

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## ENTERTAINMENT

# Review: CATCO's immersive 'Mr. Burns' envisions darkly comical and wistful future

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Darkly comical but also wistful and weird, “Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play” may be the strangest work in CATCO’s history.

CATCO has launched its season daringly with the area premiere of Anne Washburn’s off-beat off-Broadway play, which opened Friday to laughter, applause and perhaps some disorientation in the Riffe Center.

The three-act, 2½-hour production, suggested for ages 12 and older because of mature themes and brief profanity and violence, offers an immersive theatricality unlike anything that most Columbus theatergoers have experienced outside a Halloween haunted house.

Set in three vividly redesigned spaces inside the Riffe Center’s Studio Theatre complex, the post-apocalyptic comedy evokes the near-future after a pandemic sparks nuclear-plant meltdowns, then imagines how people adapt and survive seven years later and 75 years later.

In this dystopian scenario, the survivors’ fragmentary memories of the “Cape Feare” episode of “The Simpsons” spark the formation of theater troupes that survive by performing makeshift sketches of animated characters, commercials and songs to keep TV memories alive in a world without electricity.

**About 'Mr. Burns':** CATCO post-apocalyptic comedy 'Mr. Burns' draws on 'The Simpsons' for unique plot

Although perhaps not to every taste with its unusual hybrid of science fiction and Russian-doll layers of pop-cultural allusions, “Mr. Burns” is striking in its blend of cleverness, mournful sadness, and cartoonish silliness.

Fans of “The Simpsons” will catch more references and likely laugh more, but you don’t have to be that familiar with the animated TV series to follow the story or recognize its relevance after a world-changing pandemic.

With the first act in the Studio lobby, the second in Studio Two and the third in Studio One, theatergoers use the two 10-minute intermissions for the usual break but also to move into seats in the next environment.

This is a difficult play to pull off, to put it mildly, with vertiginous shifts from drama to comedy and with different levels of reality alternating.

Yet, the acting, direction and design are excellent under CATCO Artistic Director Leda Hoffmann’s direction.

The eight-member cast tackles multiple roles with impressive dexterity and poignant conviction.

Brian Gray, Oluchi Nwokocha and Shauna Marie Davis, sympathetic as itinerant actors, respectively elicit laughter while creating endearing portraits of Homer, Marge and Lisa Simpson.

**Columbus theater:** CATCO announces 2021-22 season of productions

Eli Brickey, as boyish but now idealized Bart Simpson, and Nicolette Montana, as a Simpsons teacher, grace the third act with strong vocals.

Jonathan Putnam and Acacia Duncan are amusing as ever-fighting Itchy and Scratchy. Yet, both veteran local actors help achieve something crucial in the first two acts: They ground what might have been a too-schematic play with believable characterizations as survivors who discover that theater might be a way to not just survive but also thrive.

Scott Douglas Wilson is convincing as a pragmatic survivor and resourceful troupe member. Later, he delightfully transcends realism as an operatic version of the title character. Wilson's villainous Mr. Burns approaches the gleeful wickedness of Simon Legree in "The Small House of Uncle Thomas" from "The King and I."

The third act's triumphant and melodramatic mini-musical evokes that stylized ballet and Gilbert and Sullivan operettas as faded memories mutate the Simpsons into archetypal and liturgical emblems of good and evil.

Brad Steinmetz's junkyard-repurposed set designs in three studio spaces, aptly timed for the Halloween season with Marly Wooster's flickering-candle lighting, reinforce the play's epic and tragicomic progression.

This unusual play wouldn't come to life so vividly without the playful, imaginative and amusing visions of co-costume designers Tabitha Abney and Esther Sands, props designer Jennifer Maynard and specialty props builder Ben Sostrom.

By evoking such a cracked-mirror future, Washburn's ultimately hopeful play reminds us that storytelling and mythmaking can be fallible and absurd, but they're vital to sustain our hope and humanity.

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## **CATCO's 'Mr. Burns' At a glance**

CATCO will present "Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play" at 8 p.m. Oct. 30, 2 p.m. Oct. 31, 7:30 p.m. Nov. 4, 8 p.m. Nov. 5-6, 2 p.m. Nov. 7, 7:30 p.m. Nov. 11, 8 p.m. Nov. 12-13 and 2 p.m. Nov. 14 in the Riffe Center Studio complex, 77 S. High St. Masks and proof of vaccination or negative COVID test required. Tickets cost \$45. (614-469-0939, [www.cbusarts.com](http://www.cbusarts.com))