Associate Literary Manager Alec Strum waxes eschatological in *The End of The World as We D’oh It!*

Mr. Burns author Anne Washburn on her fruitful collision of pop culture and despair.

Director of New Play Development Adam Greenfield teaches us why Anne Washburn plays are fun for the whole family!

Associate Literary Manager Alec Strum waxes eschatological in *The End of The World as We D’oh It!*
DEAR FRIENDS,

Culture mongers relentlessly peddle dystopic futurist scenarios in TV and movies. Despite all evidence we might be sated with zombie/vampire/invading alien/oncoming asteroid/catastrophic climate change/magnetic pole inversion/nuclear meltdown disaster epics, the shows keep coming. Most of these would fall decidedly into the bottom left “Lowbrow/Despicable” quadrant of New York Magazine’s Approval Matrix (except maybe The Walking Dead, which nudes just slightly into the Lowbrow/Brilliant quadrant). Anne Washburn’s ridiculously inspired Mr. Burns shoots straight into my personal “Highbrow/Brilliant” by riffing on one entirely plausible disaster scenario, the disintegration of our electric grid, and turning it inside out. It reminds me of how I felt when I first read Christopher Durang’s seminal Betty’s Summer Vacation, which took the ‘90s obsession with trash culture (remember Lorena Bobbitt and the Menendez brothers?) and exploded it to smithereens by inhabiting it so blithely. I had no idea how much I needed Durang’s play until I read it. I felt the same way about Anne’s play.

Mr. Burns’s charms lay in the fact that it doesn’t seem like a disaster story at all. That doesn’t mean that as we glean what has happened to our world we don’t get a chill from its creepy prescience. And it is all the creepier because it doesn’t feel like Anne’s purpose in writing it has been to creep us out. It’s not a narrative for thrill-seekers. It doesn’t transform its characters into action heroes. The people we meet in the play just seem like people. We meet them telling stories around a campfire, trying to recreate a favorite TV show. Gradually we realize they have no choice. Without electricity there’s no TV or stereo anymore, and that means returning to the ancient art of storytelling. As the play unfolds over the years, the storytelling becomes an important cornerstone in a new barter economy. And yes, The Simpsons lies at the heart of this storytelling, and that brings a certain whimsy to the enterprise. But what is surprising and subversive and ultimately idealistic about the play is that the importance of the disaster context here is simply to raise the stakes of the story. That’s what I mean about turning it inside out: Anne’s premise posits sweetly and fiercely that in our time of greatest duress, our stories – our art – become more important than ever, literally the key to our survival.

I don’t mean to make it seem so highfalutin. File this away and just go for the ride. There’s no question that a primary purpose of the retelling game the characters perform at the top is just for a little much needed comic relief. There’s nothing wrong with art as entertainment. Good plays should always be part “play.”

But the reason it grows in importance is that it serves as a shared story. I can still remember in the sixth grade recounting the plots of the latest Flintstones episode at lunchtime with my friends. Partly, we were just reliving the pleasure, but we were also showing off and making each other laugh. That’s how the recounting in Mr. Burns starts. But over time it evolves. And evolves. And evolves. It becomes epic and primal. And I suspect after you see it, it will stay with you for a long long time.

Mr. Burns was created out of the collective research and development of the invaluable theater troupe The Civilians (as was the wonderful Maple and Vine from a couple of seasons ago). We are fortunate that most of the original company members that inspired Anne’s play will perform in our production. I’m sure their long history with the play will deepen your experience.

Tim Sanford
Artistic Director
PLAYWRIGHT’S PERSPECTIVE

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

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

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

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

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

That summer, Clubbed Thumb – a downtown theater company – had gotten hold of a free rehearsal space they were loaning out – a disused bank vault in a sub basement deep under Wall Street. We met there, far underground and out of cell phone range, in a room with thick, thick doors and those wheel handles, under a range of flickering fluorescent lights, and asked a group of Civilians actors to remember Simpsons episodes as best they could. We also asked them to be mindful of the necessities of storytelling; if they couldn’t remember a detail, or a plot segue, they should – as one would, in the wild, in front of a small audience – make something up. The episode they remembered most vividly was “Cape Feare,” a parody of the Scorsese remake of the film Cape Fear, with Robert De Niro playing the role originated by Robert Mitchum. The resulting narrative, which I pieced together from several attempts, is... fairly accurate, and I used it as the starting point of the play.

