

The choice of *The Simpsons* seems appropriate. It’s an animated show set in a world that is always going to endure no matter what happens.

It is a good thing to have hit upon, consciously or not. Because the characters are eternal and because it’s a cartoon, you have such a wide range of stories to choose from. And the characters are archetypal. Bart Simpson is a trickster, similar to mythical characters like Coyote or Kokopelli. He always gets into trouble and always ends up surviving. His heart is in the right place, but he’s pure mayhem. And Homer is the idiot, the holy fool. Because the play takes place right after the apocalypse and *The Simpsons* is about a family, I thought the survivors would care more; the questions of what your bonds are, who your community is, become really relevant.

What do you think makes the “Cape Feare” episode so memorable?

When I tell people I wrote a play about it, many who are familiar with the show say, “I know that one. It’s my favorite!” Jon Vitti, the head writer of *The Simpsons* for a few seasons, was one of several people who left after season five. I remember him saying that
“Cape Feare” was the last episode that particular group of writers was responsible for. It was a rule in *The Simpsons* that you could never have just one primary reference point, which is why the show always had multiple references in a single episode; if people didn’t understand a particular reference, they could swiftly find another one they *did* get. “Cape Feare” is a unique case. Although there are six million other references in the episode, “Cape Feare” follows the 1991 film *Cape Fear* almost from beginning to end. So people retain it because it contains an intact story.

Although *Cape Fear* is not really an old story, it pivots on an extremely old fear: being powerless. It’s a nightmare a lot of people have—you call for help, nobody can help you, and the menacing thing is coming your way. There’s something very punitive and raw and awful about the 1962 film and 1991 remake, but the *Simpsons* episode is much scarier. Even though it’s a cartoon, the focus is on the child, and the child who is being targeted is someone nobody pays attention to. It makes the story even darker, which is also part of its appeal.

You grew up in the Bay Area. Do you have any early memories of disaster and apocalypse prompted by the location?

Growing up in the Bay Area with the threat of impending disaster probably influenced this work. If you grow up in earthquake country, even as a small child, you think about it all the time because the “big one” could happen at any moment. As an adult, you can assess the risks more, but as a kid, you can’t—there is a level of incredible insecurity that you just have to live with.
What was the weirdest piece of information you came across in your research for the play?
I don't think any of it seemed weird or strange, unfortunately. I was surprised to find out how many nuclear power plants we have in the United States. I was startled to discover that all of our policies on nuclear regulation are being enforced in the absence of emergency plans or crisis management. People proceed as though they're always going to have an unbroken chain of civic control for thousands of years, and it's not like that's ever happened or is even possible.

*Mr. Burns* doesn't feel like the typical post-apocalyptic story; the details of the disaster are palpable but they're in the background. The activities and obsessions of the characters are pretty different from those you might see on a television show like *The Walking Dead*, for example.

Maybe so, but at the same time, the stakes are enormous. The characters are not just people sitting around and putting on a play in their leisure time. At first their storytelling is casual, but you have to understand: if their audiences don't enjoy their show, the characters don't eat. I also think we assume the characters are doing a lot of surviving, but we've all seen the movies and the TV shows, and we know what that survival-oriented post-apocalyptic world looks like, so I didn't feel the need to repeat that here.
In the second act, we see a conversation between two characters in which one insists the troupe has a chance to impart meaning and another says that meaningless entertainment is much more important, since the characters live in a world where they are bombarded with meaning. Is there a larger commentary in *Mr. Burns* about escapist versus meaningful entertainment?

I don’t believe any entertainment is escapist. Anything we lose ourselves in has some form of meaning. It’s all significant, whether we approve of it or not. In the second act, what’s interesting and meaningful isn’t in the show the characters are going to present. It’s in the commercials, which respond very specifically to the things people can’t talk about. The commercials become exercises in taking people to places they aren’t comfortable going on their own—when you start dwelling on consumer goods you can’t have anymore, it becomes dangerous.

I’m curious about the role of commercials and song mash-ups in the play. Their addition feels like the characters’ attempt to find some semblance of normalcy.

In *Mr. Burns*, the commercials and song mash-ups might serve to create a kind of painful nostalgia, but they also provide the kind of reassurance kids get when they hear a family story over and over again, and they freak out if you change any details. The people in this world need storytelling to not be creative. They want to recreate the old world as exactly as possible in their entertainment.

However, because I think humans always need to express their anxieties, the commercials and the megamix of songs become the areas where, under the disguise of “we used to have commercials and they looked like this,” or “we used to have song compilations and they looked like this,” the creative urge reaches out of the shock of trauma. It’s the beginning of recovery and healing.

In Act II, we see that the characters operate in a loose copyright system that inhibits the free flow of stories. How does that affect how the stories get told?

In London [where *Mr. Burns* was produced at the Almeida Theatre in 2014], people were very caught up in the idea that the play was a dark analysis of capitalism in a world in which stories had become monetized. But that’s just how human beings work if you put them into a barter system. Everything becomes monetized. In fact, I was in Alaska working with a theater in Juneau, and one of the local tribes, the Tlingit, were very wealthy and had a lot of leisure time because they didn’t have to work so hard to get enough to eat, which meant they had a strong storytelling tradition. But you couldn’t tell the stories of another clan because that was a major copyright infringement they actually enforced.

In the world of *Mr. Burns*, everyone wants the best *Simpsons* stories, so they work out some kind of fair use. By the end of Act II, we see this deteriorating. It’s a chaotic world, so whatever fragile truce has held people together breaks. At some point, someone is bound to say, “If I had all these stories, I could rule the world. I’m going to take the stories by force, if necessary!”
By the time we get to the end, there is a complete stylistic shift. What was going through your mind when you decided to have this grand third act?

Even before I knew the story would revolve around *The Simpsons*, I wanted a three-act structure: the first act would take place roughly around now, the second act would take place seven years in the future, and the third act would be a fully fledged theatrical gesture far into the future.

I was also thinking a lot about Greek drama because it was created by a society that was still in deep trauma over the fall of Athenian democracy, which was the height of civilization at that time. Until you get to the forms that are common now, all the drama of ancient Greece and the Old World includes music and dance, which are super satisfying when they are combined. The degree to which contemporary drama is performed without music is something I find curious. In the future of *Mr. Burns*, the characters don't come from theatrical backgrounds. They aren't familiar with today's conventions, so in some ways, they have no reason not to make the most exciting plays they can.

How do you think the “Cape Feare” story would evolve if we found ourselves 175 years into the future?

It all depends on the civilization around it. The story could mutate into a beautiful meditation, or it could be grand and crude and propagandistic, depending on who's in power. But, surely, it would be more detailed, and it would be much more removed from the original concept of *The Simpsons*. It might even be blasphemous.
to say it was originally a cartoon! You’d want it to take on reverential proportions in order for it to have historical buy-in. It’s similar to how we’d like to believe that if something is important now, it must have a grand and glorious origin.

*Mr. Burns* is a memory narrative that creates the future from the detritus of the past.

Yes, the current day is always being shaped by the past. We always talk about the “good old days.” We tend to have these firm narratives about the past, but they are selective at best and often, albeit innocently, completely false.

And even as we idealize the past, the larger collective story about it constantly changes. By the end of the play, *Mr. Burns* is the villain and Sideshow Bob has been erased.

Jon Vitti has said that Sideshow Bob and Mr. Burns are both characters who tend to verbally fulminate, so they’re actually connected.

Sideshow Bob is a clown, which is frightening but not as frightening as the demonic owner of a nuclear power plant—especially in a landscape that is littered with nuclear debris, where you have the problem of radiation and industrial contamination. What makes radiation so frightening, of course, is that you never really know where it is. If you were in a future without detectors, you’d never know which way to go to escape. Someone who represents radiation would become an obvious villain.

Costume designer Alex Jaeger’s renderings of Lisa Simpson (opposite) and Colleen (right) for A.C.T.’s production of *Mr. Burns*
The Mr. Burns character inhabits not just a post-nuclear landscape but also a human brutality landscape. He’s similar to Cady, the villain in Cape Fear, who represents what happens when you take away the rule of law and are left with the psychopathic element of mankind.

Do you feel there’s a battle between the highbrow and the lowbrow when we think about whether a story or pop-culture phenomenon will have future relevance?

This brings me back to The Simpsons. An important thing to note about the show is that it is brilliant. It was created by math geniuses. The “lowbrow” status of The Simpsons in our culture has obscured the fact that it’s amazing.

There’s the dichotomy of highbrow/lowbrow, and there’s also the dichotomy of brilliant/not brilliant. There must be a lot of brilliant things that are lost that we’ll never know about. There are lots of things that were popular at one time that didn’t survive, and things that fell into obscurity but were resurrected. We’d like to think it’s a meritocracy and brilliant things survive, but that’s just not the case. I think you could eventually develop a computer that would tell you if a piece of writing is brilliant, but it wouldn’t be able to tell you if it was ever popular. Popularity and brilliance aren’t always related.

What are your thoughts about post-apocalyptic stories that are generated nowadays?

I enjoy post-apocalyptic literature and movies. Apocalypse is a preoccupation of our culture for obvious reasons; the topic has not been totally played out yet. It’s still gripping, because our culture is full of horrible tensions. In another sense, these stories are fun, like childhood games that begin with “Our parents are dead. We’re orphans. What next?” The narrative of being thrust into a world without any assistance fulfills our drive for adventure. There’s not much adventure in the world anymore, but in a post-apocalyptic world, it’s everywhere.

If you were one of the survivors of an apocalypse, what would you ensure existed in the society of the future?

I think that after an apocalypse, there’d be a lot of powerful but simplistic stories about what happened and why. For me, it would be really important to be brave and bold about piecing together the exactitude of our history, while making sure people understand there are a lot of alternative ways of viewing it. There used to be only one “history” that people knew about, but now, a big push in education has encouraged different ways of understanding our past. Many narratives are incommensurate, but exist side by side. There is a multiplicity in looking at the world that I think people find really stressful and would love to get away from. However, I’d want to find a way of maintaining this complexity of discussion at a time when people would be tempted to reach for simpler explanations.
A *Simpsons* Lover’s Guide to *Mr. Burns, a post-electric play*

*By Adam Odsess-Rubin*

If humanity ever suffers an apocalypse, *The Simpsons*, with its encyclopedic collection of movie-star cameos, original couch gags, and literary references, would offer survivors a detailed archive of the last 25 years. *The Simpsons* is American society writ large. Winner of 31 Emmys, a Peabody Award, and the record for the longest-running sitcom in television history (561 episodes and counting), it has been lauded as a simple yet effective satire on the dysfunctional nature of the American family, and a piercing look into the complexities of human nature. The many characters that populate this seemingly simple TV show reflect American society in a fun-house mirror meant to simultaneously entertain and provoke.

The heart of the show is the Simpsons family. Homer, the father, is an irate buffoon who serves (poorly) as a safety inspector at Mr. Burns’s nuclear power plant. Marge, the mother, is cautious and thoughtful, and works hard to keep the family together. Lisa, the older daughter, is the moral center of the show, a genius and die-hard liberal intellectual. Bart, the son, is a sassy yellow Dennis the Menace, never found without the slingshot he uses to terrorize his teachers. Lastly, Maggie is the silent baby, witness to the family’s antics. Supporting characters, of which there are hundreds, include Chief Wiggum, an inept donut-eating policeman; Abe Simpson, the forgetful grandfather who loves to tell war stories from his past; and Mr. Burns, the evil and greedy owner of a nuclear power plant who would rather block out the sun than lose money.

