SOFTWARE & TECH

Mr Burns A Post Electric Play

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Introduction: The Unlikely Survival of a Simpsons Episode

In an era where dystopian narratives often focus on grim survival or technological collapse, **Mr Burns A Post Electric Play** stands out as a bold, unconventional meditation on storytelling, memory, and cultural preservation. Written by Anne Washburn and first produced in 2013, this play uses a single episode of *The Simpsons*—the classic “Cape Feare”—as a lens through which to examine how a post-apocalyptic society might reconstruct art from fragments. The play is not a simple reboot or fan tribute; it is a sophisticated exploration of how narratives evolve, how we cling to shared myths, and what happens when pop culture becomes the bedrock of a new civilization. For anyone interested in contemporary theatre, speculative fiction, or the sociology of media, **Mr Burns A Post Electric Play**offers a rich, thought-provoking experience.

Set in a world after a catastrophic event (likely a nuclear meltdown or grid failure), the play unfolds across three distinct acts, each separated by an unspecified time jump. It begins with a handful of survivors huddled together, nervously recounting the plot of a Simpsons episode to pass the time and soothe their fears. By the final act, that same story has been transformed into a ritualized opera—a foundational myth for a new tribe. Washburn’s script is both a love letter to the power of narrative and a cautionary tale about how stories can be warped, commodified, and eventually ossified into dogma.

Plot Overview: From Fragmented Memory to Mythic Opera

Mr Burns A Post Electric Play is structured in three acts, each exploring a different stage of post-apocalyptic cultural reconstruction. The first act takes place in a makeshift camp, probably not long after the collapse. A group of strangers—Matt, Gibson, Jenny, Maria, and a few others—are trying to remember the plot of “Cape Feare,” a *Simpsons* episode famous for its parody of the 1991 film *Cape Fear*. The characters argue over details, repeat lines, and laugh nervously as they reconstruct the episode’s dialogue. This act is almost entirely talk: the group fills in gaps, invents jokes when memory fails, and debates character motivations. It captures the human need to tell stories even (or especially) when the world has ended.

In the second act, set approximately seven years later, the survivors have formed a small community that trades for goods, and performing *Simpsons* episodes has become a form of currency and entertainment. A group is rehearsing a performance of “Cape Feare,” but the episode has already been heavily adapted—scenes have been elongated, new jokes inserted, and the characters have been reimagined to fit the actors’ available props and costumes. There are tensions between purists who want to preserve the “original” (which itself is now a flawed memory) and pragmatists who want to update the story for their new reality. The play also introduces a rival troupe that performs episodes from *The Simpsons*season 4, hinting at emerging cultural factions.

The third act leaps forward another seventy-five years or so. Now, the group’s descendants perform a

full-scale operatic version of the “Cape Feare” story, complete with a chorus, elaborate masks, and ritualized movements. The original episode has been transformed beyond recognition: Homer Simpson is a heroic figure, Bart is a sacrificial child, Sideshow Bob is a demonic villain, and the plot involves elements of classical mythology. The performance is a solemn, heavily choreographed ritual—part entertainment, part religious ceremony. The original sitcom humor is gone, replaced by awe and gravitas. The play ends ambiguously, leaving the audience to ponder what is gained and lost in this metamorphosis.

Themes: Memory, Adaptation, and the Fragility of Culture

One of the central themes in **Mr Burns A Post Electric Play**is the unreliability of memory. In the first act, the survivors cannot perfectly recall the episode. They argue over whether a character said “Hello, Mr. Thompson” or “Hello, Mr. Thompson, I presume.” They cannot remember the order of scenes. This imperfect recollection mirrors how all cultural transmission works: we remember selectively, and we fill in blanks with our own creative guesses. The play suggests that even the most iconic pop culture is fragile.

Another theme is the economics of storytelling. In the second act, performing *Simpsons*episodes becomes a form of currency. The play directly engages with how art gains value in a scarcity economy. Who owns a story? Can you copyright a joke after the end of the world? The characters negotiate over lines and trade performances for resources, turning a beloved TV show into a commodity. This act also explores the tension between fidelity and creativity—should we preserve dead art exactly as it was, or adapt it for new purposes?

By the third act, the theme shifts to mythmaking. The operatic version of “Cape Feare” is no longer a comedy but a foundational narrative. The characters have woven the story into their identity, and it now serves as a moral lesson, a creation myth, and a source of social cohesion. Washburn subtly critiques how any text can be sacralized over time, losing its original context and becoming a tool for control or unity. The play asks: is this evolution a tragedy (the loss of the original) or a triumph (the survival of a story)?

Characters: Voices of a Shattered World

While the characters in **Mr Burns A Post Electric Play** are not deeply individualized—they are more archetypal—each serves a distinct role in the exploration of cultural memory. Matt is the de facto leader in the first act, trying to keep the group focused on reconstruction. Gibson is the obsessive fan, with a detailed knowledge of *The Simpsons*trivia; his memory is a treasure but also a burden. Maria is pragmatic, often pushing for practical survival over storytelling. Jenny is more emotionally volatile, using the story to cope with trauma. These characters are not heroes; they are everyday people grappling with an extraordinary situation.

