Introduction to *The Great Immensity*

REVIEWS COMPILED BY ANTHONY LIOI

The following reviews take on *The Great Immensity*, which was performed in its current form at the Public Theater in New York during April 2014. *The Great Immensity* was written by Steven Cosson and Michael Friedman, key figures in the Civilians, a Brooklyn-based company that engages in "investigative theater," wedding scientific and historical research with live performance. Though some of the critics call it a "climate change musical," the Civilians call it a "theatrical play" and "media project" on its home page (thegreatimmensity.org). The question of form arises in these reviews because the ubiquity of social media and the severity of the climate crisis put pressure on traditional theater in a manner *The Great Immensity* seeks to engage.

It may be useful to view *The Great Immensity* as an incunabulum, a work that stands at the beginning of ecotheater's attempts to dramatize climate change. The Civilians themselves recognize this play as the start of a longer commitment. Cosson and Friedman have founded the Next Forever Initiative to bring together scientists and artists to communicate biospheric realities to a popular audience through new works of art. As they describe it, "The Initiative cultivates new plays, films, video and audio series, and more that deepen our understanding of vital environmental topics. The Initiative will bring our country's most ingenious artists together with the world's brightest scientific minds to create thought-provoking and entertaining new work that focuses on conservation, energy, climate, land use, agriculture, the environmental

sciences, and other vital subjects. The pieces will inspire people across the country to become more engaged with these environmental issues and act in ways that protect our natural resources. The power of the arts to inspire change cannot be underestimated. Information alone is not enough to inspire the large changes that must be made in the coming years to protect our future on this planet" (http://www.thecivilians.org/programs/the_next_forever.html).

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The Sun'll Be Hotter Tomorrow

Growing Up with Climate Chaos

UNA CHAUDHURI

Whenever I hear the phrase "climate change" linked to the word "children," I reach for my copy of *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. The first chapter of Lee Edelman's contentious polemic is entitled "The Future Is Kid Stuff," a title that could serve equally well for an article about how recent plays and movies are deploying the figure of the child in dealing with climate change. A small sampling: *Earthquakes in London* (2010), in which Mike Bartlett gives us the prophetic grandchild of a doom-mongering scientist, countering the real grandchild he advises his daughter to abort in view of the worsening world; *Take Shelter* (2011), in which Jeff Nichols gives us the deaf daughter whose future her visionary father must sacrifice if he cannot remain blind—and deaf—to the ominous signs of climate chaos that all his fellow citizens are busy ignoring; *Snowpiercer* (2013), in which Bong Joon-Ho gives us a postapocalyptic apocalypse whose sole human survivors are two children; and *Interstellar* (2014), in which Christopher Nolan gives us a world-redeeming child who anchors the film's time-travelling (and death-phobic) plot.

Are these "cli-fi" (climate-fiction) kids similar to or different from the ones who anchored the inescapably conservative politics of reproductive futurism that Edelman fiercely denounced in *No Future*? For Edelman, the politics of futurity used the figure of the innocent child to outline an ideal of health and wholeness that criminalized all nonreproductive sexuality, especially queerness. In his reading, Orphan Annie's belted out "Tomorrows" became the coercive battle hymn of a (self-)re-

pression (often disguised as self-affirmation) that was practiced on behalf "of a future whose promise is always a day away."

Well, Annie's back, not only on Broadway but also in the cli-fi plays and movies I mentioned above, as well as, with appropriately ironized book, music, and lyrics, in *The Great Immensity*, by Steve Cosson and Michael Friedman. Annie's back but with a difference. She has grown up some—in fact, she's that other disorderly demon of conservative mythology: a *teenager!* And she is, as one of the show's postmodernistically allusive lyrics has it, "legion." The play's plot centers on a representative group of the world's children—quite literally representative: one each from every UN-member state—who commit a reverse act of hostage taking by disappearing themselves and refusing to return until the adult world of nations does something concrete about climate change. Their plan, in a lyrical nutshell, is as follows:

> We are young.
> We do not forget.
> We do not forgive.
> We are more powerful than nations.
> We can stop them.
> We can fuck up everything.
> We are legion.

