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# Review of *The Great Immensity*

NICOLE M. MEROLA

In a 2010 interview conducted by Sarah Kozinn, Steve Cosson, co-founder and writer-director of the Civilians, a New York City-based investigative theater company, notes that one goal of the company is to avoid producing a “theater of assurance” in which audience members “get to experience some conflict so that the world [they] want to believe in is restored” at the end of the performance (197).<sup>1</sup> Rather, Cosson says, the company is interested in using theater to dismantle “overly narrow preconceptions of how people work, how the world works, how social systems work” (196) and to “encourage people’s doubt and curiosity” (197). This nonreassuring approach to theater is particularly well suited to the company’s climate change musical *The Great Immensity*, which premiered at the Kansas City Repertory Theater (February 17–March 18, 2012) and was performed most recently at the Public Theater in New York City (April 11–May 1, 2014). In choosing climate change as a topic for theatrical investigation, the Civilians pose questions central to both environmental humanities scholars and climate change scientists: What kinds of discourse and form facilitate understanding immensely complex earth systems processes? How might particular modes of discourse and form enable humans to confront, rather than deny, the material consequences of changes to these systems?

More specifically, *The Great Immensity* interrogates key elements of climate change discourse, including extinction and last-of-its-kind narratives and the related topics of charismatic megafauna and the iconicity of the polar bear; sea ice loss and the polar regions as barometers of climate change; the relationship between climate change and the in-

creasing intensity of tropical storms; high-carbon lifestyles and personal complicity with climate change; climate change denialism; the business-as-usual political inaction at climate change summits; the trope of saving the planet for future generations; and the climate change affects of hope and despair, the relationship of each to climate change action, and the efficacy of particular kinds of direct action. In addition to exploring issues directly related to climate change and its material socioecological consequences, the musical engages with the spectacularization of the natural world, asking its audience what, exactly, humans want to see and know (or know and willfully ignore) about the planet and their relationship to it. The overarching concern of *The Great Immensity*—dramatized through the narrative thread in which Karl, an unemployed filmmaker, decides to join the Earth Ambassadors, a United Nations youth group, and the mostly anonymous Internet collective Ship Chat to stage a protest at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris—is its exploration and critique of the notion of finding an idea, a statistic, an image, an accumulation of data, or a direct action that will “flip a switch” and finally make clear, once and for all, that, as Karl plaintively contends, “we are actually breaking the world.”

The musical directly confronts the contours of the world’s splintering through plot events, dialogue, multimedia staging, and songs that employ grief, dark humor, irony, parody, sarcasm, and satire. By using these tactics, *The Great Immensity* joins a fledgling group of literary and performed texts—including Ian McEwan’s novel *Solar*; Helen Simpson’s short story collection *In-Flight Entertainment*; Fuels America’s “We Love Oil!” campaign; Conservation International’s “Nature Is Speaking” campaign; and various segments on *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show*, and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*—that take climate change and its effects seriously but engage climate change discourse aslant, through approaches that are both irreverent and incongruous. Of particular note in this regard is the way *The Great Immensity* offers a double treatment of science and scientific research. The Civilians developed *The Great Immensity* in collaboration with faculty and students from the Princeton Environmental Institute, and the aim of conveying accurate scientific information suffuses the entire performance. On one hand, the musical foregrounds the importance of scientific study and empirical data, exploring concepts such as deep time, evolution, and extinction in ways that are funny, smart, sharp, and melancholy. On the

other hand, through, for instance, sarcastic references to a thirty-year-long study of the howler monkey that has yet to yield any understanding of why they howl and to the “baby plant people,” who study a two-week period in the development of plants’ leaves, it satirizes the hyperspecialized nature of scientific research and situates science as only one way of understanding the world. Also notable for their irreverence, and their earworm quality, are composer and lyricist Michael Friedman’s musical numbers—in particular, the song focused on paleoclimates and plate tectonics, the song about how little has been accomplished at various climate summits, the torch song in which a female scientist lustily and melodramatically declaims her affection for charismatic megafauna, and the barbershop-esque number focused on the demise of the last passenger pigeon and the last golden lemur.

