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After the Beautiful Sorrow

Affective Resilience and *The Great Immensity*

ANTHONY LIOI

In the past twenty-five years, the American musical has departed from urbane satire (in which dilemmas are dispatched by wit) and utopian innocence (in which dilemmas are dissolved by love) to confront the moment after the happy ending. The tragicomic tone of the new American musical is well-suited to ecological catastrophe, because the metanarrative of apocalypse is common to stage and green. Apocalypse, in its biblical form, is a comedic genre in which cosmic history resolves on the side of the righteous. What happens after the end of that ending? In Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's *Into the Woods* (1987), the second act poses this question after the fairy-tale weddings, redemptions, and victories of act 1.¹ Faced with an angry giant bent on revenge, the characters panic while the witch sings:

It's the last midnight,
It's the last wish,
It's the last midnight,
Soon it will be BOOM, SQUISH!

Indeed, *boom* and *squish* befall more than one character, sundering parents from children, husbands from wives, hopes from realities. Afterward, the survivors band together in communities that outlast consanguinity through fostering, friendship, and civic alliance. After the "last" midnight, there is a dawn in which the people sing into a new, unwritten story.

This need to sing through dooms of love is explored in *The Great Im-*

mensity, a climate change musical by the Civilians, a Brooklyn-based investigative theater group. The words-and-music team of Steven Cosson and Michael Friedman must fit the round peg of dystopia through the square dance of *Oklahoma!* (1943), *The Wizard of Oz* (2011), and *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* (1967). They chose *not* to adapt Sondheim, the archon of the “serious musical,” to the problem of strange weather. In a queer genre, they play it straight, grounding a planetary problem in a woman’s quest for a missing husband. Phyllis’s search for Karl takes her to a research station in the Panama Canal, where the effects of climate change are explained, and then to Churchill, Canada—“the polar bear capital of the world”—where she meets teenage Earth Ambassadors who have recruited Karl to their conspiracy: they will kidnap themselves in advance of the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. They hope that children, as the “most charismatic megafauna of all,” will shock the great powers out of their complacency. Aided by Dark Web hackers and indigenous activists, Karl departs with the ambassadors, leaving Phyllis a canister of sperm that underlines the drama of stalled reproduction. *The Great Immensity* radicalizes the approach of *Into the Woods*, affirming the power of alliance without providing any closure. There is no happy ending to undo; instead, there are wacky-sad, plangent songs of *la lutte continue*.

Honestly, I had expected something snarkier, along the lines of *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (2008). I had not expected to cry so much or to approve of having my tears jerked. *The Great Immensity* strikes an earnest pose shared by the scientists, activists, and indigenous people overwhelmed by intimate yet planetary losses. There are moments of sarcasm—the Chinese mentor of the Earth Ambassadors incarnates impatience with American exceptionalism—but these do not rule the structure. When Cosson and Friedman want to teach, they teach, as in the exposition of the failure of past climate summits. When they want to pine, they pine, as in the song of the last living lemur searching for a mate who will never arrive. The frustrated romance plot is sometimes skewered: a singer characterizes her desire by admitting “I’ll soon fall for a big, tall, charismatic megafauna / That I can love until it’s dead.” A better parody of the green imaginary there is not. Nevertheless, *The Great Immensity* is a play, not a metaplay, an ironic meditation on the impossibility of this and the self-contradiction of that. The fact of planetary emergency means that there will be no place of escape, not

even irony. The characters must sing, because fear and dread have arrived, so hope and determination are required. A tragic ending would be redundant: we can witness one of those by watching cable. This is a play about a problem the audience must confront without the advantage of catharsis. Put another way, it is not a work of melancholy, an argument for the “beautiful sorrow” of lost love. Instead, it is a work of affective resilience.

The term *resilience* runs the risk of becoming what my favorite high school English teacher called a “weasel word,” a snappy evasion of affective labor. It chirps *systems bounce back after disruption* like one of Snow White’s bluebirds. Such a song begs a number of questions. Why was the system disrupted in the first place? Are those responsible going to be part of the recovery? What is the goal of recovery, and how do we deal with the losses we could not prevent? *Immensity* locates the problem of resilience in the relationships among the frontline protagonists: the Sayisi Dene, victims of Canadian genocide; the arctic First Nations; the polar bears; angry Millennials; and middle-class Americans bearing children into catastrophe. These protagonists voice the songs of extinction to understand how the death of kin crosses boundaries of race and sex, nation and species. They chant as a strategy to manage our communal terror. Here you cannot sing your cares away; rather, you sing to resist the demons of your age.