The pluralization of the formerly lone—sentimentally, heartbreakingly lone—troped child of Edelman's analysis is joined in this play with a kind of literalization that is characteristic of ecological discourse: a wariness about (and weariness with) the use of nature as metaphor and symbol. As one of the young protagonists asserts, "I don't use metaphors, Karl. I always mean what I say." A devotion to actualities and specifics also characterizes the show's lyrics, starting with its very first song, where the usual *Inconvenient Truth*–style PowerPoint presentation about climate change is exquisitely transformed by the simple expedient of having its captions sung out instead of spoken:

> This is a picture of a jellyfish, the *Aurelia aurita*.
> This is a nuclear reactor in Sweden.
> And as oceans acidify,
> The jellyfish proliferate
> And overwhelm the pools that keep the plant from melting down.
> This is the picture of an island sinking down into the sea

> After lasting for 200 million years
> And to catch the world's attention, they hold meetings underwater,
> And their ministers make votes in scuba gear.

Instead of "No Future," then—"No Metaphors." And instead of one child—many. In this way, *The Great Immensity* confronts—and partially overcomes—two of the main temptations facing climate change art: figuration and individualism. The former is one of the most powerful tools of the imagination; the latter, a tenacious tenet of humanist art. Dismantling rather than redeploying these features—trying out the power of the literal rather than the metaphor and of the collective rather than the individual—seems to be a promising strategy for ecoart, in this work and elsewhere.

The threatened futurity that Edelman tracked in the figure of the endangered innocent child is no longer, in this new context, a convenient fiction. It is a deadly near certainty, and giving persuasive voice—and form—to that certainty is one of cli-fi's greatest challenges. (The dramatic discourse, like the public one, has now moved beyond the problem of proving that climate is happening; the question now is how to get people to pay attention to the proven reality.) In another move that is characteristic of climate change theater (see *Carla and Lewis*, by Shonni Enelow, and *Gaia's Global Circus*, whose creative team famously involved the philosopher Bruno Latour), the play reflexively incorporates the representational dilemma it faces. Now that the more drama- and narrative-friendly plot—the conflict over scientific factuality—is no longer relevant, the problem is one of representational strategy. Thus Julie, one of the teenage protagonists, informs us,

> Before we started on this trip around the world, we got like media boot camp. Like how to make whatever we're doing a story. A good story that gets traction. Because it's not just about information, especially about climate change. The information is already there. It's about hearts and minds, you know. And for that, you've got to establish a compelling narrative framework.

Besides the search for a "good story"—an engaging, involving, galvanizing account—the protagonists are also in search of the right tone, the right mode of address. As Julie goes on to say, "I don't want people to think I'm too scheming. I need people to think I'm like innocent and likeable." Scheming to resemble the galvanizing innocent figure in the

old politics of futurity, Julie in fact helps to demystify that figure, rescuing it from its sentimentalizing role and political regressiveness. In this moment of showing the innocent child growing up, the play's choice of using teenagers—rather than younger children—as its protagonists pays off. Or to be more precise, the choice allows the play to have its sentimental cake and eat it too. The teenagers can still be thought of as "the 'We Are the World' kids" (as the skeptical Phyllis calls them) and thus used for the emotional blackmail they are plotting. But the play also shows them to be, like Julie, a bunch of scheming, media-savvy, and adult-manipulating political actors, turning the grown-up world's own hypocrisies against it.

That adult world, unfortunately, tends to seep into and weigh down the action, draining the liberating energy that a "legion" of international, wired-in kids might unleash. The teenagers' plot is nested within a far more conventional one, which is as implausible as the former but with much less imaginative potential. Whereas the teenagers' plot could be imagined as a modern-day Children's Crusade, complete with the bizarre vitality of that episode of mythical history, the main or frame plot involves a tedious married couple, one of whom (the wife, Phyllis) comes equipped with a whining dream of "reproductive futurity" so insistent that when her husband (Karl) runs off to help the plotting teenagers, he leaves behind a vial of his sperm for her. Sadly, nothing in the play ever counteracts this dispiriting account of love (and marriage and sexuality and life). For a play about teenagers, *The Great Immensity* is remarkably lacking in libido. This is surely an unfortunate deficit, especially given the cast of lively characters—not only the teenagers but also groups of field scientists, hackers, and others—who deliver the play's wonderful songs with great charm and wit.