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

ANNE WASHBURN
MAY 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANNE WASHBURN’s plays include The Internationalist, A Devil at Noon, Apparition, The Communist Dracula Pageant, I Have Loved Strangers, The Ladies, The Small and a trans-adaptation of Euripides’ Oreste. Her work has been produced by 13P, ATL, ART, The Cherry Lane, Clubbed Thumb, The Civilians, Dixon Place, EST, The Folger, London’s Gate Theatre, Soho Rep, Studio Theater, Two River Theater, The Vineyard, and Woolly Mammoth. Awards include a Guggenheim, a NYFA Fellowship, a Time Warner Fellowship, Susan Smith Blackburn finalist, residencies at MacDowell and Yaddo, and an ArtsLink travel grant to Hungary to work with the playwright Peter Karpatici. She is an associated artist with The Civilians, Clubbed Thumb, New Georges and is an alumna of New Dramatists and 13P. Currently commissioned by MTC, Playwrights Horizons, Soho Rep and Yale Rep.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

MICHAEL FRIEDMAN’s credits include Saved, The Drunken City, and Spatter Pattern at Playwrights Horizons. He wrote the music and lyrics to Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson (which recently played at The Public Theater and on Broadway, garnering Outer Critics Circle’s Circle and Lortel awards), and, as an Associate Artist, he has written music and lyrics for The Civilians’ productions of Canard Canard Goose, Gone Missing, Nobody’s Lunch, This Beautiful City, In the Footprint, and The Great Immensity, and co-created the group’s 2012 TED Talk. With Steve Cosson, he is the co-author of Paris Commune (BAM Next Wave Festival 2012). Upcoming: Love’s Labour Lost with Alex Timbers for Shakespeare in the Park this summer, and an adaptation of Jonathan Lethem’s Fortress of Solitude with Itamar Moses and Daniel Aukin, which will premiere at Dallas Theatre Center in 2013. Obie Award for sustained achievement.
Steve Cosson is the founding Artistic Director of The Civilians. Selected work with The Civilians includes Anne Wuhl’s Mr. Burns (Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, The Washington Post’s #1 play for 2012); Bess Wohl and Michael Friedman’s Pretty Filthy; Paris Commune (2012 BAM Next Wave); The Great Immensity; The Next Forever created for the 2012 TED Conference; In The Footprint (Top 10 of 2010 in New York Times, Time Out, New Yorker); This Beautiful City; (I Am) Nobody’s Lunch and Gone Missing (New York Times Top 10 of 2007). These works and others have been produced at The Public, La Jolla Playhouse, The Vineyard, Barrow Street, Woolly Mammoth, Kansas City Rep, Actors Theatre of Louisville, ART, Center Theater Group, and others. Additional credits include Spring Awakening (Oney Theatre); Anne Washburn’s A Devil at Noon (Humana Festival, O’Neill); Bus Stop (Kansas City Rep); and the U.S. premiere of Martin Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life (Soho Rep). His plays are published by Oberon Books, Dramatists Play Service, and an anthology from PlayScripts.

CASTING UPDATE

**QUINCY TYLER BERNSTONE** BROADWAY: In The Next Room. OFF-BROADWAY: Far From Heaven (PH), Nevo (Public, Lortel nom.), Dreams of Flying Dreams of Falling (Atlantic), Ruined (MIT, Obie Award). FILM & TV: Red Hook Summer; Rachel Getting Married.

**SUSANNAH FLOOD** NEW YORK THEATER: Tribes (Barrow Street), As You Like It (NYSF/Public), A Free Man of Color (LCT), The Heart is a Lonely Hunter (NYTW). REGIONAL: Travesties (McCarter), A Civil War Christmas (Long Wharf), Doubt (The Hangar).