*Mr. Burns* playwright Anne Washburn has pointed to the universal appeal of *The Simpsons* as a major reason for its popularity, saying, “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.” But while the goofy family from the fictional town of Springfield is undoubtedly average, they and their fellow townspeople are also undeniably unique. In large part, the show’s popularity is due to the fact that it has always encouraged audiences to laugh at, and admit, their own faults.
The Origin of The Simpsons

Matt Groening, who was previously the writer of the popular comic series *Life in Hell*, about an existential bunny named Blinky, created *The Simpsons* on a drive to FOX Studios in 1985. James L. Brooks, then a producer for *The Tracey Ullman Show*, wanted 60-second stand-alone shorts before and after commercials and asked Groening to pitch a humorous animated series for adults. Groening created a quick sketch of a family based on his own and named the characters after close relatives: his father, Homer; his mother, Marge; and his sisters, Maggie and Lisa. He thought it too obvious to name the son after himself, so he called the boy Bart, an anagram for “brat.”

Over the seasons, the characters have undergone gradual evolution. Homer has become more stupid but less angry and has taken the show’s central spotlight away from Bart, whose catchphrases such as “Eat my shorts!” and “Ay, caramba!” graced T-shirts and bumper stickers worldwide in the early 1990s. Lisa became a vegetarian and a Buddhist, and the Simpsons’ neighbor Maude Flanders met an untimely end in 2000. However, the show’s basic structure and look remain the same after 25 years.

The Simpsons and Its Influence on Popular Culture

In total, the *Simpsons* franchise is worth approximately $12 billion. *Simpsons* merchandise earned more than $2 billion in the show’s first 14 months, and “Bart Gets an F” (1990), the most popular episode in the show’s history, scored 33.6 million viewers. (By contrast, the most-watched episode of ABC’s sitcom *Modern Family* saw a little more than 13 million viewers.) While the current audience has slumped to only about 6.5 million viewers, the recent “Every Simpsons Ever” ultra-fan marathon on FXX gained the highest ratings ever for the cable company and broke the Guinness World Record for longest continuous viewing of a show.
In 1990, the *Los Angeles Times* called *The Simpsons* “perfectly conceived and executed,” while the *Boston Globe* has deemed it “TV’s most intelligent comedy.” In 1998, *TIME* magazine named Bart Simpson one of its 100 Artists and Entertainers of the Century, asserting:

One of Bart’s blackboard punishments was to write, “I am not delightfully saucy.” But he is—a complex weave of grace, attitude and personality, deplorable and adorable, a very ’90s slacker who embodies a century of popular culture and is one of the richest characters in it. One thinks of Chekhov, Celine, Lenny Bruce, little boy lost.

*The Simpsons* has graced the covers of *TIME*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Rolling Stone*, and even *The Advocate*, for a groundbreaking episode featuring filmmaker John Waters as Homer’s gay friend. The show’s influence has also spread worldwide to TV sets as far away as Mexico, Lithuania, and Japan. It has been dubbed in dozens of languages, banned on primetime TV in China, and adapted to fit Muslim sensibilities in Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

*The Simpsons* has always been visceral and immediate, even in its earliest renderings as a series of crudely drawn skits for *The Tracey Ullman Show*. The show has crafted episodes around immigration (“Much Apu About Nothing,” 1996), gun rights (“The Cartridge Family,” 1997), and the environment (“Trash of the Titans,” 1998). Given its penchant for being current and politically relevant, the show has weathered a fair amount of controversy. At the 1992 Republican National Convention, President George H.W. Bush said, “We’re going to keep trying to strengthen the American family, to make them more like the Waltons and less like the Simpsons.” In 1990, Barbara Bush said

Costume designer Alex Jaeger’s rendering of Bart Simpson for A.C.T.’s production of *Mr. Burns*
the show was “the dumbest thing” she had ever seen. Of course, *The Simpsons* retaliated with a parody—season seven’s “Two Bad Neighbors,” in which the first family moves in across the street from the Simpsons.

With the ever-increasing popularity of current-event satirists like Seth MacFarlane (*Family Guy*), Matt Stone and Trey Parker (*South Park, The Book of Mormon*), Jon Stewart (*The Daily Show*), and Stephen Colbert (*The Colbert Report*), some critics believe it has been difficult for *The Simpsons* to keep up in recent years. But it is impossible to deny the show’s influence. Although critics complain that it can’t measure up to *South Park* and *Family Guy*, these shows wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for the groundwork laid by Groening almost 30 years ago. MacFarlane acknowledged this debt, saying, “*The Simpsons* created an audience for primetime animation that had not been there for many years. They basically reinvented the wheel.”

**References and Allusions in The Simpsons**

It is no coincidence that Washburn chose *The Simpsons* as the sole surviving cultural artifact after the apocalypse. In many ways, *The Simpsons* is emblematic of modern American culture: a rare blend of both highbrow and lowbrow, exceptionally intelligent and simultaneously partial to a good old fart joke. *The Simpsons* has permeated all aspects of our culture, deconstructing celebrities, fads, and trends by way of spoof, riff, and satire. Various *Simpsons* episodes have tackled film classics from *Psycho* to *A Clockwork Orange* (Hitchcock and Kubrick seem to be favorite targets) and plays from *Macheth* to *Rent*. 
The antagonist of “Cape Feare” and regular Simpsons supporting character Sideshow Bob is a lover of theater. In “Cape Feare,” he sings songs from the H.M.S. Pinafore and shows off his branded prison number—24601, the same inmate number as Jean Valjean’s in Les Misérables. The Simpsons has devoted entire episodes to spoofing Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire (“A Streetcar Named Marge”) and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Evita (“The President Wore Pearls”).

While some write the show off as a children’s cartoon, The Simpsons has always been meant for adult audiences, and it is full of references and inside jokes only the most astute pop-culture consumer would understand. David Mirkin, an executive producer and showrunner for early seasons of The Simpsons, noted, “We’re really writing a show that has some of the most esoteric references on television. I mean really, really, really, strange, odd, short little moments that very few people get and understand. We’re writing it for adults, and intelligent adults, at that.”

When asked what makes The Simpsons special, Groening often points to the referential nature of the writing. He has said, “A lot of talented writers work hard on the show, half of them Harvard geeks. And you know, when you study the semiotics of Through the Looking Glass or watch every episode of Star Trek, you’ve got to make it pay off, so you throw a lot of references into whatever you do later in life.”

In the book The Simpsons and Philosophy, scholars William Irwin and J. R. Lombardo write, “One of the most important aesthetic effects allusion can have is the ‘cultivation of intimacy,’ with the forging of community. . . . Author and audience become intimately connected; they become, in effect, members of a club who know the ‘secret handshake.’”

Irwin and Lombardo believe that The Simpsons rewards intelligent viewers but never talks down to those who may not be as savvy. Indeed, audiences find pleasure in deciphering the treasure trove of obscure pop-culture nods sprinkled throughout episodes. The potency of memory, storytelling, and one of our most iconic pop-culture staples intersect in Mr. Burns, a post-electric play. As Washburn suggests, even if a nuclear meltdown or global warming were to destroy civilization as we know it, it’s likely that The Simpsons would, indeed, endure.

**SOURCES**

Stories within Stories
The Evolution of “Cape Feare”

By Anna Woodruff

“Cape Feare” is one of the most celebrated Simpsons tales on record; in 2014, it was number seven on Rolling Stone’s list of “150 Best Simpsons Episodes.” It features the kind of adventurous, fast-paced, and reference-laden plotline that has made The Simpsons so famous—and, as in Washburn’s play, “Cape Feare” has been retold by hosts of people, from students in dorm rooms to employees at water coolers and (perhaps) storytellers huddled around campfires.

The episode was written in 1993, two years after Martin Scorsese’s 1991 remake of the 1962 film Cape Fear. The Scorsese film follows the Bowden family, who are stalked by recently released prisoner Max Cady (played by Robert De Niro). The father of the family, lawyer Sam Bowden (played by Nick Nolte), prosecuted Cady in the trial that found him guilty of the violent rape and battery of a young woman. Cady terrorizes the family but leaves no evidence of his crimes. Ultimately, the Bowdens flee their home and arrive at a dock in Cape Fear, North Carolina; unbeknownst to them, Cady has been hiding beneath their car and follows them to their houseboat. He attacks the family and struggles ensue until, finally, Cady is badly injured and drowns. The family is brought together, but they agree never to speak of Cady again.

“Cape Feare” begins with Lisa Simpson opening a letter from her pen pal Anya, just as her brother Bart receives a threatening anonymous note containing the words “I’m going to kill you” written in blood. It turns out that Sideshow Bob, an erudite clown with a vendetta against Bart, has just been released from prison and is out for revenge.

The Simpsons are forced to enter the Witness Relocation Program and are sent to live on a houseboat. Sideshow Bob follows them and attempts to kill Bart. When the clown asks the boy if he has any last requests, Bart says, “I was wondering if you could sing the entire score of the H.M.S. Pinafore.” Sideshow Bob and Bart commence with a two-minute-long musical interlude from the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. By the end of the performance, the boat has crashed into the shore, where the Springfield police are located after visiting a local brothel. Always absurd down to the final moment, the show has the family going back to their home to find the children’s delusional grandfather without his pills, dressed as a woman, and getting picked up by an old man.
True to the show’s form, a plethora of other horror references are nested within “Cape Feare.” At the beginning of the episode, Bart and Lisa watch their favorite cartoon, *The Itchy & Scratchy Show*, which parodies the James Bond film *Goldfinger*. Sideshow Bob has the words “LUV” and “HĀT” tattooed on his fingers, a reference to the 1955 film *The Night of the Hunter*, starring Robert Mitchum (who appeared in both the 1962 and 1991 film versions of *Cape Fear*). While walking in their neighborhood, affable neighbor Ned Flanders approaches Bart with a pair of clawed gloves used to trim hedges, evoking the iconic razor gloves in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). When the Simpsons seek refuge from Bart’s stalker, Sideshow Bob stays in the Bates Motel, a nod to Hitchcock’s horror classic *Psycho* (1960). While Bart is in bed, Homer barges in to show his son his new chainsaw, a reference to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974).

Television and film critic Matt Zoller Seitz has spoken about the presence of *The Simpsons* in American pop culture and television, mentioning why the show has withstood the test of time: “[Its] self-awareness didn’t just keep the show’s writers amused; it inoculated *The Simpsons* against complaints that it was repeating itself, even when it obviously was. The infinitely varied couch openers and the ‘Cape Feare’ scene in which Sideshow Bob steps on six rakes sum up the show’s demented gift for repurposing jokes and milking good material.”