Charm and wit, however, may not be the best stylistic registers with which to approach that feature of climate change that the play's title names—its vast scale. The enormity of this problem sets it apart from all other geopolitical problems our species has ever faced, including nuclear destruction and global war. The play's strategy in dealing with this fact cleverly ironizes its general commitment to literalism by making "The Great Immensity" the name of a gigantic container ship, explaining the oddly redundant name as a "Chinese name that translates badly." Equally clever and ironic is the fact that Karl misremembers the name as "Big Bigness," which Phyllis in turn misreads as "big business,"

momentarily revealing the skein of associations between climate chaos and its chief cause.

The play's forthright embrace—in its title—of what makes its subject so resistant to representation (and so susceptible to sentimental metaphorics) is bracing and exciting. Among its strategies for dealing with the immensity of climate change is to create a multidimensional and multimedia scenic discourse, figuring the complex time space of globalization while forging an illuminating dialectic between stage space and screen information, between live action, recorded imagery, and (staged) virtual presence. The multiplicity that this scenic discourse captures is full of dramatic—and theatrical—potential, and it is disappointing indeed to see that potential exchanged for a thoroughly conventional ending. In the final scene of the play, the turbulent energies of a kooky children's crusade are nowhere to be felt. Instead, we have a group of—of all things—the *parents* of the self-disappeared kids, with Phyllis making an explanatory speech to the audience, who must now stand in for the TV audience she is addressing. The play ends with a song solo by Karl, in which he compares himself to a "Little boat floating / Alone in the sea / As a great ship goes by / Never noticing me."

The forlorn image Karl paints returns us to a politically diminished and psychologically isolated position in relation to climate change and its immense challenge. It seems a far cry from the exuberance of the teenagers' "We are legion" that had, after all, moved Karl to such decisive action. How shall we, the audience, read this distance between what he did and what he now feels about it?

To avoid answering that question with utter negativity, I turn to the play's very last lines (which are also the final song's chorus):

> But I'll just keep looking for what I can see,
> Trying to look for each contingency,
> For the next fifty years,
> For the next million years . . .

These words return us to an early—and most delightful—moment in the play, when the idea of a contingency was explained to Karl by one of the field scientists in one of the play's two main fictional locales, "a tropical research center located on an island in the Panama Canal." The scientist, a Colombian paleontologist named Marcos, tells Karl about

the contingency, or "random event," that made the human race what it is today (the event was the joining together of the once-separate landmasses of North and South America). The amusing lesson he draws from this story (and sings) is: "We are all Panamanian." This assertion of a common species identity is then contrasted to another, more recent, commonality: "We think the world should be more convenient. That is our contingency." Speaking of the irony of cutting a canal through the very place that made us who we are, Marcos says that our reason for doing this—convenience—may have far-reaching results that "might not be so . . . convenient." Besides invoking Al Gore's seminal climate change movie, this passage also balances our current precarity with a brief vision of human concord, making us "all Panamanians," all inhabitants of the marvelously generative land we have shared with the play's characters. One of those characters—a plant scientist named Allie—had described the Panamanian rainforest as "a fantastic complexity" full of "little stories and little lives going on all the time."

The Great Immensity gives us many "little stories and little lives" and does so with great ingenuity, encapsulating and communicating a remarkable swath of the current discourse on climate change. We emerge well informed about the complexity of the planet we inhabit and the challenges it faces. What the play stops short of, however, is a fully theatrical realization of the crazy kids' plot at its heart. That wild fabrication, fuelled by youthful energies, is the play's best invention. It is the play's own contribution to what it so clearly identifies as the need of the hour: new ideas, no matter how risky, crazy, implausible, courageous, outrageous they may be. In *The Great Immensity*, that idea hinges on taking collectivity seriously, on embracing the wisdom of what the kids call "the hive mind." The play's final image—a lone figure on stage—shies away from that embrace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Una Chaudhuri *is a collegiate professor of English, drama, and environmental studies at New York University. Her publications include* No Man's Stage: A Semiotic Study of Jean Genet's Drama *(Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986);* Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama *(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995);* Rachel's Brain and Other Storms: The Performance Scripts of Rachel Rosenthal *(London: Continuum, 2001); and* Land/Scape/Theater, *coedited by Elinor Fuchs (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002). Chaudhuri is a pioneer in the field of ecotheatre—plays and performances*