**GIBSON FRAZIER** OFF-BROADWAY: Luther (Clubbed Thumb), There Are No More Big Secrets (Rattlesnake), Telephone (Foundry), God’s Ear (Vineyard/New Georges), The Internationalist (Vineyard), Hedda Dratron (Les Feres Corbusier). FILM & TV: Frances Ha, Shadows & Lies, The Illusion, “Elementary.” “The Good Wife.”

**MATTHEW MAKER** OFF-BROADWAY: The Flick (PH, Obie Award); Golden Child (Signature); Red-Handed Otter (Cherry Lane); Orange, Hat, and Grace (Soho Rep); Race of the Ark Tattoo (Foundry, Obie Award). FILM & TV: It’s Kind of a Funny Story, Gone Baby Gone, The Killer Inside Me, Jersey Girl, Dogma.


**COLLEEN WERTHMANN** OFF-BROADWAY: Miss Witherspoon and Recent Tragic Events (PH); Anne Washburn’s The Communist Dracula Pageant and The Ladies; Conard, Conard, Goose?, Gone Missing, and In The Footprint (Civilians); Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson and Blue Surge (Public), Light Raise the Roof (NYTW), Suitcase (Soho Rep).


**WELCOME, NEW PATRONS!**

The Playwrights Horizons Development Department would like to welcome the following donors* who joined the Patron Program this past season, and thank them for their generous support of our mission to develop and produce new plays and musicals by American writers, composers and lyricists.

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*As of June 5, 2013.
THE AMERICAN VOICE

A MATH SOMEWHERE

Q: Tell me a story from your childhood that explains who you are as a writer.

A: I have a lot of vivid earthquake memories...

—from an interview with Anne Washburn

In the classic parlor game Balderdash, players compose fake definitions for a real word—the more obscure, the better—and then mix these imaginations with the actual definition. “The Dasher” reads them all aloud, and everyone casts votes on what they think is the truth. If you guess correctly, you score. But you also score when another player votes for the lie you invented.

About a year ago, my boyfriend and I jokingly imagined a similar game based on the plays of Anne Washburn. Stumbling home from some party, we were marveling at the sheer number of times that week we had heard a sentence begin with, “Have you heard about the new Anne Washburn play that’s [insert premise of play here]?” And in every case, the rest of the sentence was so unexpected that, precisely as happens when playing Balderdash, the truth was far more awesome than anything we could make up.

Let’s play the game now. I’ll be the Dasher. Identify which of the following sentences my boyfriend and I didn’t hear. “Have you heard about the new Anne Washburn play that’s a) “…written in an invented Slavic language that its protagonist doesn’t speak?”  b) “…told from inside an acid trip that Philip K. Dick is taking?”  c) “…a contemporary musical adaptation of ‘Little Bunny Foo Foo’ with an anti-war message?”  d) “…a pageant that chronicles the rise and fall of Ceausescu’s reign, featuring Vlad the Impaler?”  e) “…about survivors who try and reconstruct a ‘The Simpsons’ episode at the end of the world?”

Naturally, it’s a trick question, and the answers is, f) all of the above. The plays, which are only a sampling of Washburn’s beguiling and totally unpredictable body of work:  a) The Internationalist (2004) takes us inside the mind of an American businessman abroad in an unnamed country, where he’s awakened to his own uselessness;  b) A Devil At Noon (2011) weaves a multi-dimensional tale around a science fiction writer’s struggles with reality;  c) Little Bunny Foo Foo (2007) shows us a rabbit who, well, just won’t stop bopping field mice on the head;  d) The Communist Dracula Pageant: by Americans, for Americans, with hallucinations, phosphorescence, and bears (2008) is a wildly theatrical satire that scrutinizes how history gets written;  and e) Mr. Burns, a post-electric play opens our new season.

