

Design Concept

Anne Washburn's *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play* circles around several large themes: collective trauma, the human need for storytelling, the blurred line between pop culture and mythology, and transformation. Faced with the collapse of modern life, a motley group of strangers band together for comfort, safety, and ultimately to rebuild. Much like human civilization, the story begins in the dark, huddled around a fire, and ends with monuments and complex ritual. In many ways, *Mr. Burns* is an exploration of what stays and what goes in an apocalypse scenario: physically through the decay of objects and culturally through the preservation and transformation of mythology.

In Act One, we find ourselves huddled around a campfire, recounting the popular Simpson's episode Cape Feare, based on the 1991 film, a remake of a 1962 film, based on a novel. The episode in itself references a wide array of pop culture, a lasagna of references and call backs. To echo the layering of references that continues throughout the play, I felt it was important to include a singular element in the scenic design that could multiply along with the regrowing of society. I chose the noble milk crate for its sturdy, stackable, useful nature, and the fact that it will never biodegrade. In addition, I wanted the space overall to remain the same at its base but transform over time, which led to the inclusion of a series of vertical beams as the skeleton of the set. In act one they act as trees and evolve again for each act.

At the beginning of the play, there is little hint that anything is unwell with the world, so the costumes need to feel like normal, contemporary clothing. People wear lots of jeans, sweatshirts, and have a variety of different stylings to give a small sampling of people. Over the act, the audience may notice small things like the fact that most have opted to wear some sort of hiking boot, or that Jenny's white sneakers (which would normally be pristine) are looking quite dingy. As the circumstances are revealed, different people begin to look more or less suited to their lot. Here I also discovered that hair is a useful in showing the passage of time. Jenny for example begins with what was a trendy blonde bob, but in act one her roots have grown out quite a bit, by act two, her hair is longer, back to its natural brown.

In act two, our ensemble has transformed into a theater troupe. They have made recreating television, commercials and all, their bread and butter. The addition of two horizontal diagonal beams hints at industrial architecture, which our thespians take advantage of to the best of their ability. Milk crates are perfect tools for this traveling company, acting as platforms, totes, cubbies, and houses for lighting instruments. The costumes, like the set, are well thought out and executed with care, though somewhat limited by skill and access to materials. Garments have been collected from various sources and are kept in as good condition as possible. For Chart Hits, the costumes are all based around recognizable TV commercial tropes from before the end of electricity- we recognize Flo of Progressive Insurance fame and the prolific "Smiling Businessman" and "Athletic Woman". The intention is to create a "Best Of" walk down memory lane, there is something for everyone here. The Simpsons costumes are as loyal as they can be to the cartoon, using mostly existing garments. Some attempt has been made to hint at the Simpson's yellow skin, and the headwear is all lovingly crafted, though maybe the costume design was more of a team effort than the work of a single person.

Act three is a dramatic escalation of the performance in every way. The theater has become a permanent structure, a cathedral of milk crates mystically glowing with candlelight and later gloriously blazing with electric light. The performance itself is no longer a recreation of pre-meltdown television, but a complex ritual of remembrance combined with an operatic miracle play. The makeup is stylized and the costumes, while reminiscent of what was once the Simpsons, have become in themselves layered with references to everything from pop culture to indigenous ritual dress, bordering more on wearable art than clothing. Since it has been over seven decades without climate control, plastics and metals make up the bulk of the materials. The final scene shows a Mr. Sideshow-Burns, a villain turned humble servant atop a stationary bike which acts as a generator for the final spectacle. The reintroduction of electric light leaves us wondering about the trajectory of this new society, whether they are on course to try and recreate what once was or invent something new.