that engage with the subjects of ecology and environment—and helped to launch that field when she guest edited a special issue of Yale's journal Theater *in 1994. Her introduction to that issue, entitled "'There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake': Theorizing a Theatre Ecology," is widely credited as a seminal contribution to the field. Chaudhuri was also among the first scholars of drama and theater to engage with another rapidly expanding new interdisciplinary field, animal studies, and guested edited a special issue of* TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies*, on "Animals and Performance." In 2014 she published books in both these fields: an animal studies book entitled* Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*, coedited with Holly Hughes (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press); and an ecocriticism book entitled T*he Ecocide Project: Research Theatre and Climate Change*, coauthored with Shonni Ennelow (Basingstoke: Palgrave). Besides her scholarly work on theater, ecology, and animals, Professor Chaudhuri participates in collaborative creative projects, including one ongoing multimedia collaboration entitled* Dear Climate *that was featured in an exhibition on art and climate change in Dublin in the summer of 2014 and at the Dumbo Arts Festival in Brooklyn that fall.*

"This Is a Picture Of . . ."

ANDREW MARK

> It's really hard to make people care and listen. Because at a certain point, if your piece of art is just as good as a brochure, then, you should probably just make a brochure.
> —Becky Johnson

This is important. My exposure to *The Great Immensity* immediately followed my taking in some of the Fry Street Quartet's collaboration with Dr. Robert Davies, *The Crossroads Project*, at the "Ecomusics and Ecomusicologies 2014" conference in North Carolina. During that weekend, full of nascent academic and artistic investigation into music and environment, an individual quietly whispered to me, "You know, I thought it [the conference] was going to be all about Timothy Morton and ecocriticism and doom. I mean, ecocritics no longer entertain the idea that books will save the planet, if they ever did. This has been a refreshingly optimistic weekend. People here actually believe that music can help. You know, to *do* something." Coming from flat Ontario, I drove to the conference through economically devastated upstate New York toward ecologically reclaimed Pittsburgh to pick up a carpooler. We then viewed West Virginia's wanton resource extraction, framed through my windshield in the heights of autumn leaves on the way down to mountainous Asheville. Driving back, I pondered how ecomusicology might have to grow to handle more cynical ecocritical perspectives, ones that appear deceptively mature. I thought, "The Fry Street Quartet and Davies need coaching from Becky Johnson [quoted above] on the efficacy of political art." Their immaculate performance had oozy HD graphics and digital art, with a kind of PowerPoint Steve Jobs TED Talk–like

delivery and an amazing avant-classical quartet for desperately needed intermissions; ultimately, they offered a rudimentary and humorless introduction to environmental thought. Had I been at a National Science Museum IMAX, a narrated and accompanied silent film? This is important. It was precisely in such a troubled and needy state of mind that I encountered *The Great Immensity* when I got back north.

The Great Immensity musical does appear to know how to preach to the converted. I imagine those involved in the performance do not assume that the musical is free from an ironic, jaded, informed, and knowledgeable gaze. Rather, they make an attempt at presenting old news through an interesting and engaging story, even if it is a bit stretched. They present characters that their most likely audience can relate to or have met elsewhere. The characters seem to be weary academics, intellectuals, environmentalists, artists, researches, and activists. They spew out complex ecological information at every chance, and with fitting exhaustion. They are tired of imagining that with enough production value, enough exposure, the best technology possible, proper promotion, the right sequence of notes, the correct interpretation of the data, and the correct staging, somehow people will walk away from this musical, or any artwork, as if from a David Suzuki fantasy—his book talks famously included little paper pledge drives for personal impact reductions that would litter empty auditoriums after his departure—and make permanent changes to their environmental practices (or lack thereof). I mean to say, I am sure they would be delighted if people did leave their theater feeling empowered, but I was pleased to find they did not assume this would be the case. The narration does not lay out a nice linear presentation of the history of the planet and its fragile features that sustain us and are now threatened by J-curves; instead, it plops the audience into seemingly asynchronous Ernst Blochian moments, a la *Memento*, rich with information in need of digestion, reflection, and further research.[1] It does not all make sense, and why should it? The work is about how to deal with global environmental climate change, and this problem requires active puzzle-solving skills to piece together the entire story. This approach stands in contrast to conventions of force-feeding a grand arch that ushers the audience to the most logical iteration of anxiety-provoking response: *do* something already! The piece does not preach, thank goodness; it, instead, promotes rumination.

