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THE BART OF STORYTELLING

An eclectic dark comedy at Gonzaga draws on *The Simpsons* to reflect on the notion of stories

By E.J. Iannelli



Young Kwak

Gonzaga freshman Isabella Jackson

A group of young men and women is gathered around a crackling oil-drum fire. They're engaged in a rapid-fire discussion as they piece together an episode of *The Simpsons* — "Cape Feare," as it happens — from the animated series' fifth season.

One of them contributes a hazily recalled line of dialogue. Another struggles to remember the exact sequence of events. Why is it again that the Simpsons are thrown into the witness relocation program? Oh, yeah, on account of Bart's archenemy, Sideshow Bob. Where do they first encounter Bob after he leaves prison? That's right, in a movie theater. The rough framework of the episode slowly takes shape. Guesses and abstractions fill in the gaps between particulars.

This collaborative act of mental reassembly is what opens Anne Washburn's *Mr. Burns: a post-electric play*. The actors' speech is sprinkled with naturalistic tics: pauses of uncertainty, mid-sentence revisions, excited gestures as a long-forgotten detail bubbles up from the depths of memory. But it's no quaint campfire conversation. In a way, it's a desperate reaction, a form of self-soothing and escape in the face of catastrophic events that will be unraveled — although never fully — when a new arrival is forced out of the forest shadows, carrying, like all the others, a notebook of names in his backpack.

"*Mr. Burns* is about a time when the culture is completely in crisis, and how the culture responds to it. It takes place right at the beginning of when civilization is dissolving. The power grid has been taken out, there's been a nuclear meltdown, and there's a mass exodus

of people out of the cities. We meet a group of travelers in the middle of the Adirondacks, and they do what people do in those situations: They start trying to piece together old *Simpsons* episodes just to pass the time," explains Charles Pepiton, an assistant professor at Gonzaga University. He's directing a new production of Washburn's play for the Theatre & Dance Department.

"Act two is seven years later. This same group of travelers has stayed together and they've become this amateur theatrical society, performing the memories that they buy from people. There's a big surprise at the end that moves us forward 75 years into act three. What we find there is essentially a religious passion play where that *Simpsons* episode of 'Cape Feare' has become unifying mythology of the culture. They're talking about the fall of society through the lens of layers and layers of pop culture from the time before."

Pepiton and his colleagues were first introduced to *Mr. Burns* last year when Abbey Plankey, technical director at the Theatre & Dance Department, brought it to their attention. She had worked on the original production of the play shortly after its premiere in 2012 at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, D.C.



Young Kwak

Senior Talena Kellin (left) with Isabella Jackson as part of a post-apocalyptic acting troupe.

"All of the faculty read it and it just seemed to be right. We wanted to do something new, and that seemed like it was leaning into culture as opposed to just providing the same old thing. This is one of those shows that's got a little bit of everything in it."

"Leaning into culture" is a phrase Pepiton uses more than once to describe *Mr. Burns* and "edgy" pieces like it. Consciously or not, it's served as a guiding vision for the sort of material that the faculty of the Theatre & Dance Department are looking to explore with their students.

"I'm really excited about what we're doing," he says. "We have a main-stage season that's faculty-directed, and then we have a parallel season that's all student-directed, -designed and -produced. And all of that work is looking to how we can engage with culture now: Where is theater going? How can theater respond to the culture? How can we raise big questions that encounter where our culture is today?"

To that end, the department is already working with Terrain to stage a collection of eight student-directed scenes and short plays under the banner of a larger performance called *War*

No More on Dec. 9. Next year, along with one-act play festivals and sketch comedy, the students will be directing and designing *Stupid F---ing Bird*, an update of Chekhov's classic *The Seagull*.

"What we're trying to do is giving students the tools to use theater to engage as opposed to escape," says Pepiton. "We're looking forward and saying, 'Where do we want to go?' And to pose that question to a broader audience, it's not surprising that they would turn to *Mr. Burns* — an eclectic, "meta-theatrical" play rooted in the present but set in an imagined future.

"This is a really fascinating story about the power of story. Because, essentially, we are the stories we tell about ourselves." ♦

***Mr. Burns: a post-electric play* • Nov. 18-20: Fri-Sat, 7:30 pm; Sun, 2 pm • \$10-\$15
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