In many respects, *The Great Immensity* functions as a memorable intervention into climate change discourse. Its dialogue and songs, in large part because they mix pathos and humor, have incredible staying power. The musical effectively engages with a hallmark tension of the Anthropocene: it simultaneously elevates humans to a tectonic force able to influence earth systems and demotes humans to just another species subject to the same forces as all other things, animate and inanimate, on the planet. Within this universalizing tendency, it also ably inserts difference. Through references to technology, global trade, the consumption of fossil fuels, the arctic, and the multinational composition of the Earth Ambassadors, *The Great Immensity* makes clear that the causes and effects of climate change are unevenly produced and will be unequally experienced. The motif of disappearance is underlined in multiple registers—a husband mysteriously vanishes, nonhuman animals go extinct, cargo ships appear and disappear from radar, members of an anonymous Internet collective are variously disguised or uncovered, habitat is fragmented, a Native community is forcibly relocated and disintegrates. So too is the notion of contingency, especially as applied to the continued existence of *Homo sapiens*.

For an audience already well-informed about climate change, perhaps the most interesting thing about the performance is the way it self-reflexively works at cross-purposes. At one level, the Civilians are interested in producing a performance that engages in consciousness raising. At another, the idea that there exists a switch and that all we have to do is find and flip it is revealed, ultimately, as a form of false

reassurance. The last scene of the musical features Karl alone on stage in the aftermath of what is supposed to register as a shocking direct action. The Earth Ambassadors, one child from every country represented in the United Nations, have resorted to voluntary, off-the-grid exile aboard the cargo ship *The Great Immensity* as a way to pressure developed nations at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris to finally compose, sign, and enact a binding agreement; Karl has joined them in order to disseminate their story. But in keeping with the notion of nonreassuring theater, the end of the musical resists closure. The disappearance of the Earth Ambassadors is not staged; and in the last scene, it is not clear where *The Great Immensity* is or how long it has been circling the globe, just out of reach of the radar. All the audience knows is what Karl sings directly to it, and the mournful lyrics of the final song are ambiguous. The “us” in the phrase “the next forever without us” could refer to everyone aboard *The Great Immensity* or it could refer to all humankind. Similarly, the “you” in the phrase “you are the contingency” could refer to Julie, the organizer of the Earth Ambassadors’ action; to Karl’s wife, Phyllis; to the audience; to all humankind; or given the musical’s emphasis on evolutionary and planetary timescales, even to all carbon-based life. The way *The Great Immensity* trails off at the end—with dangling narrative threads, with an incomplete sentence for its last lyric, and with an unresolved melodic line as its last sound—is, ultimately, the most discomfiting and powerful thing about it. The state of limbo in which *The Great Immensity* leaves its audience is, unfortunately, all too consonant with the state of limbo in which the recently concluded 2014 Climate Change Conference in Lima has left the world. We are, once again, left to wait. In the words of the song that closes *The Great Immensity*, we are all the widows who “wait for the ships that won’t come.”

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nicole M. Merola** is an associate professor of ecocriticism and American literature in the Literary Arts and Studies Department at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she teaches courses on the Anthropocene, climate change cultures, contemporary ecological fiction, green film, narratives of evolution, and theories of natureculture. She also coteaches with Lucy Spelman—a science educator and veterinarian, board certified in zoological medicine—a fieldwork-based course focused on the approaches of the arts, humanities, and sciences to biodiversity. Her recent publications include “Materializing a Geotraumatic and Melancholy

*Anthropocene: Jeanette Winterson's The Stone Gods,* minnesota review 83 (2014): 122-132; and "for terror of the deadness beyond": *Arctic Environments and Inhuman Ecologies in Michelle Paver's Dark Matter,* Ecozon@ 5, no. 2 (2014): 22-40. She is currently working on articles focused on teaching climate change cultures and on affect and the Anthropocene.

NOTE

1. See Sarah Kozinn, "Discovering What We Don't Know: An Interview with Steve Cosson of the Civilians," *TDR* 54, no. 4 (2010): 188-205. All parenthetical citations refer to this article.