One really must experience the work to begin to make sense of any review; but instead of examining the entire piece, I am going to focus only on the second sequence of the work, the first song, which comprises about two and a half minutes of this two hour musical.

This song appears approximately two minutes into the musical and features a soloist in a simple dress. There is also an unlit and harmonizing team that joins in for the chorus. The piece begins with a mournful cello, a strumming guitar, and a voice that follows a descending chord progression. The title of the number might be "This Is a Picture Of . . ." The lyrical text is simply packed with information (see below), including a species and a geographic term I had to look up. The singer gestures in her singular spotlight with taught hands, almost claws, moving as one might when pleading with an audience. She narrates a series of images that keeps pace with the lyrics. The images are well above her in large, seemingly panoramic dimensions. She states that "this is a picture of a _____" (fill in the blank), but she does not point above her to the image. The lack of explicit direction for the audience from the singer leaves one to wonder where and what she thinks the image is, in relation to the audience. To whom is she speaking about the pictures she is not looking at or seemingly aware of? Are these pictures in her mind? These unanswerable questions are the cracks in the armor of standard environmental pedagogy that the musical exploits in this moment. This is where we might locate an advantage of environmental performance for communicating environmental issues and influencing change. I will return to this point shortly.

The images are projected onto a corrugated tin or iron backdrop that is part of the tall stage. As the song progresses, the singer becomes increasingly distraught, rapidly spitting out her lines. A piano joins in with force around her mention of sharks and ocean gyres, soon taking up and amplifying the guitar's eight-note soft-loud off-beat pattern that lends a sensation of increasing mechanical speed and frantic disaster until the singer reaches, "Detroit," almost gasping for breath. Suddenly the singer's accompanists drop away at this juncture, perhaps emphasizing her profound loss, the emptiness of Detroit, and her inability to begin a new series of cogent observations, gesturing to pictures that march on until the chorus joins her again to close the piece.

Before reading further, take a moment to glance over the lyrics. You are bound to find some of your own memories here.

VERSE:

This is a picture of Staten Island, November 2012.
The water hasn't quite receded yet.
You can't tell where the sea ends and where the land begins,
Pieces of cars, pieces of people's lives lie scattered in the mud.

But already, things are growing here,
Tall invasive grasses, a triage station by a fallen tree,
A sea-soaked teddy bear looks out like a widow
Watching waiting for a ship to return across the sea.

CHORUS:

And the world is wide,
And the world is so small,
And so we ride,

(Soloist)
On our little leaky sinking boat of hope,
Across the hot world to come.

VERSE:

This is a picture of a jellyfish, the *Aurelia aurita*.
This is a nuclear reactor in Sweden.
A swarm of thousands got in the cooling pool.
The plant went to code red.
They've never come this far north before.

And this is a picture of an island sinking down into the sea,
After lasting for 200 million years.
And to catch the world's attention, they hold meetings under water,
And their ministers make votes in scuba gear.
This is a picture of a polar bear, in Churchill, Manitoba,
The polar bear capital of the world.
And this is a shark from a special on the Nature Channel,
And this is a gyre of plastic debris the size of Texas in the Pacific.
There are two of them or seven, we don't know,
But we know that this one exists,
A floating pile of garbage somewhere in the ocean,
And the jellyfish replacing all the sharks,

The polar bears are waiting hungry as
Containerships go by en route to Sweden
To the nuclear reactors where the waters have all opened up
Because the ice is melting, Sahel is drying up,
And Staten Island is full of water.

This is a picture of the Philippines after Haiyan.
This is New Orleans after Katrina.
This is the Great Barrier Reef.
This is the Three Rivers Gorge.

This is my hometown,
Detroit.
They used to build cars here that made the country rich,
With all the oil from . . .
This is a picture of . . .
A picture of . . .
A picture of . . .