In the second act, new characters appear who represent different approaches to adaptation. The director figure, for instance, insists on adding commercials to the performance because “that’s how TV worked.” Another character argues for cutting certain scenes to save time. Their debates mirror real-world discussions about adaptation and authenticity in contemporary theatre and film.

The third act’s characters are the descendants, speaking in a stylized, archaic English that echoes ancient Greek tragedy. They no longer understand the original context of *The Simpsons*. For them, the story is truth, not fiction. The masks and costumes are abstract, and the performance is emotionally intense. The characters here represent a culture that has lost its historical connection to the source material, raising questions about how much original meaning can survive generations of adaptation.

Cultural Context: Why The Simpsons?

Choosing *The Simpsons* as the cultural touchstone in **Mr Burns A Post Electric Play** is a deliberate and clever

The Simpsons is one of the most widely recognized and longest-running TV shows in history. It is both high and low art: it has been praised for its satire, but it is also a commercial product. By grounding the play in a single episode, Washburn taps into a shared cultural vocabulary that many audience members will have. The play does not require deep knowledge of the episode’s details; part of the humor and pathos comes from watching characters struggle to remember what most of us take for granted.

Furthermore, *The Simpsons* is itself a show that often references other media: movies, literature, music. The episode “Cape Feare” is a parody of a Martin Scorsese film, which itself was a remake of a 1962 film. The play thus becomes a meditation on layers of reference—how stories are always adaptations of other stories. Washburn adds another layer: her play is an adaptation of a TV show that is a parody of a film remake. This meta quality enriches the experience and invites audiences to consider the endless chain of storytelling.

Moreover, the post-electric setting—a world without power, internet, or recorded media—makes oral tradition the only means of preserving culture. This resonates with anthropological understandings of how pre-literate societies maintained their epics. The play implicitly compares the way we watch TV to the way ancient Greeks performed Homer. In both cases, the audience participates in the construction of meaning.

Production History and Critical Reception

Mr Burns A Post Electric Play premiered in 2013 at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, D.C., before transferring to Playwrights Horizons in New York City in 2014. The production was directed by Steve Cosson, who collaborated with Anne Washburn to develop the script. The play received generally positive reviews, with critics praising its originality and its willingness to tackle big ideas through popular culture.

Reviewers often noted the play’s tonal shifts: from dark comedy in the first act to nearly operatic tragedy in the third. Some found the third act less engaging than the earlier sections, feeling that the ritualized performance lost the human connection of the first act. Others hailed it as a brilliant commentary on how culture evolves. The play was a finalist for the 2014 Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Play.

The script was published by Oberon Books in 2014, and subsequent productions have appeared at regional theaters around the United States and internationally. The play remains a staple of university theatre departments, frequently used in courses on contemporary drama, adaptation theory, and postmodernism. Its continued relevance speaks to the enduring fascination with post-apocalyptic narratives and the role of art in crisis.

Analysis: The Play as a Reflection of Our Own Time

In an age of streaming, social media algorithms, and content saturation, **Mr Burns A Post Electric Play** resonates as a cautionary tale about how we consume and remember media. The characters’ struggle to recall a simple TV episode mirrors our own reliance on digital tools for memory. What happens if Google disappears? The play forces us to consider that our shared cultural knowledge is more fragile than we think.

Additionally, the play comments on the commercialization of nostalgia. The second act, where performances become a commodity, reflects how modern entertainment industries monetize our fond memories. Yet the play also suggests that even commodified art can carry emotional weight. There is real comfort and connection in the act of retelling a beloved story, even if the details are wrong.

The third act raises uncomfortable questions about cultural appropriation and reinterpretation. The descendants have no access to the original “truth” of the Simpsons episode; they have built their own meaning. This is inevitable. Every retelling changes the story. The play neither celebrates nor condemns this transformation; it simply observes it. This ambiguity may frustrate some viewers, but it is part of the play’s strength—it refuses to offer easy answers about how we should preserve or adapt culture.

Conclusion: A Play for a Fragile Future

Mr Burns A Post Electric Play is a remarkable piece of theatre that uses a popular cartoon to explore profound questions about memory, myth, and resilience. Its three-act structure intelligently charts the journey from lived experience to legend, showing how stories morph to fit new contexts. While it may not appeal to those looking for traditional plot-driven drama, it rewards patient viewers with layers of meaning and a surprisingly emotional punch.

In an era of climate anxiety, pandemics, and political instability, the play feels eerily prescient. It suggests that even in the worst of times, humans will tell stories. And those stories—however corrupted or transformed—will shape the world that comes after. Whether you are a fan of *The Simpsons* or simply interested in how narratives survive, this play offers a compelling, challenging, and unforgettable vision of post-electric culture.

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