Clearly, *The Great Immensity* is a work of affective, not simply emotional, resilience. One must enter the songs bodily to get the full effect. One must not merely witness another’s indomitable will to survive. There is too much to do. The action is incomplete, and the characters are left hanging. Karl disappears with the Earth Ambassadors, the people of Churchill contend with starving polar bears attacking their garbage, and Phyllis addresses the Paris summit with a call to action that ends the play. This is no *ABC After School Special* in which the children of the seventies learn to persevere in the face of adversity. It is a performance of scientific and existential truth that can propagate through the audience in bits of recounted dialogue, fragments of melody hummed on the way home. It is a revision of musical utopia: not perfection as a refuge from sorrow but solidarity arising from the breath itself. This sort of resilience bounces us back from the despair of the affluent that blights discussions of climate justice. *What are we to do?* cries the global middle class, *afflicted as we are by corrupt politicians and pumpkin-spice*

lattes? Sing like a lemur, says *The Great Immensity*, disrupt business as usual, make new friends and influence the Anthropocene.

To further my preference for affective resilience as an ecodramatic strategy, I compare *The Great Immensity* to two contemporaneous works, Karen Malpede's *Extreme Whether* (2013) and Bruno Latour's *Gaia: Global Climate Tragi-Comedy* (2011). There is not enough space to do justice to either work here, but it is possible to discuss contrasts of strategy. In *Extreme Whether*, Malpede fictionalizes the struggle of climate scientists like James Hansen of NASA as they try to raise the alarm in the midst of petroculture. *Extreme Whether* presents a family drama in which the Hansen figure and his girlfriend and graduate student struggle with his sister, who is married to an oil lobbyist, while they all mentor the scientist's transgender daughter. Like Cosson, Malpede uses the figure of the scientist to work climatological exposition into the plot, along with the conceit of family argument as political conflict writ small. By confining the action to a Walden-like retreat, however, Malpede relies on a microcosm to stand for the planet, whereas Cosson wrote a quest to generate a flow of cultures and polities. Though Malpede succeeds in fashioning symbolic drama, there is no instrument to carry the action into the world, so the microcosm of the stage amplifies the sense of confinement, like the frog in a warming pond who appears as side character. In contrast, Bruno Latour's *Gaia* relies on a carnival-cosmos named after James Lovelock's Gaia, the self-regulating biosphere. In the rough draft of the play available on his website, Latour populates the stage with scientific, literary, and mythic figures to represent the material and semiotic system of planetary crisis. One expects exactly this from an actor-network theorist, and the approach carries distinct charms, which enact his "compositionist" intention to take "up the task of searching for universality but without believing that this universality is already there, waiting to be unveiled and discovered."² The drawback, however, is the creation of a staged hyperobject, the representation of a biocultural realm that dwarfs the human in spatial and temporal dimensions. What can one do when faced with a hyperobject but feel like an absurdist character in search of an author?

What is needed at this moment is not a drama of family dysfunction or a pastiche of cosmic misrule so much as an affective toolkit that helps us cope with the catastrophes endemic to our era. In this task, *The Great Immensity* succeeds better than anything I have seen so far.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Lioi is an associate professor of liberal arts and English at the Juilliard School, where he teaches writing, American literature, and cultural studies. His essays on ecocriticism and environmental literature have appeared in a number of journals and essay collections. He is the media review editor of *Resilience*.

NOTES

1. My main reference for this production has been Stephen Sondheim, James Lapine, Jonathan Tunick, Bernadette Peters, Joanna Gleason, Chip Zien, Tom Aldredge, Robert Westenber, and Paul Gemignani, *Into the Woods: Original Cast Recording* (New York: RCA Victor, 1988), sound recording; see also Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, *Into the Woods* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

2. Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010), 474. See also Bruno Latour, Frédérique Ait-Touati, and Chloé Latour, "Gaia: Global Climate Tragi-Comedy," trans. Julie Rose (rough draft 1, Bruno Latour's official website), <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/KOSMOKOLOS-TRANSLATION-GB.pdf>.