Anne Washburn centers her play on an episode of *The Simpsons* that showcases the lasting impact of successful parody. In Costume designer Alex Jaeger’s rendering of Sideshow Bob for A.C.T.’s production of *Mr. Burns*
22 minutes, Jon Vitti, the head writer of “Cape Feare,” managed to include at least 17 pop-culture references, while also offering an extensive parody of an entire film. The episode’s direct allusions to the nation’s most time-honored horror movies add another layer to viewers’ memories, as the telling of the story gives way to the discovery of even more stories within the larger framework. This is also what Mr. Burns accomplishes; by revealing the evolution of “Cape Feare” from a recollection around a campfire to a grand spectacle 75 years after the apocalypse, Washburn shows us that certain stories in our culture tend to persist.

Embracing Disaster through Storytelling
An Interview with Director Mark Rucker

By Anna Woodruff and Adam Odsess-Rubin

Mark Rucker, associate artistic director of A.C.T., has staged a number of mainstage productions, including Napoli!, 4000 Miles, Maple and Vine, Once in a Lifetime, Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet, The Rainmaker, and The Beard of Avon. He is also an associate artist at South Coast Repertory, where he has directed more than 20 productions, including world premieres by Richard Greenberg, Christopher Shinn, Annie Weisman, and Culture Clash. Rucker began his career at Shakespeare Santa Cruz but has also worked at the forefront of new play development in American theater. This has given him a deep knowledge of both classical and modern repertoires—a quality that is especially valuable in directing Mr. Burns, a post-electric play, which simultaneously embraces and breaks theatrical conventions.

In a recent conversation, Rucker discussed the ideas behind Mr. Burns, how it connects to A.C.T.’s other productions, and what might happen in a world where storytelling is no longer a luxury but is essential to survival.

What attracted you to Mr. Burns?

It’s a totally different kind of writing from what I’ve ever experienced. I love the way it was created; Anne Washburn started by working with a group of actors and based the first act of the play on their dialogue. She asked them to recreate an episode of The Simpsons, and the actors used improvisation to do so. Part of the first act of the play is actual language that the actors improvised; she used that and then added the circumstances and the other dramatic parts of the narrative.

What interests me most is the human fascination with retelling narratives. We tell the same stories and watch our favorite movies over and over to feel safe and comfortable. At the same time, these stories change as we tell them. People in the world of the play make little changes to the narrative that shift the story of “Cape Feare” forever.
What were your conversations with Washburn like, and how did her insight contribute to your direction?

I had a lot of conversations with Anne, both here and in New York. I had several questions about the characters. When I held auditions, it was really interesting to see who came into the room and how they approached the material. It’s a very specific kind of play, and there were some people who totally got it, which was really exciting.

We’re relocating the play to Northern California. In the original first scene of the play, characters talk about coming from Hartford, and there are other mentions of different highways and freeways and nuclear reactors specific to the East Coast, so Anne wanted to see what it would be like to transplant the play to the West Coast, referencing things like the I-5 and the 101. However, there are only two nuclear reactors on the West Coast, so some things had to be modified considerably.

How much will you have to restage Mr. Burns in its transition from A.C.T. to the Guthrie Theater, where this production will run at the end of March?

The Guthrie and A.C.T. have been in communication throughout the whole process. The Guthrie has two theaters. One is a thrust stage, which is what they’re famous for. They also have a proscenium stage, which is more similar to The Geary. We’re putting the show on their proscenium stage, so we won’t have to do any dramatic revisions. It will just be small detail work. The set is being designed to fit both spaces, which are similar enough that there aren’t going to be major adjustments.
Are the actors the same for both shows?

Yes, it’s the same company and the same production, except that it’s been completely relocated. We work really well together, so the collaboration has been fruitful. Our actors are primarily from the Bay Area and Minneapolis, where the Guthrie is located. We have one actor coming from Southern California, but mostly, the idea was to make the process a true collaboration, with artists from here and artists from there working together. Also, most of our design team has worked at both the Guthrie and The Geary.

What do you expect will draw people most to Mr. Burns?

After the artistic team talked about it, we realized that there are people in their thirties, forties, and fifties, along with younger generations, who all watch The Simpsons. Since I first encountered this play, I find that I talk to Simpsons fanatics all the time. Because the show has been around for 25 years, there is a range of viewers who love it.

The play is generating a lot of outside interest. There are people who tell me they are coming to this show although they don’t normally go to the theater, and that’s because of the vast popularity of The Simpsons.

Maybe Mr. Burns is not as “edgy” as we think. It’s not an avant-garde piece. It’s just a really unique play that has a lot to say about culture, how we get through difficult times, and how we retell stories. There’s something vibrant and fresh about it that excites people.
Directing this play requires quite a bit of context for *The Simpsons*. Are you a big fan of the show?

I haven’t been a television person since I was a kid; basically, once I was in college, my pop-culture sensibility diminished. But I did watch some of *The Simpsons*; I had friends who were obsessed and had DVDs or taped TV episodes, so I was pretty familiar with the show, but not obsessive.

The episode that the characters recount points to the intricate nature of storytelling. “Cape Feare” is based on the 1991 adaptation of the 1962 movie classic. What’s it like directing a play based on such a chain of stories?

It’s fascinating! A.C.T.’s artistic director, Carey Perloff, wasn’t familiar with *The Simpsons* before she read the play. But when she read it, she realized that it was about a group of people telling stories, which is so universal. The compelling thing about this play is how the story changes. By the time we get to the third act, it’s 75 years later, and the characters retelling the episode are presenting some things that are very much the same as they were in the original and some things that are completely different.

**What will the set look like?**

We have three distinct sets. The first act is mainly a campfire in the woods. Then there is a transition from the first act to the second act, where the characters are rehearsing in a warehouse seven years later. That’s been an interesting challenge for our set designer, Ralph Funicello, who has to figure out how we suddenly go from this dark campfire to a sunlit, sky-lighted warehouse. The third act takes place in an actual theater, so the set is a theater within a theater.

Costume designer Alex Jaeger’s rendering of Jenny for A.C.T.’s production of *Mr. Burns*
What kinds of conversations are you having with the costume designer, Alex Jaeger?
For the second and third acts of the play, we are trying to imagine what the world looks like after we’ve stopped manufacturing clothing. I’ve worn some of the same clothes for over seven years, so it’s not dramatically different, but we also want to have a sense that you can’t buy certain things anymore; for example, our materials include a lot of wear and tear, as well as patches and hand-knitted alternatives. At the same time, this troupe is trying to not only recreate an episode of The Simpsons, but to also include commercials, which are short vignettes that remind us of what life was like before the apocalypse. These are nostalgic elements, so the characters’ clothes need to look nice and not super worn. All these scenes are meant to distract the people of that world from their current situation, which is very dire. The entertainment is meant to be an escape, so the clothing should reflect that.

What is Michael Friedman’s music like?
His music is eclectic pop. It includes a mish-mash of recognizable artists, like Britney Spears. It’s very clever and fun.
One of the things I’m very grateful for is how collaborative Anne has been; she has not only helped me to understand the play better, but she’s also been open to changing things and making them more accessible to the audience. Michael is going to be around, as well, to help do that.

Washburn takes The Simpsons and elevates it to a mythic level. What are some of the artistic decisions you’re making in order to show us the evolution of this pop-culture phenomenon?
The biggest decision stems from the third act of the play, which is an operetta based on the “Cape Fear” episode; it assumes the iconic status of something like Carmen or La traviata. The Simpsons turns into a highbrow work of art 75 years after the beginning of the play. We’re asking questions like, “How does this look? How does that feel?” We don’t want it to be an exact replica of Marge and Bart and Homer and Lisa from the television show. Much like the storytelling in the play, the characters and their meaning have shifted. We are making some bold decisions around that.

How does Mr. Burns reflect the way society reacts to disaster?
The play uses The Simpsons as an example of how we embrace stories to distract ourselves from disaster. Even in the direst situations, we need storytelling to comfort us and to help us move forward.
Once Upon a Time . . .
How Myths Evolve

By Nirmala Nataraj

The past pervades human consciousness to some degree even in the simplest societies, and discussions of past events—narrating, sometimes dramatically, commenting on the narration, challenging points of fact or logic, and co-constructing a suite of stories—occupied many an evening for perhaps 300,000 years.

—Melvin Konner, The Evolution of Childhood

Myths have pervaded our world since our early ancestors etched crude drawings into cave walls and sat around bonfires weaving tales about gods, monsters, and the mystery of our origins. From the stories of indigenous people in the New World to the medieval lore of Beowulf to Disney films to urban legends, the proliferation of myths has had profound effects on how we tell stories and characterize ourselves.

Although myths tend to be fantastical, they contain a seed of truth—in the form of a historical character or event—that gradually transforms as it is told and retold. Tellers of myth forego mundane details and transcend merely observable facts to create stories that reveal simple truths. Myths give people a way to dramatize and make sense of the scattered events of their daily lives, while offering them a glimpse into the deeper mysteries of our reality.

Oral storytelling existed for several thousand years before writing was invented. In early Paleolithic and Neolithic cultures, elders were the keepers of myths; as the stories were passed down, younger generations were entrusted to stay faithful to the core story, even as they added a turn of phrase here and an embellishment there. Bards and other wayfaring artists developed reputations for their storytelling talents, as well as their distinctive language and physical presence, which helped make the stories they told more memorable, and thus, more likely to spread via word of mouth.

World mythology scholar Joel Dubois compares the trajectory of a mythic story to the way maps of known territories change over time. He asserts that, just like maps, myths must be continually revised in order to remain relevant and useful:

With any map, the territory depicts change through destruction of existing landmarks and new growth. More importantly, though, the labels for those landmarks and the territories themselves change over time; and different
mapmakers discover and highlight features of the land that had previously not been thought to be important. So, too, mythic stories require continual adjustment, not only because some aspects of mythic realities evolve over time, but also in order to highlight details most relevant to listeners in particular situations, time periods, and cultural contexts.

Although mythology exists in a timeless dimension, mythic thinking can only thrive in the context of the real world; the stories that don’t address people’s current situations eventually lose relevance. In fact, few of the myths that have been revised over the years replicate the original narrative precisely. Instead, storytellers draw upon mythic motifs in a mix-and-match fashion; this helps the updated version adhere to the spirit of the original story without becoming obsolete to new audiences.

In many ways, it is the retelling of a myth and its inevitable structural and thematic transformations that give it any continuity at all. In his book *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, Walter Burkert writes:

A tale becomes traditional not by virtue of being created, but by being retold and accepted. . . . A tale “created”—that is, invented by an individual author—may somehow become “myth” if it becomes traditional, to be used as a means of communication in subsequent generations, usually with some distortions and re-elaborations.
As Burkert demonstrates, classic fairy tales such as “Cinderella,” “Snow White,” “Bluebeard,” and “Sleeping Beauty” are “distortions and re-elaborations” of much older stories that deal with cultural taboos concerning everything from incest to sibling rivalry.

Many myths are born from the verbalization of social contracts and have contributed to the “civilizing process” of most societies. A prime example is the fable, a type of mythic story most commonly associated with a Greek slave named Aesop, who was born around 600 BCE. (According to some scholars, however, there is no evidence that Aesop actually existed.) Aesop’s fables most likely originated in ancient Mesopotamia, as evidenced by old clay tablets, dating from around 800 BCE, that bear tales with an uncanny resemblance to those of antiquity’s favorite moralist. These texts were most likely transmitted to the Greeks both orally and through manuscripts. When free speech was established throughout Greek city-states, scholars used fables to teach grammar, debate, and ethics. By this time, Aesop’s fables had already become a linchpin of Greek popular culture.