CHORUS:

And the world is wide
And the world is so small

It might seem the academic convention of using a quality picture to frame a discussion via PowerPoint should be beyond pedagogical reproach. I much prefer it to a screen with only text if an orator is not very good. Some of my mentors distain technical accoutrements. I use such devices with the notion that images aid all my students with better information retention and memory recall through associative cybernetics. And yet "This Is a Picture Of . . ." softly mocks me. With a little reflection, I can bring to mind so many instances of individuals putting up a picture, describing the picture for a moment (or not), and somehow assuming that by virtue of the picture, by virtue of whatever sublime capacity it can carry in representing a cause, a devastating image of tar sands exploitation, child labor, or a collage of violence, the mere showing and seeing provides some kind of authentication of a will to change—an assumption that people have done something in their viewing. These images are knowledge, but what are they really? "This is a symbol of . . ." Because show-and-tell does not cut it, folks. I mean, this is what Facebook slactivism is all about, right? Sharing a

bunch of images with a few choice framing words. This is what was so desperate about *The Crossroads Project* for me; even if the stories were rich, the audience never had to question the images as tools, the media as the message. If I never see another humorless Chris Jordan image from his work *Midway* of a dead albatross with plastic innards without some deeper consideration of the image's possibilities, meanings, and becomings, beyond, "See, this is what we've come to, for shame," this life would be better for the absence.[2] At a Society for Ethnomusicology conference, themed after "sound ecology," I found Jordan's work plastered in the terrible Los Angeles public-transit system, haunting me with statistics turned into aluminum can works of art before I'd have to enter the Wilshire Grand Hotel. These images have become like so many memes. They are even badges of identity: an unquestionable environmental positivism. I love what they do, but I question how we use them. I do not question their importance or efficacy, but I do wonder what we really think these pictures mean about the real world when they are deployed. The nightmare for me is that people keep discovering these images, appear genuinely surprised, and then ask me if I've seen them and essentially go back to business as usual.

But *The Great Immensity*, in its first minutes, repeats this taken-for-granted public-speaking gesture of plastering a white screen with an LCD projection of Microsoft PowerPoint slides, what frequently constitutes a voyeuristic "think piece" presentation of nature's subordination as capturable and consumable to the human eye. *The Great Immensity* does this so rapidly, with increasing speed, that the act reveals its own absurdity. In other words, I applaud how *The Great Immensity* subverts, with a corrugated backdrop, exactly what *The Crossroads Project* attempts in HD realism. "This Is a Picture Of . . ." reinserts human and more-than-human agency and subjectivity into the way these images are used too often as visual facts by Greens. The work does so with humor: "There are two or seven of them, we don't know," and I find myself stifling laughter. I can just see the water-soaked teddy bear looking out the window on Staten Island, morose, and it's funny. The musical pulls this off with the kind of details an informed environmentalist is so conversant with. That the gyre in the Pacific is "the size of Texas" rings so true for me. How many times have I read and heard this fun fact? It's this attention to detail that tells me the playwright feels my pain. What is this fact doing for or to us in conjunction with images of floating sea

trash? If the gyre were the size of Australia, would it matter? Has anyone been to Texas? Is it the size of Texas because Texas has oil? Republicans? What if it were the size of five New Englands?

The Great Immensity is best understood as a necessary step forward in the world of ecoperformance, precisely because it offers a more iterative and reflexive response to the problems of climate change. And looking back, it doesn't tell us what to think: it creates a gap in what can be such a positivist bland story of anthropogenic greenhouse gases, too many cows, the thermohaline circulation pattern, volcanoes, and the albedo effect. By imagining and animating environmentalist archetypes, it demonstrates the unique opportunities that performance offers to reevaluate the modes of environmental information communication. On the one hand, as with any performing art, human skill will always be a prerequisite to achieve a baseline authenticity and appreciation. As with any work of this kind, in measuring success, an audience will rarely pay attention to the message if the delivery by the actors isn't on. I'll leave this debate to the actors: were they "on"? Well, they worked for me. Though there were times at which I felt some characters were unconvincingly distressed, others appeared quite comfortable and believable. The use of technology—including cameras, projection, lighting, and sound, a difficult set of relays—was seamlessly handled and quite effective as an augmentation to the actors. The songs did not pander to a popular sensibility, but they also didn't inspire movement for me, though tragic music rarely does.

