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Fate of the Earth Takes Center Stage

By JASON ZINOMAN

Where is the great American play about [climate change](#)? Is there even a good one?

Say what you will about the potential end of civilization as we know it, but there's no denying it is dramatic stuff. That's why it's odd that as climate change finally moves forward in the national conversation, with President Obama making it a centerpiece of his [inauguration speech](#), New York theater has mostly avoided it.

Short works and the recent Off Broadway play "[If There Is I Haven't Found It Yet](#)" have touched on the issue, but no drama exploring what many believe is the fundamental challenge of our time has made a significant impression. Steve Cosson, the artistic director of [the Civilians](#) — a theater company whose drama "The Great Immensity" is preoccupied with what it would take to transform public consciousness about climate change — puts it bluntly: "On a cultural level, we are behind."

That may start to change with "This Clement World," an ambitious new work now at St. Ann's Warehouse by the writer-performer Cynthia Hopkins, who filters the complexity of the science through her charmingly eccentric aesthetic. (After a run in Kansas City and some further development, "Great Immensity" will have a New York staging in 2014.)

"It's difficult to find a personal connection because we're not feeling the full effects now," Ms. Hopkins explained in a recent interview. "We have to act on behalf of people who aren't born yet. To grasp that dramatically requires imagination."

Alison Carey, a writer who last month posted online a [play](#) called "Tonight's Fire," presents the challenge this way in an e-mail: "How do you write about change on this scale — across time, across the globe — when the major players are atmospheric forces rather than individuals?"

Ms. Hopkins's solution is to ruthlessly exploit the freedom of nonrealistic theater. Creating a work of dizzying scope, she zips through space and time, plays a multitude of characters, and uses video and song. Early in "This Clement World" (the title comes from Carl Sagan's book "Cosmos"), as an alien she delivers a history of the world that includes the creation of the sun and the death of the dinosaurs. Ms. Hopkins also plays the ghost of an American Indian issuing a warning to those who

think their way of life will never be under threat. These monologues make the implicit and sometimes explicit argument that our currently hospitable world is much more fragile than it appears.

“Sure, it’s chilly,” Ms. Hopkins said, gesturing to the snow outside a Park Slope coffee shop. “But generally living on this earth, it’s pretty awesome. It’s hard to imagine that it won’t always be the case. With the Native American character, here’s a way of life that existed and now does not.”

Ms. Hopkins was inspired to write “This Clement World” by a speech at a 2009 conference on climate change at the Columbia University Earth Institute. Jeffrey Sachs, the economics professor who is the director of the institute, talked about how artists could help with the widespread miscommunication about this issue in a way that politicians and journalists could not. “I realized,” Ms. Hopkins said from watching him, “that I could use my bizarre skill set for something vital.”

Two months later, she went on an exhibition to the Arctic, sponsored by [Cape Farewell](#), a British organization that fosters communication on climate change between artists and scientists. This trip became a backbone of her show, which includes Ms. Hopkins’s playing many of the scientists, including a German physicist she encountered who argued unexpectedly that there is some beauty in the end of the human species.

For an artist who often makes quirky, introspective work (the death of her mother inspired “[The Accidental Trilogy](#)”), the new play represents a departure. While still very personal and filled with showmanship, it aims to raise awareness and to persuade an audience of the severity of the crisis. It has an activist streak, but it’s worn very lightly.

She still tells a personal story, including her struggle with alcoholism, but it’s as a prism to understand and clarify a political issue. “Alcoholism is an excellent metaphor for the climate change crisis,” she announces at one point onstage. “We’re addicted to behavior that is making us sick.”

For a short 2008 [festival](#) in New York, “Climate of Concern,” the journalist and professor Lawrence Weschler commissioned nine short plays on climate change from writers like Jon Robin Baitz, Sarah Ruhl and Don DeLillo, with the hopes that they would be mounted by other theaters. So far, only [one](#) has been produced. Mr. DeLillo’s post-apocalyptic “[The Word for Snow](#)” had a run last year in London where it has lately been joined by several other plays on the issue.

Richard Bean, the author of “One Man, Two Guvnors,” even wrote a comedy, “The Heretic” that poked fun at the scientific consensus on the issue. More recently, the Royal Court presented “Ten

Billion” a fact-filled lecture with projections delivered by the Cambridge scientist Stephen Emmott that The Guardian critic Michael Billington [called](#) “one of the most disturbing evenings I have ever spent in a theater.”

In Nick Payne’s “[If There Is I Haven’t Found It Yet](#),” a professor’s obsession with the disastrous impact of climate change blinds him to the looming catastrophe in his own family. The play’s most polemical element might be its design, which in the recent Roundabout Theater Company production featured rising water levels actually washing away parts of the set.

Mr. Cosson of the Civilians chalked up the cluster of plays in Britain to that nation’s tradition of political theater as well as greater public financing for the arts. But in America, he said, “Our theater tends to be more risk-averse because it depends on keeping their audience and supporters happy.” And it’s not just climate change that isn’t an easy sell, he noted: “After a few war plays the message from theaters about Iraq is that we’ve had as much as our audience wants.”

Still, both “Great Immensity” and “This Clement World” have enjoyed significant outside support, with the Civilians piece receiving a rare and unusually large \$700,000 arts [grant](#) from the National Science Foundation.

Unlike the kind of documentary theater the Civilians are known for, “Great Immensity” is fictional, packaging a story about the radical measures required to save the environment in a mystery plot about a woman trying to find her missing sister. The play paints a grim contemporary portrait while trying to grapple with the potential for change.

Indeed, while a bleak disaster plot has its dramatic appeal, it can also numb its audience. Al Gore’s Oscar-winning documentary, “An Inconvenient Truth,” is so far the most successful popular entertainment on the topic, though its suggestions for change were modest. “This subject really sorts out the pessimists from the optimists,” said Ruth Little, an administrator with Cape Farewell, which plans to continue to sponsor expeditions as well as give grants to artists.

“It’s a tricky thing,” Ms. Hopkins said. “I think a big part of the skepticism is because it’s so terrifying that it’s easily overwhelming and paralyzing. The challenge is to communicate that there’s also hope and agency.”



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