Many mythic stories, including the “fable” at the heart of Mr. Burns, are cultural memes. Examples of memes include popular tunes, catchphrases, or even clothing styles. In his book The Selfish Gene, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins writes:

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain.

A story that has become a meme leads to the creation of traditions and social norms. The premise of any mythic story is shared experience; this can include love, death, suffering, betrayal, and the overcoming of great odds. Although a mythic story is constantly in the process of being recreated and reformed—and although it may be pieced together from different fragments, motifs, and cultures—it is always immediately familiar to us.

After Armageddon
Apocalyptic Fiction through the Ages

By Nirmala Nataraj

And I looked, and beheld a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

—Book of Revelation 6:8

Silent white light filled the world. And the righteous and unrighteous alike were consumed in that holy fire.

—Stephen King, The Stand

Apocalyptic fiction has flourished for as long as the written word has existed. Concern with the end of human civilization has been portrayed in various ways: from zombie apocalypses, nuclear warfare, extraterrestrial attacks, and cybernetic revolts, to supernatural phenomena, divine judgment, unstoppable climate change, ecological collapse, and other disasters beyond the scope of prevention.

However our current world will end, there will always be stories to help the survivors pass the time. As in Anne Washburn’s play, storytelling has historically been not simply a matter of leisure but a matter of survival; take Giovanni Boccaccio’s fourteenth-century Decameron, in which a group of aristocrats hole up in an Italian villa to tell morality fables as the world is wiped out by the Black Plague beyond their walls.

Stories are like magical talismans that have the power to ward off a sense of imminent doom—even when the stories are about the end of the world. Generations of people have woven catastrophic fantasies that parallel current turmoil, and each generation has imagined calamity to be just around the corner. Historian James Berger has written that in apocalyptic fiction, there are two kinds of catastrophes influencing the trajectory of events: historical and remembered ones, and imagined ones. Depictions of the end of the world are usually just as dependent on destabilizing actual events (for example, the Holocaust, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Chernobyl calamity, and the aftermath of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina) as they are on fantastical ones like zombie warfare. Some authors have suggested that apocalyptic fiction is simply a representation of catastrophes that humans have already experienced. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote, “The pole of reckoning, denoeument, and apocalypse, which
we had been able to postpone until the Day of Judgment, has come infinitely closer. Nevertheless, do not panic. Everything has already become nuclear, faraway, vaporized. The explosion has already occurred; the bomb is only a metaphor now.”

The Beginnings of the End
As a literary term, “apocalypse” was coined by German scholar Karl Immanuel Nitzsch in 1822 and refers primarily to works written by Jews and Christians between 200 BCE and 100 CE. Apocalyptic texts were usually pseudonymous and presented as if they were written by such ancient figures as Abraham or Enoch. Authors wrote about contemporary events as if these occurrences were fulfilling prophecies made centuries or millennia earlier. The stories were written from the perspective of the oppressed, persecuted, and despairing. In early texts, heavenly intermediaries show up to reveal secret knowledge to a pious protagonist, promising a future era of justice and peace. The possibility of positive change in the present age, according to these early apocalyptic texts, is low. A divine intervention would set the balance of the universe right and rid the world of evil.

Other ancient cultures across the world also generated stories about the destruction of human society. The “deluge myth” is a common narrative in world mythology from ancient Mesopotamia to Mesoamerica. It describes an enormous flood that destroys civilization. This is seen as an act of divine retribution and, ironically, mirrors many of the world’s great creation myths, in which the world is born out of primeval waters. The Epic of Gilgamesh, written in Sumer between 2000 and 1500 BCE, is the earliest of these tales. The story of Noah’s Ark (found in the Book of Genesis) is believed to derive from this older epic. Such ancient tales about the “end of the world” use the motif of the chosen few survivors, tasked with the enormity of rebuilding civilization.
In the first centuries CE, apocalyptic works were filled with even more vivid fantasies about the end of the world. The most prominent is the Book of Revelation (which generated the term “apocalypse,” meaning “revelation of secrets”), whose prophecies of large-scale catastrophe and esoteric symbolic visions provided fodder for subsequent generations of disaster stories. The author, John of Patmos, reveals a vision of Judgment Day (in Judeo-Christian theology, the final judgment of God on all of humanity) that is both horrific and sublime. A crucial aspect of the Book of Revelation is God’s promise that pious humans will be redeemed from all suffering; a new Heaven and a new Earth will rise from the destruction. This promise was for John’s Christian readers, who were routinely persecuted by the Roman Empire at that time. While the text may seem grisly and punitive to contemporary secular readers, the apocalyptic works of authors like John were for audiences who believed they were the chosen recipients of God’s salvation; thus, such texts were meant to inspire, enchant, and fuel anticipation for the end times.

**A Survey of Contemporary Apocalyptic Literature**

While texts like the Book of Revelation depict apocalypse as a fundamental change in the reality we know, with separate fates for the blessed and the damned, modern apocalyptic texts are dictated by a rational, post-Enlightenment view of the cosmos. In these works, destruction is not brought about by divine intervention but by human action.

As they wander a wasteland of their own making, the survivors of modern apocalyptic texts are ostracized from their former reality. While few of these works stop to linger on the creature comforts of the society that has been obliterated (and are more concerned with where the characters’ next meal is coming from), attempts to create meaning in a strange new world help combat the meaninglessness of existence—as in Anne Washburn’s play.

Mary Shelley’s 1826 novel *The Last Man* is considered the first work of modern apocalyptic fiction. Detailing the struggles of a man trying to keep his family safe after a plague wipes out most of humanity, the book was written as a memorial to Shelley’s deceased Romantic poet friends—as well as a cynical counterpoint to their revolutionary political ideals.

The stories of H. G. Wells are also early exercises in end-of-the-world thinking. In his 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, Wells’s protagonist travels to 802,701 CE, a time in which humanity has split off into two distinct species: the ethereal and peaceful Eloi and the brutal and primitive Morlocks. As the protagonist progresses into the future, the sky grows dark and the sun becomes large, red, and dim. Wells writes:

> It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all that was over. In its place there was only an awful twilight.

The world is forlorn and empty, the last remnant of a now-unknown human apocalypse. In the novel, there are no brave, morally upright survivors to put things right or launch humanity into a utopian future.
## Welcoming Doomsday

### Ten Apocalyptic Novels

**After London, by Richard Jefferies (1885)**
When a large-scale plague destroys the industrial world, the land is reclaimed by nature, London becomes a poisonous swampland, and survivors return to an idealistically imagined, medieval way of life.

**Earth Abides, by George R. Stewart (1949)**
Stewart’s novel features an ecologist braving an airborne pandemic that results in the disappearance of reading and writing, and the reemergence of hunter-gatherer tribes.

**The Day of the Triffids, by John Wyndham (1951)**
Catastrophe ensues when the light from a meteor leaves society visionless and susceptible to a race of meat-eating plants.

**On the Beach, by Nevil Shute (1957)**
This bleak novel about nuclear fallout and a submarine crew’s search for survivors features characters who prefer suicide to brute survival.

**A Canticle for Leibowitz, by Walter M. Miller, Jr. (1961)**
After a nuclear war, desert monks attempt to preserve books that symbolize humanity’s last hope for survival. Miller, who helped destroy a monastery in Italy as a bomber pilot during World War II, used his haunting memory as inspiration for this Hugo Award-winning novel.

**The Stand, by Stephen King (1978)**
After a biological weapon wipes out the majority of humanity, two warring factions of “good” and “evil” survivors prepare for their last stand.

**A Gift upon the Shore, by M. K. Wren (1990)**
The fragile truce of two female survivors of a nuclear holocaust is threatened by the struggle between true knowledge and single-minded fundamentalism.

**The City of Ember, by Jeanne DuPrau (2003)**
This young-adult novel, adapted into a film in 2008, tells the story of a city plunged into complete darkness after the world’s power supplies are depleted by humans.

**Oryx and Crake, by Margaret Atwood (2004)**
A sole survivor gradually descends into madness as he takes solace in memories of his best friend and the woman they both once loved.

**Station Eleven, by Emily St. John Mandel (2014)**
In this novel about the endurance of art in the face of disaster, a deadly pandemic destroys America, leading a group of traveling actors to perform Shakespeare plays for the survivors.
Unlike Wells's fatalistic works, many turn-of-the-century post-apocalyptic scenarios tended to express the utopian possibilities of new technology; but after World War I these narratives were almost entirely replaced by stories of robot rebellions and advanced weaponry. This is perhaps because people began to consider technology not as a tool to promote humanistic visions of harmony and civility, but as something that would enable them to kill each other more efficiently.

When scientists split the atom in 1917, the deadly implications supported the cautionary moralism of previous authors. Stephen Vincent Benet's 1937 story “By the Waters of Babylon” examines the ruins of an unnamed Northeastern city several generations after an event known as the “Great Burning.” Pat Frank, Nevil Shute, Andre Norton, Philip K. Dick, Ursula Le Guin, and many others utilized post-nuclear apocalyptic scenarios to imagine humanity’s sordid fate. Other authors transposed nationalistic concerns onto their post-nuclear narratives to reveal the threat of external attack by deadly “others”; for instance, mutants, alien invasions, robot attacks, and meteor impacts appear in the works of such authors as Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison.

While many authors have used the uncertainties of technological progress as a jumping-off point for apocalyptic stories, other tales rely less on imagined disaster. Some literary scholars have noted that the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki greatly influenced Japanese literature and popular culture. Japan's manga comics and anime films teem with apocalyptic imagery. In 1954 the live-action film Gojira (known as Godzilla in the United States) created the monster as a metaphor for nuclear weaponry, a horror that the Japanese had witnessed firsthand.

Most apocalyptic narratives from the 1970s forward focus on environmental concerns. The difference between this threat and those that prevail in older apocalyptic texts is the notion that everyone is to blame. Our unconscious excesses and blatant disregard of the planet are the ultimate culprits. In Richard Cowper's three-volume novel The White Bird of Kinship (1978–82), human-induced global warming results in a major rise in sea level two millennia in the future. The ramifications of environmental disaster include not just the collapse of our infrastructure but also the end of enlightened rationalism; in Liz Jensen's The Rapture, humanity turns to religious fundamentalism as a response to ecological tragedy.

Modern authors describe a world in which reason, kindness, and civility are quashed by a society that has lost its hope. In fact, apocalyptic authors of the last decade depict the notion of redemption and the possibility of a more humane world as illusory—especially because they conflict with our history of self-destruction. Cormac McCarthy’s works remind us that apocalypse is something humans have brought upon themselves countless times already, especially among cultures that saw their end through genocide.

One of the most haunting and pessimistic apocalyptic novels of the last decade is McCarthy’s Pulitzer Prize–winning The Road, which New Yorker journalist Joshua Rothman deemed “the closest thing I’ve found to an ideal apocalypse story,” as it is realistic rather than speculative. In the book, a father and son attempt to escape cannibals; the two walk through a ravaged landscape over which looms a gray, ash-
drizzling sky. McCarthy describes the cataclysm as vast and revelatory of “the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. The Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe.”