The best strategy in Balderdash, when composing one’s false word definition, is to erase oneself from the writing of it. Because Anne’s work somehow keeps her more elusive. In a way, what her plays seem to have in common is that they have so little in common. It’s as though—and I promise this ends my extended Balderdash metaphor—each of her plays is a striking, rare word she plucked from the Arcanum, inhabited completely, and then exploded open for us, allowing us to marvel at the strangeness of its mere being. Her plays often (not always) incorporate found text or transcriptions of recorded interviews: Mr. Burns, Dreamerewake (2013), The Ladies (2004). They also often (not typically) offer an expressionistic vision of the world, from the point of view of a central character: The Internationalist, A Devil at Noon. And they often (never predictably) carry us from one reality into another, smashing two dissimilar play-worlds together: Apparition (2005), The Communist Dracula Pageant. The effect is that the nature of each richly conceived and spellbinding play has a way of diffusing evidence of Anne’s own handbook. It’s only in looking at her plays as a collection that this effect starts to emerge as the commonality between each play. She’s a shape-shifter. Sly and liethe. And what we know about shape-shifters is that their elusiveness allows them to do the most audacious things.

“As long as someone, somewhere, is thinking about the ending of the world, it won’t,” the character Duncan offers in her play The Small (2007). “There’s a scientific explanation, having to do with very complicated physics, about the importance, even the necessity of being unexpected. I know it’s a math somewhere; I’ve observed it in my life: what you anticipate and rely on, will not occur.” This strikes me as a slightly uncharacteristic moment in Anne’s plays, only in that it’s possibly a fleeting glimpse into the thoughts of the playwright herself. Her plays are anything but expected, constantly defying our laws of probability, opening up new possibilities through her inventive use of language, subjects, imagery. But beyond a belief in the unanticipated, do we pick up in Duncan’s words an almost romantic curiosity towards the mysteries of the cosmos, the secrets of the universe? Though he doesn’t understand the physics, and though the math isn’t within reach, he knows there’s a pattern far out there, up there, in there somewhere that will reveal to us how or why things happen or don’t happen. Anne Washburn’s plays reflect a writer in love with the mysteries themselves, pursuing a pattern behind them vigorously, but perfectly content with the fact that the end of each pursuit only reveals more mystery.

In The Small, Duncan continues, imagining the splendor that will be revealed when the end does come:  “We’ll see crazy colors. Colors will break open and there will be new colors inside of them. We will see animals from other planets. And new music. For a moment everything will be so new that we’ll understand how limited our palate—of color, sound, form—was before this moment. In that moment, we’ll understand that everything that used to be miles apart (holds his hands out, a solid foot and a half apart) is actually this (forefinger and middle only a few centimeters apart) close to each other, in relation to all of this—it spreads out his arms as far as they can go). Our minds are gonna boggle, and then they’ll end.”  q

ADAM GREENFIELD, DIRECTOR OF NEW PLAY DEVELOPMENT

Leadership support for the New Works Lab is generously provided by the Time Warner Foundation.
We recommend Mr. Burns for audiences aged 10+

POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSIONS

PPDs with the creative team have been scheduled for the following dates:

- **WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 28** following the matinee
- **FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6**

We hope you can take part in this important aspect of our play development process.

- Indicates post-performance discussion
- Open Captioned for theatergoers who are deaf or hard of hearing
- We recommend Mr. Burns for audiences aged 10+
- Available to 30&Under and Student Members only

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**BACKSTORY CONT’D FROM PAGE 8**

Just a small sample of works of literature that have been given full-episode treatments on the show: Lord of the Flies, The Raven, Hamlet, The Lottery, Macbeth, A Streetcar Named Desire, The Tell Tale Heart, Moby Dick, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and The Old Man and the Sea. Of course, that hardly includes the smaller allusions packed into countless bits, lines and sight-gags, and it says nothing of the show’s considerable treatment of films, other television shows, musicals, operas, and more. There are also the show’s famous guest appearances (it holds the Guinness Record), which not only span the entertainment industry from Elizabeth Taylor to Justin Bieber, but include (among many others) Richard Dawkins, Tony Blair, Thomas Pynchon, Stephen Hawking and Julian Assange. The series’ reputation as a thorough disquisition on Western civilization has even been bemoaned by its rivals, as in the South Park episode enviously entitled “Simpsons Already Did It.”

