

FRIDAY, JUNE 1, 2018 | A SPECIAL SECTION

The New York Times

TOPDOG/UNDERDOG

AN OCTOROON

THE FLICK

MR. BURNS, A POST-ELECTRIC PLAY

CLYBOURNE PARK

RUINED

HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE

SEVEN GUITARS

TWILIGHT: LOS ANGELES, 1992

THE DESIGNATED MOURNER

THE HUMANS

THIS IS OUR YOUTH

THREE TALL WOMEN

JESUS HOPPED THE 'A' TRAIN

EURYDICE

HOUSE/LIGHTS

THE LARAMIE PROJECT

YELLOW FACE

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY

THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD GAME

THE WOLVES

THE REALISTIC JONESES

THE APPLE FAMILY PLAYS

THE ELABORATE ENTRANCE OF CHAD DEITY

IN THE COMPANY OF ANGELS

BY BEN BRANTLEY and JESSE GREEN

"The Great Work begins." When we first heard the Angel of America bellow that bulletin as the curtain came down on Part I of the play named for her and her band of anxious immortals, many of us who look to the theater for inspiration were, in fact, inspired. Tony Kushner's "gay fantasia," fusing the ambition, morality and underdog sympathies of earlier 20th-century masters, felt not only like a great American play but like a culmination and reimagining of great American playness. It slammed a door open.

That was 1993. Exactly 25 years later, the first Broadway revival of "Angels in America" started us thinking about what has happened to American plays in the meantime. Have they been as great? Is their greatness different from what it was? Is "greatness" even a meaningful category anymore?

Perhaps not on Broadway. Of the plays we've singled out as the best 25 of the last 25 years — dated by their first reviews in The New York Times — only nine have ever appeared on Broadway, and none originated there. No matter their size, most began on, and many never left, the smaller stages of Off and Off Off Broadway, or were developed at regional theaters.

If they have reached fewer people as a consequence, they have told more stories: the kind often ignored during the decades when theater was still a dominant but homogeneous cultural force.

The most obvious and hopeful evidence of that change is the diversity of playwrights and subjects represented on our list. The diversity is only natural because the most exciting theater is often (not always!) about the most urgent issues in the world it reflects. Works exploring race and gender are prominent, for instance, because racism and sexism remain prominent.

Not that we aimed for that result; in fact, our list was put together using such a complicated and secret method that even we don't understand it. Nor is our grudging ranking of the 25 any less arbitrary just because it emerged from a reasoned debate.

What we do know is that the critics Laura Collins-Hughes, Alexis Soloski and Elisabeth Vincentelli joined us, The Times's chief theater critics, in a series of round-robin ballots, Faustian horse trades and attempts at persuasion, sometimes successful.

Our conversations were raucous and filled with disagreement; one critic's pet was often another's horror. (Five of those pets get a

list of their own on Page 14.) Even so, we found much to love, with more than 75 plays making the first cut.

To prune them to 25, we eventually realized that we could only include one play by any given playwright or risk being overrun by a medley of Annie Bakers or Suzan-Lori Parks. Conversely, we decided that we could not include veteran playwrights just because they wrote great plays before 1993. (See our inventory of some of those lions, though, on Page 15.)

The upshot is a consensus list that satisfied none of us completely, and probably won't satisfy anyone else either. Get ready to argue about what plays made the cut and, especially, what didn't. For instance: Though we deliberately excluded musicals, saving that furor for another time, other once-dominant genres simply failed to show up. The one-set naturalistic drama and the flat-out comedy are mostly not represented, each having evolved into something eerier and more conceptual. Plays addressing the profound changes in technology during the period are also thin on the list. (But we've provided a tasting menu of five important ones on Page 14.)

Still, you may feel, as we eventually did, excited enough by the 25 plays to want to reread all of them, catch their next revivals or check out those that have been made into films. (The cast members we've listed for each play come from various stage and film productions.) Taken together, they constitute a fairly representative — and optimistic — snapshot of the best (mostly mainstream) theater in America since 1993.

It's a theater that is often more directly engaged in unpacking large-scale social issues than we at first expected. But it's also a collection marked by imaginative boldness that would not surprise that interloping angel who delivered the millennial challenge 25 years ago. Let the Great Work continue!

4.

Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play

BY ANNE WASHBURN

Rebuilding civilization after the apocalypse with what we have in common, like 'The Simpsons.'

"HERETIC HOMER." "Heart of Bartness." "Lisa the Vegetarian." "Springfield Files."