Literary scholar Sue Schopf has said, “Today we are exposed to constant talk about terrorist attacks, biological warfare, environmental disturbances, pandemics, and technological disasters. Writers and filmmakers are obviously responding to these cultural anxieties.” While McCarthy presents readers with a plausible vision of life at the end of the world, fantastical works about monsters and alien invasions offer cathartic release by offering us a safe space in which to contemplate the forbidden and the horrifying, and to ponder worst-case scenarios.

The Perennial Appeal of Apocalyptic Stories

Apocalyptic visions have been documented in both celluloid and television, and there is no sign that this will cease. Many apocalyptic films are based on novels but diverge from literary descriptions by banking on epic disaster and special effects, while others present a more unsettling and realistic view of our extinction. Some of the most devastating examples include eerily detailed accounts of the aftermath of nuclear war (Threads, 1984), chilling depictions of worldwide energy systems gone awry (The Quiet Earth, 1985), and sobering visions of global human infertility that has left its survivors marching toward obsolescence (Children of Men, 2006).

A recent trend in American apocalyptic films and novels is the wholesale rejection of rebuilding. Rothman suggests that finality and inevitability might be depressing prospects, but they allow for the most exciting, shocking, and cathartic apocalypse stories:

Someday, for whatever reason—entropy, a meteor, that giant volcano under Yellowstone—life on earth will end, and when it ends, it will end for good. . . . What [readers] really want is the end of everything, full stop, because that reveals something more challenging and strange: nothingness. These sorts of visions are thrilling to contemplate in a purely aesthetic way. And they aren’t, necessarily, despairing visions; in a way, they’re fortifying. If the things we care about—goodness, love, beauty, intelligence, friendship, humanity, and so forth—exist only for a little while, and only for us, then that’s a reason to take them even more seriously than usual. If our lives are islands of meaning amidst a rising ocean of meaninglessness, then we ought to mean as much as possible to ourselves, and to one another.

The End of the World
(As We Know It)

Realities of a Post-Apocalypse

By Shannon Stockwell

Chernobyl’s birds disappeared in the firestorm when Reactor Number Four blew that April, their nest building barely begun. [...] But the following spring the birds were back, and they’ve stayed. To watch barn swallows zip naked around the carcass of the hot reactor is discombobulating, especially when you are swaddled in layers of wool and hooded canvas coveralls to block alpha particles, with a surgical cap and mask to keep plutonium dust from your hair and lungs. You want them to fly away, fast and far. At the same time, it’s mesmerizing that they’re here. It seems so normal, as if apocalypse has turned out to be not so bad after all. The worst happens, and life still goes on.

—Alan Weisman, The World without Us

The idea of complete human extinction has captured the minds of humans since time immemorial. From the Rapture of Christian doctrine to the Ragnarök of Norse mythology, every culture has its beliefs and predictions about the end of the world. But apocalypse is not just a mythical idea. It is a reality that species become extinct, and humans are not immune to this fate. In fact, it is believed that Homo sapiens once came dangerously close to extinction; genetic data suggests that, about 70,000 years ago, the species dwindled to no more than a few thousand members. Despite this, and countless disasters that have happened since, we are still here. Clearly, only an enormous catastrophe could bring about an apocalypse—and even then, there would likely be survivors.

The kind of knowledge an individual would need to survive depends on how the world ends. Unfortunately, that is nearly impossible to predict. Sam Sheridan, survivalist and author of The Disaster Diaries: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Apocalypse, asserts that the end of the world will be caused by a “Black Swan cataclysm,” a disaster we won’t see coming, at least not as a society, until it has already happened. In a way, then, making it through the end of the world might not require much skill. One might just need to be in the right place at the right time. It is survival after the apocalypse that will require some special knowledge.
An Unmaintained World

In August 2003, an untrimmed tree branch caused a chain reaction of power failures from Michigan to Canada, leaving 50 million people without electricity in the largest blackout in U.S. history. The region was accustomed to small power outages caused by blizzards and thunderstorms, but the widespread nature of this blackout caused major problems. Water pumps stopped working, and stores raised the prices of bottled water, batteries, and other necessities. Homes all over the Northeast were unable to use air conditioning, which wasn’t just uncomfortable—in the 90-degree heat and oppressive humidity of a New England summer, it was life-threatening, especially for the elderly. Those suffering from heat-related illnesses couldn’t even find comfort in hospitals, which were dependent on back-up generators and couldn’t run air conditioning on their limited power supplies.

The aftermath of the 2003 power failure is a stark reminder of how much the citizens of developed countries have come to rely on electricity. In all cases of massive power failures, electricity is restored, and life can go back to normal. This process requires only one key component: maintenance personnel. In the world of Mr. Burns, a post-electric play, the characters are unsure of how many people remain alive in the United States; one guesses a million, another says it’s definitely less. However many people are left, there would definitely be a shortage of necessary maintenance personnel. Without them, infrastructure is doomed to fail.

While there aren’t many events that would completely destroy the electrical grid, one is, according to Lewis Dartnell, author of The Knowledge: How to Rebuild Our World from Scratch, an “enormous coronal mass ejection” from the sun: “A particularly violent solar burp would slam into the magnetic field around our planet, set it ringing like a bell, and induce enormous currents in the electricity distribution wires, destroying transformers and knocking out electrical grids across the planet.” In general, Dartnell gives apocalypse survivors a “grace period” in which modern conveniences, such as electricity and sewage systems, continue to run normally for a little while before their inevitable breakdown, but in the event of a total failure of the electrical grid, he predicts that “the collapse of social order would soon follow” as people attempt to consume food before it rots.

In addition to the chaos that would ensue, fire would become one of the major problems faced by survivors such as those in Mr. Burns. As lightning rods rust and break, buildings would catch on fire; with no firefighters to put them out, fires would likely burn cities to the ground. This would be particularly devastating to cities like San Francisco, with its famed Victorian houses built mostly from wood.

Water would also pose a major problem. In areas that experience major temperature fluctuations in spring and fall, the freeze–thaw cycle would cause materials to expand, contract, and ultimately break down. Even the mightiest buildings and bridges would eventually crumble to the ground and decompose.

The Ukrainian city of Pripyat, where the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant was located, is a haunting example of what a city would look like if people disappeared; journalist Andrew Blackwell calls it “the world’s most genuinely post-apocalyptic city.” Pripyat was quickly evacuated within two days after the Chernobyl disaster. Today, plants grow
through cracks in the pavement and buildings show signs of decay. It is populated only by animals and the occasional tourist. Here, nature has taken over, and eventually, even the city’s tallest building will fall. But things will not return to their original state for a long time. Indeed, humans are responsible for many sinister creations that will be around, in Chernobyl and elsewhere, long after we’re gone.

A Post-Nuclear World

Many fictional accounts posit nuclear war as the cause of the apocalypse, but no matter how the world actually ends, survivors will have to contend with radiation. Radioactivity is a particularly unsettling concept. Unless you have a Geiger counter handy (and few people do), it’s difficult to know if you’ve come into contact with an irradiated area until it’s too late. Symptoms of radiation sickness include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headaches, fatigue, and, in extreme cases, burns and loss of consciousness. These symptoms will appear anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours after contact, depending on the level of radiation and how close you were to the source, and will usually subside a few days later. In addition to the immediately visible effects, radiation also affects human cells on a genetic level, causing cancer and tumors later in life. The effects of radiation on humans are devastating, but we still use nuclear energy because it is extremely efficient, and, for the most part, doesn’t cause problems—however, when it does, they can be catastrophic.

The concept of nuclear power is relatively simple: an atom is split into two smaller atoms in a process called fission, which gives off heat. Most nuclear reactors use an isotope of uranium (uranium-235, which takes 704 million years for half of its radioactive atoms to decay), which fissions easily; it is manufactured into fuel rods. A split U-235
atom sends neutrons flying. These neutrons are absorbed by another U-235 atom, which becomes unstable and undergoes fission itself, and so on. This self-sustaining chain reaction boils water, which powers steam turbines, which generates electricity.

In order to stop this nuclear reaction, the neutrons firing off and causing the chain reaction of fission must be intercepted. In order to do this, one inserts a control rod, made of an efficient nuclear absorber like cadmium, boron, or hafnium, into the reactor core. This rod soaks up the wayward neutrons and stops the reaction. However, the fuel rods retain heat even after the reaction has been stopped. Therefore, pumps constantly circulate a coolant (usually water) in order to keep the fuel rods from getting too hot. If the cooling system fails, the water eventually boils away, leaving the fuel rod exposed; eventually, the uranium melts into a radioactive puddle, which, left unchecked, will burn through the containment vessel, exposing the outside environment to lethal doses of radioactivity.

This is what nearly happened in 1979 at Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station in Pennsylvania, the most infamous nuclear disaster in U.S. history. Due to what the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (USNRC) calls “design-related problems and worker errors,” the pumps that circulate the water failed; workers did not realize that the alarms indicated a failure of the cooling system. The crisis was stopped before the melted fuel rods burned through the containment vessel, but some radiation did escape into the surrounding environment.

The meltdown at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant was similarly caused by worker error. In April 1986, engineers shut down some of the safety features at the plant in order to run some tests. Over the course of the tests, which involved pulling control rods, the fuel rods in the fourth reactor grew too hot and the containment vessel exploded. Radiation was detected as far away as Sweden. The area surrounding Chernobyl, known as the “Exclusion Zone,” became the most radioactive ecosystem in the world. Scientists have trouble determining exactly how many deaths the disaster caused; 41 people died in the immediate aftermath, but it is suspected that anywhere from 4,000 to 100,000 people contracted thyroid cancer as a result of radiation. It is still dangerous to go to the Exclusion Zone, which covers 1,000 square miles around the former nuclear plant, without protection.
Perfect performance by workers does not equal a world free of nuclear plant failures; for example, the 2011 meltdown at Fukushima Power Plant in Japan was primarily caused by an earthquake. Any number of factors and freak accidents can contribute to a nuclear disaster, but they don’t occur very often, and for that, we have the plant maintenance workers to thank.

But what if those workers disappeared? If employees had to vacate a nuclear plant, with enough warning they could insert the control rods and stop fission. The reactor’s connection to the power grid would be cut automatically. The fuel rods would still be hot, but the cooling system’s emergency generators would kick in. Journalist Arthur Weisman writes that the fuel rods, producing about seven percent as much heat as a fully operational reactor, would generate enough warmth to keep pressurizing the cooling water looping through the reactor core. A relief valve would release overheated water and close when the pressure dropped. “At some point,” he writes, “it becomes a question of whether the water supply is depleted, a valve sticks, or the diesel pumps cut out first.”

If workers didn’t have the time to initiate a proper shutdown, the plant would continue running as usual until one of the many parts, ordinarily meticulously maintained by trained personnel, failed. A failure should trigger an automatic shutdown, but if it doesn’t, a meltdown is likely. “If everyone on Earth disappeared,” writes Weisman, “441 nuclear plants, several with multiple reactors, would briefly run on autopilot until, one by one, they overheated.”