Having spanned three decades reflecting American life back to us, The Simpsons has become a kind of Library of Alexandria for 21st century America. Assuming it doesn’t go up like the last one, we should be OK if the Four Horsemen come calling.

**ALEC STRUM, ASSOCIATE LITERARY MANAGER**

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**SPECIAL EVENT THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 5**

Meet Mr. Burns playwright Anne Washburn and composer Michael Friedman as they discuss Mr. Burns with Adam Greenfield, Director of New Play Development.

This free event, which starts at 6:30pm, will be hosted by The Drama Book Shop at 250 West 40th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues.

A book and CD signing will follow.
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A, C, E, and 7 trains at 8th Ave; 1, 2, 3, N, R, W, Q, or 5 trains at Times Square; B, D, V and F to 42nd/6th Ave.

The M42 Crosstown & M104 buses are also available for your convenience.

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Online: Visit www.ticketcentral.com and click on MY ACCOUNT to log-in and order your seats via our automated system.

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Your tickets to Mr. Burns are $30 for perfs 8/23-9/8 and $35 for perfs 9/10-10/6.

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30 Under Member tickets are $20; Student Member tickets are $10. Young members may order online, by phone, or in person.

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We would prefer to hold tickets for pick-up at the box office to expedite ticket exchanges. If you request that your tickets be mailed, they will be sent out immediately. Unless your performance date takes place in fewer than 10 days, in which case they will be held at the box office. If you are unable to attend a performance for which you have a reservation, please call Ticket Central at least 24 hours prior to your performance.

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The end times have been with us for a long time. Nearly every human culture has postulated some epic finale for the universe. But as our power to shape the world (for better or worse) has grown, so has the genre of doom. The Industrial Revolution brought a spike in apocalyptic fiction (Mary Shelley’s The Last Man, 1826; H.G. Wells’s The Time Machine, 1895; and War of the Worlds, 1898), but the atom bomb kicked things into high gear, exponentially multiplying the ways we’ve been able to conceive of our end. In the last seventy years, our stories have wiped civilization from the planet’s surface by way of nuclear war, pandemic, extraterrestrial attack, impact event, cybernetic revolt, technological singularity, dysgenics, runaway climate change, resource depletion, ecological collapse, assorted geological and astronomical catastrophes, and that old standby: divine judgment. But what of after?

Among contemporary works that imagine life post-apocalypse, many are simply stories of survival: The Day After Tomorrow (2004), 28 Days Later (2002), The Road (2006). But many others confront the question of how to rebuild. And, sure, in the cases where the apocalypse was one of our making, the characters will aim to build a society less likely to err in the same ways. But largely we see an attempt to preserve or restore the values and identity of the culture that was lost, to rebuild using the pieces that we have.

It’s usually a good thing to hang on to a key artifact or two of the old times: say the works of Shakespeare (The Postman, 1985), The Bible (The Book of Eli, 2010) or the US Constitution (The “Omega Glory” episode of Star Trek, 1968). What’s important in a world of scarce resources and manpower is to try to choose a document that packs as much data as possible about the lost culture into the least amount of space.

The Simpsons, in its unrivaled 26-season-and-counting run, has reached a mind-bogglingly wide audience. Meanwhile, as Scott McCloud asserts in his terrific Understanding Comics, the simplified features of the cartoon character allow us to project ourselves more readily onto him or her, and for that character and his or her world to absorb layers of meaning about our own that a more photographic rendering would make impossible by virtue of its specificity. Even casual fans of The Simpsons will tell you that the citizens of Springfield remind them of their own community.

On the one hand, the characters are archetypes: Homer, as Anne Washburn suggests in her Perspective, is at once the Holy Fool who has appeared for centuries in our literary canon and also a more specific, lovingly satiric jab at American masculinity and fatherhood. On the other hand, the ever-growing population of Springfield has evolved over the show’s lifespan into a microcosm of the nation as a whole. And on a third hand (anything’s possible in a cartoon!), in its insatiable hunger for satiric cannon-fodder, The Simpsons has made reference to pretty much the entirety of the Western Canon.

CONTINUED INSIDE ON PAGE 6.