

Intense "Immensity"

By [Victor Wishna](#) Mon, Mar 05, 2012

Making its world premiere at Kansas City Rep, "The Great Immensity" is an entertaining, educational, and agitating multimedia musical mystery/adventure about our endangered planet.



Theatre can delight and depress, educate and inspire, but what it does best over most other art forms is provoke. *The Great Immensity*, a musical mystery and adventure story about our endangered planet, making its world debut on Kansas City Rep's Copaken Stage, is amusing, edifying, and ultimately maddening, which is also the point. However—despite enlivening performances, an appealing score, inventive stagecraft, and the powerfully made case for our world's fragile future—some of the exasperation lies with the tenuousness of the story itself.

Written and directed by Steve Cosson, with music and lyrics by Michael Friedman, and co-produced by Cosson's New York-based "investigative theatre" company, The Civilians, *The Great Immensity* may be multi-media, but is also a single-issue show. Throughout nearly two hours, there are charming songs and occasional comic relief, but no subplots, no diversions from the message at hand: *The world is ending; the damage humans have done is irreversible; it's not too late to save the planet, but don't get your hopes up.*

With a quick stride, the plot takes shape as Phyllis (Rebecca Hart) arrives at Barro Colorado Island, a rainforest and research preserve in the middle of the Panama Canal, to find her twin sister, Polly, a nature documentarian who has recently vanished from the island. The researchers there (Don Domingues, Eddie Korbich, Todd Ceveris, and Meghan McGeary) agree to help Phyllis reconstruct her sister's last days, and through

flashback, we learn that Polly (also Hart) is apparently engaging in her own scheme—something big that somehow involves the upcoming Auckland Climate Summit—but what?

At first, the clever structure keeps the audience one step ahead of the characters, allowing us to watch with satisfaction as they discover details we already know—without really knowing any better how those bits will all come together. (*The Great Immensity*, for example, is the translated name of a Chinese cargo ship that plays a role



in Polly's disappearance.)

The narrative is advanced through snippets of video interviews from Polly's hard drive—many revealing startling data about the human race's dire outlook—and vaudeville-like musical numbers that bring environmental research to life. Climate-change polling percentages become fodder for a tango ("Margin of Error"), while the last days of an extinct species are re-imagined in a sad song of lost love ("Martha, the Last Pigeon"). "Charismatic Megafauna," sung by McGeary (who quickly swaps jungle shorts for an evening gown for her moment as a glamorous spurned lover), is clever if not quite the ridiculous showstopper it should be.

The six-member ensemble is strong, with a few standouts. In the role of Julie, Molly Carden is wonderfully convincing as a teenager, the disillusioned "Earth Ambassador" who becomes Polly's co-conspirator. Korbich's slightly off Harold is a hoot (really, that's the word for it), and the versatile and charismatic Domingues embodies his distinctively Colombian and Canadian characters with equal smoothness.

Most of the actors shift effectively among multiple roles, with help from Sarah Beers's simple but realistic costumes. Mimi Lien's set, a two-story frame of corrugated sheet

metal evocative of shipping containers, is also simple but creatively used. The upper level doubles as a flat surface for Jason H. Thompson's various projected backdrops and video clips, some prerecorded, some broadcast from offstage, some filmed simultaneously onstage, and some cleverly integrated with the live actors.

One of the show's obvious virtues is its pacing, which is why it was disappointing to learn that the intermission was only added during previews—to my mind, a mistake. The excitement that builds at the end of Act One as the characters stitch together larger swaths of the mystery doesn't carry over to the second act, which takes a darker turn.

And as the narrative progresses to its less-than-uplifting conclusion, the structure begins to deteriorate. Whereas the show's earlier messages were so cleverly integrated as plot points, the latter scenes get preachy and even more pessimistic. The ending may put off some people—as, I believe, is intended, and commendably so. But the only brush with optimism is the suggestion that a simple solution is still possible: all it will take is for the entire world to work together. (Hello? Have you met the world?)

Unless you are already a dedicated researcher of climate science, you will likely learn something. But what exactly you are supposed to do with that knowledge after the houselights rise is, seemingly, part of the mystery.

But that's where the provocative comes in. Theatre-goers may very well leave *The Great Immensity* more frustrated and agitated than inspired. But unlike a lecture or even a documentary film, theatre isn't expected to offer answers but to raise—to *provoke*—questions, to challenge assumptions, to take us from “there's nothing to be done” to “Isn't there *something* we can do?”

It seems only fair to mention that the play on stage is only one part of *The Great Immensity*—“a play and media project about our environmental challenges.” There is a website (www.thegreatimmensity.org), with a video gallery of interviews with climate scientists that Cosson and others gathered in their research, an audience forum where theatergoers can discuss the experience, and multiple blogs on issues related to the play's central topic.



For all of its cracks, this *is* a world premiere and only a beginning, so it will be interesting to see where it goes from here—there is plenty of room to grow. After all, the topic of climate change, the challenge it presents, and the audience that needs to heed it, are all immense.

REVIEW:

Kansas City Repertory

The Great Immensity

Runs February 24 through March 18 (Reviewed Friday, February 24, 2012)

Copaken Stage

13th and Walnut Streets, Kansas City, MO

For tickets call 816-235-2700 or online at www.kcrep.org

Cover Photo: Cast members Molly Carden, Rebecca Hart, Molly Carden and Todd Cerveris. (Photo by Don Ipock)