Beyond the immediate threat of nuclear plants melting down, apocalypse survivors would eventually need to face massive quantities of nuclear waste. Most nuclear facilities in the United States put their spent fuel rods (still highly radioactive, but no longer efficient at sustaining fission) in pools, submerging them at least 20 feet underwater, which the USNRC says “provides adequate shielding from the radiation for anyone near the pool.” The water is replaced every 12 to 18 months. If a pool runs out of space, a plant might resort to “dry casking,” a method of storing high-level nuclear waste whereby spent fuel that has been cooling in a pool for one year is sealed in a container called a cask and buried in the ground. It might take quite a long time for the cask to break down (they are designed to last for many years), but if the water in the spent fuel pools evaporates, the uranium will heat up, melt through anything containing it, and expose radiation to the outside world.

It takes highly trained personnel to transport nuclear waste safely; with few people left on Earth after an apocalypse, it’s unlikely that many of them would have the knowledge necessary to carry out the task. In Mr. Burns, Maria tells her fellow survivors about a man she met who had a plan to keep the cooling-pool generators operating until the fuel rods were spent and, he believed, less radioactive. His plan, while noble, would only have worked for a certain amount of time; at some point, any number of the intricate systems would fail, and the plant would melt down. As Dartnell points out, “The most profound problem facing survivors is that human knowledge is collective, distributed across the population. No one individual knows enough to keep the vital processes of society going.”
Preparing for the End . . . and Everything After

There are those who make a hobby out of apocalypse preparation—disaster-survival enthusiasts who build bomb shelters, compile “bug-out” bags (which contain items necessary for survival), and train for a post-apocalyptic world. Aside from food, water, shelter, and medicine, there is an important and often-ignored aspect of post-apocalyptic survival: mental well-being. You can prepare as much as possible for the apocalypse—store water, put together a bug-out bag, train physically, learn how to use a gun, and build a makeshift generator—but it’s extremely difficult to prepare for the psychological effects of facing the end of the world as we know it.

Philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously wrote that after society breaks down, chaos replaces it and survival is a matter of every man for himself. But this might not be entirely true. Sam Sheridan refutes Hobbes’s theory by comparing it to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, especially in New Orleans’s Superdome, where about 20,000 evacuees sought asylum from the category-five storm. While the media reported squalid conditions and rampant violence, Sheridan explains that only six people died in the Superdome and only 13 weapons were found. He writes, “Everyone was buying into the notion that civilization is just a thin veneer and that any moment we can all revert to animalistic, Hobbesian behavior.”

In reality, group panic only occurs under extremely specific circumstances. Otherwise, people tend to help each other rather than turn to violence and chaos. The survivors of the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001, describe a calm and polite evacuation down the stairs; during the Northeast blackout of 2003, gang members escorted the elderly to their homes.

After the apocalypse, society as a whole might not completely break down, but it’s plausible that individuals may. As Sheridan writes, “Any apocalyptic event is going to be mentally traumatic—turns out, the definition of mental trauma is basically a feeling of personal apocalypse. Your world becomes strange, unrecognizable, and terrifying.” Sheridan interviewed Dr. Ghislaine Boulanger, a clinical psychologist and trauma specialist, to find out how a person might cope with this trauma after the end of the world:

[You really have to form groups. You can’t [heal] on your own. You need someone else to validate your experience, even if it’s their experience too. . . . You talk about this, you start to build a narrative, and that brings all the memories. You establish reason and a sense of time, you give meaning to the experience. It’s not black and white, and it’s not simple, but you can get the sense of having some control over the experience, you can detoxify it.

A Foundation to Cling To

An Interview with Set Designer Ralph Funicello

By Shannon Stockwell

Ralph Funicello has a long history with A.C.T., having designed the scenery for more than 50 productions here since 1972. “He’s the all-star,” says Artistic Director Carey Perloff. “He was one of the original designers here, and he really taught me how to use our theater; he showed me where the sweet spots are.”

“I suppose, because of my experience with The Geary Theater, I’m often called to do plays that are particularly challenging,” he muses. Funicello’s most recent feats include creating an imposing, epic-scale palace edifice for Elektra (2012); designing a set for Maple and Vine (2012) that accommodated more than 30 scene changes; and fashioning a living room set for Clybourne Park (2011) that aged 50 years between acts. “Carey told me that as soon as they read the Mr. Burns script, they thought, ‘This is a good project for Ralph,’” he says.

Funicello received a Tony Award nomination for his design of the 2004 Broadway production of Henry V; he is the recipient of the Michael Merritt Award for Excellence in Design and Collaboration, as well as awards from the San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle, the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle, Drama-Logue magazine, Back Stage West, and the U.S. Institute for Theatre Technology. He is currently the Don Powell Chair in Scene Design at San Diego State University, where, he says, his students were excited to discover he was designing for the Simpsons-inspired Mr. Burns, a post-electric play. “They had so much respect for me when I told them about it,” he says, laughing. Funicello, however, had not heard of the play before joining the design team; in fact, he wasn’t even all that familiar with The Simpsons. “I’m older than the generation that grew up on the show,” he admits.

As with Funicello’s other work at A.C.T., the scenic requirements of Mr. Burns are a challenge. For one thing, the world is built completely from circumstances no one has ever experienced. For another, the play has three different settings, the last of which takes place 75 years in the future. Finally, the story is inspired by a cartoon. “When someone says, ‘We’d love you to design this play based on The Simpsons,’ you think, ‘Really? Someone wrote that play?’” Funicello says, recalling his thoughts upon being offered the chance to work on Mr. Burns at A.C.T. “But when I read it, I thought it was absolutely incredible.” He was happy to share with us his thoughts on his design, the apocalypse, and the challenges in bringing the world of Mr. Burns to life.
What excites you about *Mr. Burns, a post-electric play*?

We’re in a time when there’s a huge struggle, certainly in this country, between people who think that the Christian religion—which could be considered a myth—is the answer to everything. *Mr. Burns* is a version of how something like that happens. If you didn’t know someone was talking about Christianity, if they wrote that story with a different name, perhaps it would seem just as fantastical and silly as “Cape Fear.” When a television show is on the air for 25 years and the writers have to continuously come up with new stories, they keep rehashing other versions of other stories; they all mush together, and that becomes the myth.

Can you describe your design for *Mr. Burns*?

When you’re approaching a play that is a known entity—whether it’s Shakespeare, a Greek classic, or *A Streetcar Named Desire*—you try to design your version of it. That wasn’t at all what came into my mind when designing *Mr. Burns*. I was just trying to make this play as clear to the audience as possible. I think the play itself is challenging enough; I don’t have to answer that challenge by doing a strange take on it.

The first act is just a bare stage. We want it to be as dark as possible and to really seem like it’s lit by the firelight. In the first act, I’m trying to pretty much follow what Anne Washburn suggests: the sense of a campfire. Cowboys sitting around the fire telling stories—I think that’s what it’s about. Because of the facilities at The Geary Theater, we have the opportunity to do something that really feels like a campfire. Other theaters have had to put the fire in a 55-gallon drum or trashcan, something that they
can carry offstage quickly, but we can do it on a trap that goes into the floor, meaning we can actually do a campfire.

For the second act, I already had a huge folder of images of bombed-out, deserted factories. Fortunately, that’s a fascinating subject for photographers, so there are a lot of good photographs of abandoned factories. In designing the second act, one of the questions was, “How cartoony should it be?” It seemed like there should be a contrast between the second and third acts, and between the real world and the fake world they’re trying to create. But I still felt that it couldn’t just be a grim factory, because the play is funny. Keeping that in mind, I colored it in a way that’s a bit “not real.” There’s this blue cast; everything fades out to a rich blue, which makes it all part of the same play and also keeps the humor of it.

I’m trying to make the third act look like a beat-up version of a touring production of *The Simpsons*. At the very end of the play, we see Mr. Burns on the treadmill, and we learn that the characters have discovered how to generate electricity. Rather than a treadmill or bicycle, we have decided to use one of those wonderful exercise machines where a big fan turns when you pedal and you have to move your arms back and forth, so it’s a very active object.

We talked about a lot of ways to bring in the auditorium’s light fixtures. We even talked about flickering the chandelier in the theater. We may go back to that, but at this point, I made the choice that the world of the play has to stop at the proscenium. If we try to mix in hanging fixtures out in the auditorium, it draws attention to the fact that lights are turned on. But who knows? Maybe flickering the chandelier will be a funny thing to do.
What have your conversations with the other designers been like?

I work a lot with costume designer Alex Jaeger. I used his costume sketches when I was starting to compose the third act. When I saw the bright colors he was using, I actually copied his renderings, put them in my sketch, and balanced my colors so I knew I wouldn’t conflict with his design. Seeing the clarity and purity of his colors made me feel I could be strong with the colors I was choosing.

It’s wonderful to have The Simpsons as a resource. We’re not making this up, in a way—we’re recreating something. It was also interesting to research the 1991 Cape Fear film, to see what that boat looked like, and to see what The Simpsons cartoonists were looking at when they were drawing the episode.

How much does the set change between acts, and how much work will the crew have to do?

They’ll have to do a considerable amount. Hopefully, the transition from the first to the second act will happen without a curtain going down. During the first act, I’m hoping to keep the main body of the Act II factory set onstage and covered up. So the question is: What is the factory set covered with so that the audience doesn’t see it? We decided to use camouflage netting, which is a coarse, synthetic cotton netting that is used to cover vehicles in the military. We’re going

Costume designer Alex Jaeger’s rendering of Marge Simpson for A.C.T.’s production of Mr. Burns
to take that and paint it black; it will still be slightly transparent, and it adds a textural surface. I’ve used it in various ways before, and it’s pretty effective for covering things. The other conceit is that it’s a destroyed post-apocalyptic world where everything is dark; we can’t quite tell what anything is, and maybe that’s fine.

**Were there other ways in which the apocalyptic plot influenced your design?**

In *Mr. Burns*, my sense is that there was some sort of terrible disease that killed off a lot of the population; therefore, everything else broke down, and the emergency generators—which were pumping water and keeping the nuclear plants cool—ran out of gas, and then all the plants melted down and blew up. The characters in the play are not where any of the nuclear meltdowns happened; otherwise, they wouldn’t be alive. Therefore, my factory is not one that was destroyed by the explosions. It’s just an abandoned factory covered with graffiti, which makes the set fun and hip, and brings some color into the second act.

The fact that this set has to jump so far into the future, combined with elements degrading over time, reminds me of your set for A.C.T.’s 2011 production of *Clybourne Park*.

That was a fun challenge, in a different way. The most challenging play I have done at A.C.T. was *Maple and Vine*, also directed by Mark [in 2012], just in terms of the vast amounts of scenery and scene shifts, things that had to move fluidly and change from place to place. It was equally difficult trying to make sense of the story, explaining where we were and what we were doing. *Mr. Burns*, in many ways, is easier. Certainly, there aren’t as many scene shifts!

**Are you prepared for the apocalypse?**

[Laughs] Not at all! I have a relative who is completely prepared. He lives in Arizona, has stores of food and water, and is armed. I don’t know what I would say to him if I saw him. I don’t know how I could keep a straight face.

