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## 'Mr. Burns' is a bizarrely fascinating play

TICKET

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CHAMPION — There are great ideas for plays, and there are great plays.

*"Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play,"* a play by Anne Washburn that opened last week at Kent State University at Trumbull, definitely is the former. Whether it's the latter will depend upon one's frame of reference and taste for the offbeat.

I thought it was pretty great, and Kent-Trumbull skillfully handled the show's many challenges. I think my older daughter, who had to work and couldn't go with me, would have loved it too. But I'm also almost positive

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that my wife and other daughter would have hated it. It's that kind of play. Consider yourself warned.

The first act starts post-apocalypse and focuses on a group of survivors sitting around a fire and entertaining themselves taking about a fifth season episode of *"The Simpsons"* called *"Cape Feare,"* a spoof of the 1962 film *"Cape Fear"* and its 1991 remake with Sideshow Bob terrorizing Bart Simpson and his family.

The second act takes place seven years later, where a theater troupe entertains other survivors with their production of *"Cape Feare,"* complete with commercials. The final act takes place 75 years after that, and the fragments of the story have evolved into a Gilbert-and-Sullivan-like operetta.

Washburn's script has funny moments, some generated by repeating and subverting gags from *"The Simpsons,"* others by weaving additional pop culture references into the work. That operetta features lyrical and / or melodic winks to Britney Spears' *"Toxic,"* Ricky Martin's *"Livin' La Vida Loca,"* Lady Gaga's *"Edge of Glory"* and the theme from *"The Flintstones."*

But outside of the jokes, *"Mr. Burns"* is a fairly serious play about how all art is influenced by what came before it, how art reflects the world in which it's created and how art can provide comfort in troubled times. A silly "Simpsons" episode passed down the way folk tales were centuries

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ago evolves into an inspirational tale of a young man making his way in a post-apocalyptic world.

It also has some parallels with “*The Walking Dead*,” minus the zombies. In a world where the societal structure has collapsed, the greatest threat comes from other humans.

Director Eric S. Kildow and the technical crew — Tony Kovacic, set designer and technical director; Leslie Brown, lighting designer; Eileen Janis Larson, costume designer; Kathi Kovacic, props designer; Jacob Glosser, sound designer; and Sierra Boyle, mask and makeup design — have created a visually striking show. The look of the production has some echoes of “*The Simpsons*,” although the design is more “*Treehouse of Horrors*” than a regular episode. The evolution of the costumes and masks for the characters reinforces the themes of the work and plays a crucial role in the storytelling.

The music, primarily performed by music director Matthew White and Bob Young, does a wonderful job of setting the mood. The score draws on pop music and musical theater sources, but it has the dissonant, unsettling quality of a Nine Inch Nails album.

The cast — Austin Brown, Emmy Cohen, Jojo Garcia, Jacob Glosser, Rylie Hornung, Eileen Janis-Larson, Kathi Kovacic, Tamron Lewis and Justin Pickett — is impressive. Kildow’s direction makes the campfire conversation in act one feel natural and spontaneous, and Pickett’s

animated retelling of “*Cape Feare*” brings an energy to the opening sequence.

There are individual moments that stand out, but the lasting impression is how well the cast works together as a whole.

I found “*Mr. Burns*” bizarrely fascinating and the staging first rate, but it’s not for everybody. A strong knowledge of “*The Simpsons*” seems like a prerequisite (watching the “*Cape Feare*” episode again minutes before driving to Sunday’s matinee definitely increased my appreciation of the show). Familiarity with the musical sources also will help (pay attention to the between-act music).

I heard the guy behind me say to his family between acts, “*What kind of show did you bring me to?*” His reaction won’t be an isolated one, but I liked it almost as much as Homer Simpson likes doughnuts.

## COMMENTS

## TICKET

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