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# Review of *The Great Immensity*

NICOLE SEYMOUR

*The Great Immensity* had me at “climate change musical.” After reading that brief descriptor of the play, I envisioned campy yet incisive song-and-dance numbers about unprecedented heat waves, sea-level rise, melting polar ice caps. I imagined the kitschy, queer appeal of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, but with more scientists and activists and fewer charming lumberjacks turned sort-of kidnappers. But with a few exceptions, such as a sardonic number about the pathetic state of international climate change policy (“oceans must be better protected / science must be respected . . . these agreements are not legal / these agreements are not binding”), *The Great Immensity* is not that kind of climate change musical. For better or worse.

In my view, it’s both better *and* worse.

Developed by the Brooklyn-based Civilians theater group, *The Great Immensity* focuses on American cameraman Karl (Chris Sullivan), a multiple-Emmy winner for his work on the Discovery Channel’s *Shark Week*. Estranged from his wife Phyllis (Rebecca Hart) while posted at a scientific research center in Panama, Karl’s despair over environmental degradation and the ineffectiveness of the mainstream media leads him to team up with the Earth Ambassadors, an international youth group led by a precocious American girl named Julie (Erin Wilhelmi). They set a goal of hatching a major media stunt that will get the world to watch, and to act. Their deadline for pulling it off is the eve of an international climate change summit in Paris.

At a time at which emotions around climate change find little outlet in public media—instead, we are bombarded with facts and figures and

left to cope on our own—*The Great Immensity* has achieved a significant cultural coup simply by putting emotion on stage. Early on, Julie declares, “The information [about climate change is] already out there. It’s about hearts and minds, and for that you’ve got to establish a compelling narrative framework.” Over the course of the play, Julie and Karl struggle to manage their own hearts and minds, including conflicting feelings of optimism, fear, and impotence: “We can change the future, Karl,” Julie begins, to which Karl responds, “Whatever you do, it won’t work. That’s the awful truth. It’s not worth it for me to throw myself in for some noble failure.” These feelings are often set to music, producing poignant, Decemberists-esque tunes, like “The Next Forever.”<sup>1</sup> While they sometimes devolve into maudlin ponderousness, the self-reflexivity of such interludes is crucial. Rather than *being* preachy or full of gloom and doom, as so much contemporary environmental media is, *The Great Immensity* is *about* preaching and doomsaying: why we engage in these kinds of modes, what emotional tolls they can have, what their risks as well as their rewards can be.

Of course, as middle-class white Americans, Julie and Karl have yet to directly experience the effects of climate change—or, at least, to suffer from them. Our globe-spanning play attempts to go beyond this limited perspective, offering us characters such as Charlie (Dan Domingues), who is an indigenous resident of Churchill, Manitoba—the so-called Polar Bear Capital of the World and the starting ground for Karl and Julie’s stunt. The Churchill scenes tell us about the past violence suffered by the local indigenous populations and the current effects of climate change on the polar bears, those charismatic megafauna that draw tourists to the region. However, we don’t get much of Charlie’s emotional perspective. The pain on view is mainly that of Karl, Julie, and Phyllis: largely psychic and largely anticipatory.

The play’s thematic and performative engagement with new media technologies—including video communication, activist hacking, and data visualization—is another of its notable innovations. *The Great Immensity* often alternates between live performance and performance on video monitor, such as when Karl communicates with Julie via a Skype-like program. But even as the play itself relies on new media technology, it raises doubts about the assumed progressive, even revolutionary, nature of that technology. For example, Karl alludes to the role of social-networking sites in the Arab Spring—which, as we now know,

both allowed protestors to communicate with each other and enabled authorities to track their whereabouts—while Julie invokes armchair environmentalism: “All these people watch us and they think it’s doing something,” she laments, referring to the Earth Ambassadors’ multiple appearances on the likes of CNN. “[But] it’s just watching.”

The play thus deftly thematizes the biggest challenge of climate change: representation. How can those of us in relatively privileged first-world locations visualize what we can’t yet see, before it’s too late? How can those in nonprivileged third-world locations make visible that which no one wants to see? And how to turn such visualization, if it can be achieved at all, into meaningful, transformative action? The play ends before we see the reaction to Karl and the Earth Ambassadors’ stunt, leaving those as open questions for the viewer.

About that stunt. It’s here where the play begins to falter and where the kind of campy queerness I initially imagined might have proved valuable. Having learned that Karl and Phyllis’s estrangement stems from their fertility struggles, we see them reunite in Churchill near the play’s end. Karl gives Phyllis a vial of his frozen sperm for later use, and the two come to their own separate epiphanies in relation to the same powerful cultural force—which, following queer theorist Lee Edelman, we might term “sentimental heteroreproductive futurism.”<sup>2</sup> It’s worth quoting the play’s dialogue at length here:

**Charlie:** What do you think about when you think about the future?

**Phyllis:** I imagine I have a kid. Okay, two kids.

**Charlie:** And their future?

**Phyllis:** I just hope that things will still be okay.

**Charlie:** That’s your answer. When you think about the future you think about—

**Karl:** (wheels turning) *The most charismatic megafauna of them all.*

**Phyllis:** Our kid? My kids?

**Karl:** Not our kids. The Earth Ambassadors.

What Karl will do, then, is hold the youth ambassadors for (voluntary) ransom, taking each off the grid one by one, only to be returned “if,” as he says, “the agreement gets made in Paris, if it gets reinforced, if the world changes its course.”

Here, the play is cannily realistic: however much animals such as polar bears have served as heart-string-tugging harbingers of climate change,

human narcissism and sentimentality make the Earth Ambassadors the perfect poster children, quite literally.<sup>3</sup> But without a clear queer sensibility, the play offers no critique of sentimental heteroreproductive futurism. At best, Karl's plan is a cynical exploitation of that ideology; at worst, it's a reaffirmation of it. Indeed, as overstuffed with subplots as it is, *The Great Immensity* here threatens to boil down to a simplistic, tired story: the normative bourgeois family's struggle to continue itself. This story, at least as the Civilians have staged it, does not meet Julie's directive: "You've got to establish a compelling narrative framework."

Indeed, what *The Great Immensity* does not seem willing to fully explore is the fact that, for all the ways in which the Child (to use Edelman's influential formulation) embodies our fears about a greatly compromised future world, she or he also embodies our (misplaced?!) hopes and potentially justifies our continued, destructive existence. As Phyllis testifies at the summit in one of the play's last scenes, "These choices here in Paris—yeah, they do matter more than anything else. To me. To my kid. Or my two kids. We can give them suffering, or we can give them a chance." As long as we can reproduce ourselves, whether biologically or ideologically or both, the mortality, culpability, and limitations that climate change forces us to face can still, if ever so slightly, be mitigated.

Depending on perspective, then, audiences may want *The Great Immensity* to be, or to say, something else. But as the singular (to my knowledge) occupant of the climate change musical genre, it's an ambitious and admirable effort.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nicole Seymour** is an assistant professor of English at California State University, Fullerton, where she teaches courses in literature, media, and the environment. She is the author of *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013) and several journal articles. Her favorite musicals are *The Sound of Music*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, even though the latter offends all her feminist sensibilities.

#### NOTES

1. "The Next Forever," from *The Great Immensity*, with music and lyrics by Michael Friedman and performed by Trey Lyford, is now available as a stand-alone video <http://vimeo.com/39213500>.

2. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

3. For more on the role of polar bears in climate change discussions, see Una Chaudhuri's essay, "The Silence of the Polar Bears: Performing (Climate) Change in the Theatre of Species," in *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, ed. Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).