I think the question is, “Do you want to be prepared?” And for me, I suppose, the question is how much I want to be alive. But I have a young daughter and a couple of grandchildren, and I worry about what their lives will be like. My daughter was born in 2008, and my dad was born in 1909. I know the changes my father saw in his life; he went from the Wright brothers to people landing on the moon. Two world wars, the Great Depression . . . he went through all of that. Compared to when he was born, it’s amazing how different the world was when he died. And change has only gotten faster. I wonder—but also worry—about how inhabitable the world will be when my daughter grows up. I’m not so worried about myself. I live in Southern California, and my house is high enough that I’m not worried about rising ocean levels. But I might end up with beachfront property!
Theater in a Time of Crisis

The Post-9/11 Geary

By Anna Woodruff

In *Mr. Burns, a post-electric play*, a theater performance is created and repeated for years after the world has been ravaged by catastrophe. Playwright Anne Washburn’s grand pronouncement is that theater is a powerful art form that brings people together, whether on an average day, during a political crisis, or even after a nuclear meltdown. When she reflects on the events that transpired after September 11, 2001, Washburn recalls, “I was in New York on 9/11, and was fascinated by the group-mind which followed the event. After the first three days, during which no one thought about anything else, or spoke of anything else, there was an etiquette which evolved, spontaneously, and which everyone followed, perfectly. People were desperate to seize on an order, and a way of doing things.”

Whenever our country enters a time of crisis, government officials do their best to establish the order people crave in the face of chaos. Many of us will recall that, in the days following 9/11, the government openly censored television, radio, and film. A Clear Channel memorandum sent out suggestions of “lyrically questionable songs” to ban from the radio (including Don McLean’s “American Pie” and Frank Sinatra’s “New York, New York”) out of fear that their content would upset the American public. Additionally, many films shot in New York prior to the attacks on the World Trade Center—such as *Zoolander* (2001), *Spider-Man* (2002), and *Men in Black II* (2002)—were forced to edit out frames that included the Twin Towers on the skyline.

Despite the restrictions the government placed on artists and the media during that time, some leaders in the art world stepped up, insisting that the willingness to tell evocative, and sometimes difficult, stories is integral to our national identity. *Saturday Night Live’s* 27th season premiere on September 29, 2001, began with Paul Simon delivering a heart-wrenching performance of “The Boxer”:

> In the clearing stands a boxer,
> And a fighter by his trade
> And he carries the reminders
> Of ev’ry glove that laid him down
> And cut him till he cried out
> In his anger and his shame,
> “I am leaving, I am leaving.”
> But the fighter still remains.
The song was followed by SNL Executive Producer Lorne Michaels asking New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, “Can we be funny?” Giuliani cheekily responded, “Why start now?” And the show went on.

Just two nights after September 11, across the country in San Francisco, A.C.T. also decided that going on with the show would be the most powerful response to widespread crisis. Carey Perloff was directing Harold Pinter’s one-act plays *The Room* and *Celebration*. *The Room*, Pinter’s menacing first play, was written in 1957. It takes place in a room occupied by a woman named Rose and her husband, Burt. Rose becomes increasingly paranoid as various individuals enter the room, creating an irrational and confusing atmosphere of disjointed dialogue and mounting terror. *Celebration*, written in 2000 and Pinter’s last play, takes place on the wedding anniversary of Lambert and Julie, whose celebration is marred by crude interruptions from the wait staff and another couple in the restaurant. Peter Riegert, who starred in both shows, says that the two plays offered both a “frightened and comedic look at terror.”

*The Room* hit home for everyone in the audience on September 13, 2001, which Riegert deems “the single greatest night I ever spent in a theater.” The play’s themes of fear, terror, intrusion, the foreign, and the unknown were more relevant than ever. Perloff says that audiences did not seem to focus on specifics; the only thing that mattered in that moment was the “empathy with Rose’s plight, and a strong emotional connection with each other, as audience members and Americans were witnessing a story about terror at that confusing and frightening time.” After watching this gravely serious play, the audience responded to *Celebration* with a cathartic release of laughter. Riegert recalls, “The audience reassured us that we were doing our jobs. They were laughing because they were still alive. It was truly profound.”
In an article written by Perloff honoring the life and work of Pinter when he passed away in 2008, she describes the mood infusing The Geary during the performance of *The Room*: “In the midst of banalities and scrambled eggs comes the knock at the door. That audience on September 13, 2001, sat without breathing as they watched Rose desperately trying to keep the enemy at bay. At intermission, they were quiet, subdued.”

Of the second, more comical piece, Perloff wrote, “Within moments of the curtain rising on Peter Riegert’s obnoxious, take-no-prisoners Lambert, the audience began to scream with laughter. The emotional release was so intense, it nearly overwhelmed the actors.”

The two plays, which evoke life’s tragicomic elements, were challenging to perform and watch during a national crisis that took precedence. Perloff wondered whether A.C.T. should even be performing after a national tragedy, the aftereffects of which would probably numb most audiences. Despite her hesitation, Perloff says she was inspired by Pinter’s courageous dramatic works, which “are not easy, feel-good plays; they are tough, elliptical, trenchant, and uncompromising.” In the aftermath of the tragic events of 9/11, she felt an urgency to put on the show because “this was one of those moments in which theater actually mattered.”

At the first preview performance, Riegert wondered how the production would be received. He remembers pondering to himself, “*The Room* is about terror. Now, who’s going to see a play about terror when you’re already terrified? The second play is a comedy—who’s going to laugh?” Despite these reservations, A.C.T.’s thousand-seat theater was almost filled to capacity. As with the characters in *Mr. Burns*, who spend their time entertaining the survivors of the apocalypse, perhaps the desire for theater becomes more urgent when our freedom and leisure time are under siege. In any case, on September 13, 2001, Perloff was reassured. “Watching nine hundred people packed into The Geary Theater to experience Pinter reminded me why we had rebuilt that theater in the first place. To be able to gather the community together in the shared experience of theater at that moment was vital and satisfying.”
**The Simpsons Terms**

**Springfield** is the town in which *The Simpsons* takes place. It is located in an unspecified American state. Its mottos are “Meanest Town in America!” and “Springfield: Good.”

**Bart Simpson**, voiced by Nancy Cartwright, is a ten-year-old fourth-grade student and the only son of Homer and Marge Simpson. Unlike the other members of the Simpsons family, who are named after creator Matt Groening’s family members, Bart’s name is an anagram of the word “brat.” He is mischievous and disrespectful of authority; he makes prank phone calls, does poorly in school, and can be found riding his skateboard. He is famous for his catchphrases, including “Eat my shorts!” and “Ay, caramba!” “Cowabunga” also became one of his catchphrases, but only after fans attributed it to him.

**Homer Simpson**, voiced by Dan Castellaneta, is the patriarch of the Simpsons family. He works at the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, and he has an affinity for beer and donuts. His stupidity is often a source of humor in the show.

**Lisa Simpson**, voiced by Yeardley Smith, is the eight-year-old daughter of Homer and Marge Simpson. Extremely intelligent with an IQ of 159, she often feels like an outcast in her family. She has idealistic morals; she is an environmentalist and a feminist, and she becomes a vegetarian and a Buddhist over the course of the show.

**Maggie Simpson** is the infant daughter of Marge and Homer Simpson. She generally does not speak, but has been voiced by Nancy Cartwright, Elizabeth Taylor, Jodie Foster, and James Earl Jones. She is usually seen sucking on a red pacifier. Throughout the series, she has exhibited traits that imply she is a genius.

**Marge Simpson**, voiced by Julie Kavner, is the matriarch of the Simpsons family. She is recognizable by her blue beehive hairstyle and high-pitched, gravelly voice. She is a calm foil to the rest of the family’s chaos.

**Mr. Montgomery Burns**, voiced by Harry Shearer, is Homer’s boss and the wealthy, evil owner of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant.

**Sideshow Bob** is a recurring character on *The Simpsons*. Voiced by Kelsey Grammer, he is an evil clown whose real name is
Underdunk Terwillinger, PhD. Sideshow Bob begins his clowning career as the trod-upon, silent sidekick on Krusty the Clown's television show. Eventually, Bob begins to resent Krusty's abuse and frames his boss for armed robbery of Kwik-E-Mart, a neighborhood convenience store. Krusty is arrested, and Bob assumes control of the show, but Bart exposes the plan. Krusty is freed while Bob goes to prison, holding a long-lasting grudge against Bart.

**Blinky** is a species of fish with three eyes that lives in Springfield; the mutation is caused by radiation from the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. In the episode “Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish” (season two, episode four), Bart catches a Blinky fish.

**Kent Brockman** is a newscaster in Springfield.

**Ned Flander** is the Simpsons' neighbor. His devout Christianity and perfect family are a source of annoyance for the Simpsons, particularly Homer.

**Groundskeeper Willie** is the Scottish groundskeeper and janitor of Springfield Elementary School, which both Lisa and Bart attend.

**Itchy and Scratchy** are characters in a fictional cartoon (*The Itchy & Scratchy Show*) frequently watched by Lisa and Bart. In this spoof of *Tom and Jerry*, a mouse (Itchy) and a cat (Scratchy) antagonize each other; but unlike Tom and Jerry, they succeed in killing each other several times, often with gratuitous violence and gore.

Edna Krabappel teaches Bart's fourth-grade class. Her grumpy demeanor is a satire of the American public-school system.

Troy McClure is a washed-up actor, usually appearing in infomercials and educational videos.

Nelson Muntz is a bully who attends Springfield Elementary School with Bart and Lisa. He is famous for his obnoxious laugh.

Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, an Indian immigrant, is the manager of Kwik-E-Mart, Springfield's convenience store.

**Mayor Quimby** is the mayor of Springfield and a parody of politicians in the Kennedy family.

“Smarmy Prosecutor,” also known as the “Blue-Haired Lawyer,” often appears in episodes featuring the Simpsons in court. He is also one of Mr. Burns's lawyers.

Moe Szyslak is the owner of Moe's Tavern, a bar frequented by Homer and his friends. He has a short temper and propensity for violence and suicide attempts, and often receives prank phone calls from Bart.

Thelma is likely a corruption of the name of Marge's sister Selma Bouvier. (There is no Simpsons character named Thelma.)

Chief Wiggum is the incompetent chief of police in Springfield. In one episode, he claims that Sideshow Bob calls him Chief Piggum; in fact, the character was designed to resemble a pig.
The Simpsons Episodes

“Calm thyself, Bartron, and tell us now where the magic space crystals which can save the galaxy are hidden” is a line said by Lisa in “Space Patrol,” the 14th short on The Tracey Ullman Show, which aired on November 8, 1987. In the short, Lisa, Bart, and Maggie play “Space Patrol”; Maggie and Lisa put pots on their heads as helmets, but Bart gets his head stuck in a vase. Lisa dubs him “Bartron, the evil robot from Mars gone berserk” and proceeds to antagonize him.

“A Streetcar Named Marge”
Season 4, episode 2
Original air date: October 1, 1992
Marge wins the role of Blanche DuBois in a musical adaptation of Tennessee Williams’s classic play A Streetcar Named Desire. Homer is unsupportive of Marge’s new hobby, and she begins to realize that he shares certain undesirable traits with Stanley Kowalski, the brutish character in Streetcar. Homer eventually comes around and is sincerely moved by the production and Marge’s role in it. The episode pokes fun at community theater and makes allusions to many other plays.