To the characters in Anne Washburn's mind-whirring play, these aren't just the titles of old episodes of "The Simpsons" — or the titles as they recall them, anyway. They're also currency: pop-culture properties to trade in the post-apocalyptic remnants of what was the United States.

Survivors sit around a campfire as the play opens, trying to reconstruct a "Simpsons" episode that sent up the movie "Cape Fear." A succession of

nuclear disasters has obliterated the power grid, killing much of the populace. For those who remain, there's not a TV to turn on anywhere.

Doesn't sound like much of a setup for a comedy, does it, though that's partly what "Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play" is. A song of civilization's abrupt collapse and rickety reassembly, it's a tale of our current society, too — the precariousness of it, the stories that sustain it, the myths we invent to make sense of our history.

By the second of this play's three acts, seven years into post-electric life, the survivors from Act 1 have formed a traveling theater company, performing recreated "Simpsons" shows. Adding to the scripts bit by bit, relying on their own recollections, they also buy lines from strangers and negotiate for episode rights with competing companies.

There's a weird plausibility to the notion — classic cartoon as cultural cornerstone — and a bizarre, blindsiding grandeur to the play's final act. It may set you thinking about the reverence we give to received texts, no matter how badly corrupted and far from the source they are.

Not everyone loves this play; not everyone's meant to. But for the rest of us, it's the kind of bold, inventive show that sends you staggering out onto the street afterward, stunned and exhilarated, not sure quite what you've just experienced because you've never seen its like before.

LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES

REVIEW
Sept. 15, 2013

ACTORS

Quincy Tyler
Bernstine,
Matthew Maher,
Jenna Russell

ALSO

Developing the play with the experimental theater company the Civilians, Ms. Washburn and the director Steve Cosson asked a group of actors to remember everything they could about an episode of "The Simpsons."



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jennifer R. Morris and Matthew Maher recreating "The Simpsons."

5.

Clybourne Park

BY BRUCE NORRIS

A scathingly funny dissection of race, gentrification and liberal pieties that spins off from 'A Raisin in the Sun.'

TWO ACTS, ONE NEIGHBORHOOD, separated by 50 years: Bruce Norris's "Clybourne Park" aims to leave everyone, including the audience, uncomfortable.

Set in 1959, the first act introduces a young couple thinking of selling their Chicago-area home to (unseen) African-Americans who, we realize, are the Youngers of Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun." But this is a white community, and some neighbors are afraid the newcomers will change it forever.

The second act opens 50 years later in the same house, now in disrepair and recently purchased by a white couple. The neighborhood has fallen onto hard times and is ripe for gentrification. Because they are planning extensive renovations, the buyers are meeting with representatives of the local black community.

Mr. Norris's specialty is making an audience question its sympathies. And no character in "Clybourne Park" better embodies the modern mix of hostility, defensiveness and self-righteousness than Steve, half of the white couple. As the second act goes on, Steve pulls even the most innocent characters into an epic showdown of offensive jokes.

In a recent interview, Jeremy Shamos, who portrayed Steve in the Off Broadway premiere at Playwrights Horizons and in the subsequent Los Angeles and Broadway productions, recalled what it was like to play Mr. Norris's obnoxious, entitled provocateur.

What did you think when you realized you would have to tell these jokes every night?

I knew it was going to get a reaction, and of course

as an actor you think, "This is going to be fun to do!" Steve is saying the things he thinks people aren't saying anymore — he's breaking the social norm. But I also knew it was so well-written, it wouldn't be confused with [a playwright] trying to slip in racism.

Is the idea to make people consider what makes them laugh?

It gets people laughing hard, and then it socks you when you're open. It also makes you question what you laugh at, and where the line falls. Bruce finds

that line and plays with it: "Why are you offended by this when you were laughing at that other joke?"

Does "Clybourne Park" hit a particular nerve because the majority of theatergoers are white?

The play holds a mirror to people, especially the sort of white, potentially entitled audience who come to see theater. And not in that way that's traditionally done, where you point out, "You should feel guilty because this is going on." It's more: "This is you."

ELISABETH VINCENTELLI



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

From left, Damon Gupton, Crystal A. Dickinson, Annie Parisse and Jeremy Shamos, who plays the obnoxious Steve.

REVIEW
Feb. 21, 2010

AWARDS
2011 Pulitzer
Prize, 2012 Tony
for best play

ACTORS

Jeremy Shamos,
Annie Parisse,
Amy Morton,
Martin Freeman

ALSO

The Guthrie
Theater presented
the play in
repertory with "A
Raisin in the Sun,"
while Baltimore
Center Stage
paired it with a
different update of
Lorraine
Hansberry's play.