“Homer the Heretic”
Season 4, episode 3
Original air date: October 8, 1992
To Marge’s dismay, Homer decides not to attend church one cold winter morning, instead staying home and having an extraordinarily good time. Despite visits from God in his dreams, Homer continues skipping church, but one Sunday morning he falls asleep with a lit cigar and the house catches on fire. Homer survives but concludes that God was exacting vengeance on him, and he decides to return to church. It is one of the more philosophical episodes, including such lines as “I’m not a bad guy, I work hard, I love my kids . . . so why should I spend half my Sunday hearing about how I’m going to hell?” and “What if we’ve picked the wrong religion? Every week we’re just making God madder and madder.”

“Bart of Darkness”
Season 6, episode 1
Original air date: September 4, 1994
(Called “Heart of Bartness” in Mr. Burns)
In this parody of the Hitchcock film Rear Window (1954), Bart breaks his leg and is confined to his room for the entirety of summer vacation. Realizing that her brother is becoming increasingly agitated and bored, Lisa gives him a telescope, which Bart uses to spy on their neighbors, the Flanders. Bart becomes convinced that Ned Flanders murdered his wife, but eventually discovers that she was just at vacation Bible camp.

“Lisa the Vegetarian”
Season 7, episode 5
Original air date: October 15, 1995
After visiting a petting zoo, Lisa decides to stop eating meat. She is teased for her decision but receives encouragement from Apu, who is a vegan, as well as Paul and Linda McCartney. The McCartneys, who were vegetarians in real life, agreed to appear on the show as long as Lisa remained a vegetarian for the rest of the series. The episode received an Environmental Media Award and a Humane Society of the United States Genesis Award for its treatment of animal rights and environmental issues.
“Much Apu About Nothing”  
Season 7, episode 23  
Original air date: May 5, 1996  
When Springfield forms a patrol to protect the townspeople from bears, taxes are raised astronomically; Mayor Quimby shifts the blame to illegal immigrants and puts forth a proposition to deport them. When Homer learns that Apu (manager of the Kwik-E-Mart) is at risk of deportation, he helps his friend study for the U.S. citizenship test so he can remain in Springfield. The episode received generally positive reviews for its satirical yet sympathetic take on a controversial topic.

“Raging Abe Simpson and His Grumbling Grandson in ‘The Curse of the Flying Hellfish’”  
Season 7, episode 22  
Original air date: April 28, 1996  
After the death of their friend Asa Phelps, Abe Simpson (Homer’s father) and Mr. Burns are the only surviving members of the Flying Hellfish, a World War II squad. During the war, the squad found some paintings and agreed that the last surviving member would inherit them. Mr. Burns attempts to have Abe assassinated in order to obtain the art. Abe moves into his son’s house, and Bart eventually helps him recover the paintings. The week the episode aired, The Simpsons was the second-highest-rated show on FOX.

“Springfield Files”  
Season 8, episode 10  
Original air date: January 12, 1997  
This parody of The X-Files (a series that aired on FOX from 1993 to 2002) features guest stars David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson as their characters from The X-Files, as well as Star Trek actor Leonard Nimoy as himself. In the episode, Homer sees an alien, but Lisa reveals that the alien is actually Mr. Burns, who glows green at night due to radiation from his nuclear plant.

Other  
Cape Fear is a 1962 psychological thriller film directed by J. Lee Thompson. Based on the novel The Executioners, by John D. MacDonald, the film is about attorney Sam Bowden (played by Gregory Peck), whose family is stalked by a rapist named Max Cady (Robert Mitchum), whom Bowden helped send to jail. Bowden and his family escape to their houseboat in Cape Fear, off the coast of North Carolina, but Cady follows them. After a long struggle, Bowden ultimately allows Cady to live out the rest of his life in jail. The film regularly makes it onto lists of the most frightening movies ever made. In 1991, the film was remade, directed by Martin Scorsese. It starred Nick Nolte as Bowden, Robert De Niro as Cady, Ileana Douglas as Bowden’s colleague and Cady’s victim, and Juliette Lewis as Bowden’s teenage daughter. De Niro and Lewis both received Academy Award nominations for their roles.

Chablis is a white wine made in and around the town of the same name in Burgundy, France. Chablis wines are almost all dry chardonnays and are famous for their distinctive notes of flint, chalk, and/or seashells.
Columbia Generating Station is Washington’s only nuclear plant, located in the southern part of the state, about ten miles north of Richland. Its one reactor has been in operation since 1984. The cooling water is drawn from the nearby Columbia River. It provides about 10 percent of Washington’s electricity.

David Beckham (born 1975) is a retired English football (soccer) player. He made People magazine’s “Sexiest Men Alive” list in 2013.

Diablo Canyon Power Plant is the only functioning nuclear plant in the state of California, located in San Luis Obispo County. It consists of two reactors and has been in operation since 1985. It provides about 7 percent of California’s electricity, draws its cooling water from the Pacific Ocean, and has been designed to withstand a 7.5-magnitude earthquake.

“Feets, don’t fail me now” is a catchphrase most famously heard in films of the 1930s and ’40s, said by such black actors as Willie Best, Stepin Fetchit, and Mantan Moreland.

Gilbert and Sullivan collectively refers to librettist W. S. Gilbert (1836–1911) and composer Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900), who wrote 14 comic operas together between 1871 and 1896. Their work is marked by intricate rhyming structures, syncopated rhythms, witty lyrics, and dynamic harmonies. H.M.S. Pinafore, the pair’s first international success, was first performed in 1878. The Mikado opened in 1885 and became their most popular opera. It takes place in a fictional Japanese city where flirting is punishable by execution; Ko-Ko has been convicted of this crime, but as he himself is the Lord High Executioner, he cannot be killed, and therefore, no one else can be. His assistant, Pooh-Bah, takes the offices of all those who are too proud to serve Ko-Ko. The opera features the song “Three Little Maids from School Are We,” which is sung by Yum-Yum (the ingénue) and her friends.

Interstate 90 is more than 3,000 miles long, making it the longest interstate highway in the United States. It is the northernmost cross-country highway (the other two are Interstates 80 and 70).

Interstate 5 is the main interstate highway on the West Coast. Its northernmost point is in Blaine, Washington, and its southernmost point is in San Diego, California.

Kelsey Grammer (born 1955) is an American actor, famous for his role as Dr. Frasier Crane in the television series Cheers and Frasier, and for providing the voice of Sideshow Bob in The Simpsons.

Lithium batteries use the element lithium as a source of power. These batteries can be one-use or rechargeable. Due to their longevity (some can last for as long as 15 years), they are often used in electronics and such medical devices as pacemakers.

The Night of the Hunter, directed by Charles Laughton, is a 1955 film about reverend/serial killer Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum), who attempts to seduce a widow (Shelley Winters) in order to acquire the money her husband stole from a bank. In the film, Powell
has tattoos of the words “LOVE” and “HATE” on his knuckles. He explains them to the widow’s young son, while acting out the story with his hands:

H-A-T-E! It was with this hand that old brother Cain struck the blow that laid his brother low. L-O-V-E!
You see these fingers, dear hearts? These fingers have veins that run straight to the soul of man. [. . .]
Those fingers, dear hearts, is always a-warring and a-tugging, one agin t’other. Now watch ’em! Old brother left hand, left hand hate’s a-fighting, and it looks like love’s a goner. But wait a minute, wait a minute! Hot dog, love’s a-winning! Yessirree! It’s love that’s won, and old left hand hate is down for the count!

In 1989, director/writer/producer Spike Lee paid homage to The Night of the Hunter in his film Do the Right Thing, about mounting racial tension in a Brooklyn neighborhood. In this film, the character Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) wears brass knuckles spelling out “LOVE” and “HATE.” He explains them while acting out the story with his hands:

Hate: it was with this hand that Cain iced his brother. Love: these five fingers, they go straight to the soul of man. The right hand: the hand of love. One hand is always fighting the other hand, and the left hand is kicking much ass. I mean, it looks like the right hand, love, is finished. But hold on, stop the presses, the right hand is coming back. [. . .] Ooh, it’s a-devastating, right, and hate is hurt, he’s down. Left-hand hate K-O’ed by love.
“Plants all over”—in the United States, there are currently 62 nuclear power plants in operation, with a total of 100 reactors. The state with the most is Illinois, with 6 plants and 11 reactors. The West Coast has only two plants, with a total of three reactors; California’s San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station began the shut-down process in 2013.

Pret a Manger is a fast-food chain, especially popular in London (where it first opened in 1986) and New York City. It is famous for its sandwiches and dedication to using all-natural/preservative-free ingredients.

Quickchange is a theater term referring to a costume change that must be executed with extreme efficiency, usually due to an actor having only a brief moment offstage.

Rods provide the fuel for nuclear reactors. They are usually made of uranium-235, an isotope that fissions readily, and are encased in metal cladding.

Shale is a sedimentary rock that often contains higher-than-average levels of radioactivity.

Shiraz is a red wine made from grapes grown primarily in Australia, with undertones of violet, tar, pepper, spice, and dense, dark red berries.

Smash cut refers to an abrupt cut in a film that occurs without warning, usually in the middle of a scene, with the intent of startling the viewer.

“This is the vida loca, we are living the vida loca” is a line from the 1999 Latin-pop song “Livin’ la Vida Loca,” by Ricky Martin. It was one of the best-selling singles of all time and stayed at number one on the Billboard “Hot 100” for five weeks.

Three fingers—many early cartoon characters were drawn with three fingers and one thumb, as this was easier for animators to draw than a complete human hand. Groening used this convention for The Simpsons.

Tom Brady (born 1977) is the quarter-back for the New England Patriots. He made People magazine’s 2012 “Sexiest Men Alive” list.

“ Toxic” is a 2003 song by American pop singer Britney Spears; it reached number nine on the Billboard “Hot 100” chart. The song compares the singer’s lover to a toxic substance, presumably a drug: “With a taste of your lips I’m on a ride / You’re toxic, I’m slipping under / A taste of a poison paradise / I’m addicted to you / Don’t you know that you’re toxic?”

U.S. Route 395 exists in Washington, Oregon, Nevada, and California; it runs from the Canadian border to Hesperia, California, in the Mojave Desert.

The West Wing is a political drama series, created by Aaron Sorkin, that ran from 1999 to 2006. The show, which follows the story of the fictional President Bartlet and his staff through his term in office, has been praised for its political accuracy, treatment of current events, and witty, fast-paced dialogue.
Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think Anne Washburn chose to center *Mr. Burns, a post-electric play* around *The Simpsons*? Is this an effective choice? How might the play have been different if she had based it on another pop-culture phenomenon?

2. How does the characters’ recollection of a *Simpsons* episode in the first act affect and transform the world of the play in the second and third acts?

3. How does the act of storytelling tie into the characters’ survival?

4. How does the “Cape Feare” plot subtly and overtly change over the course of the play? What do you think causes these changes?

5. In the second act, Quincy says, “Meaning is everywhere. We get meaning for free, whether we like it or not. Meaningless entertainment, on the other hand, is actually really hard.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

6. What was your experience of the third act? What do you imagine occurred in the years between the second and third acts that contributed to the new version of “Cape Feare”?

7. If there were an apocalypse, what stories do you think would survive? Which story would you most want to keep alive?

For Further Information . . .