Thinking about where I would like to see ecoperformance go generally and what we can learn from *The Great Immensity*, I would like to see greater focus on the details of one object or issue or person's narrative in addition to attempts to take on what is the huge intersectional discourse of climate change and violence. This musical, in a utopian fashion, tries to tie together disparate linkages within the chaos of climate change. The work is a zeppelin really, quite an achievement. We might ask ourselves how we can also foster and dig deep into singular narratives that offer detailed instances of environmental dilemma. If *The Great Immensity* sits at the beginning of larger trends of interest in environment and performance and music, going forward, let's see if we as environmentalists, activists, academics, and artists can produce and catalog a range of attempts to tackle the amorphous challenge of climate change and see what is working for us and why, just as I have attempted to do above with "This Is a Picture Of . . ."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Mark *is an ABD PhD candidate with the faculty of environmental studies at York University, where he earned an MA in ethnomusicology. As an active musician who ultimately chose the McGill School of Environment to complete his undergraduate degree, he finds loyalties to environmental thought and performing arts in ecomusicology. His dissertation concerns the importance of musicking for sustaining the rural community of Hornby Island in British Columbia, Canada. Andrew has publications with themes that relate to music and globalization, Gnawa music, mbira music, ecoperformance, ecomusicology, mourning and melancholy in the environmental movement, and podcasting and ecocriticism as well as forthcoming work on North American Zimbabwean music. Andrew is a cofounder of the Society for Ethnomusicology's Ecomusicology Special Interest Group; a board member of the* Ecomusicology Newsletter*; an editorial collective member of* Undercurrents: The Journal of Critical Environmental Studies*; and a coproducer of* CoHearence*, the podcast series.*

NOTES

The epigraph comes from an interview the author had with Becky Johnson, referenced in Andrew Mark, "Refining Uranium: Bob Wiseman's Ecomusicological Puppetry," *Environmental Humanities* 4 (2014): 69–94, http://environmentalhumanities.org/arch/vol4/4.4.pdf.

1. Cf. Ernst Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics," trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique*, no. 11 (1977): 22–38; and Christopher Nolan, *Memento*, dir. Christopher Nolan (Los Angeles CA: Newmarket Films, 2000).

2. Chris Jordan produces astonishing works of art in many media that seek to capture the immensity of human impact on our environment. For example, his drawing "Silent Spring" (2009) includes 183,000 birds on the canvas, the estimated number of daily bird deaths related to agricultural pesticides in the United States . I love his work; I do not appreciate its use as a blunt tool, because I find that such use rather dampens discourse and injures the viewer. Some kind of clear guidance and purpose is needed for dealing with Jordan's work, in my opinion. See more of Chris Jordan's work online under "Artworks," on his official website, *Chris Jordan Photographic Arts* (http://www.chrisjordan.com).

Review of *The Great Immensity*

NICOLE SEYMOUR

The Great Immensity had me at "climate change musical." After reading that brief descriptor of the play, I envisioned campy yet incisive song-and-dance numbers about unprecedented heat waves, sea-level rise, melting polar ice caps. I imagined the kitschy, queer appeal of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, but with more scientists and activists and fewer charming lumberjacks turned sort-of kidnappers. But with a few exceptions, such as a sardonic number about the pathetic state of international climate change policy ("oceans must be better protected / science must be respected . . . these agreements are not legal / these agreements are not binding"), *The Great Immensity* is not that kind of climate change musical. For better or worse.

In my view, it's both better *and* worse.

Developed by the Brooklyn-based Civilians theater group, *The Great Immensity* focuses on American cameraman Karl (Chris Sullivan), a multiple-Emmy winner for his work on the Discovery Channel's *Shark Week*. Estranged from his wife Phyllis (Rebecca Hart) while posted at a scientific research center in Panama, Karl's despair over environmental degradation and the ineffectiveness of the mainstream media leads him to team up with the Earth Ambassadors, an international youth group led by a precocious American girl named Julie (Erin Wilhelmi). They set a goal of hatching a major media stunt that will get the world to watch, and to act. Their deadline for pulling it off is the eve of an international climate change summit in Paris.

At a time at which emotions around climate change find little outlet in public media—instead, we are bombarded with facts and figures and

left to cope on our own—*The Great Immensity* has achieved a significant cultural coup simply by putting emotion on stage. Early on, Julie declares, "The information [about climate change is] already out there. It's about hearts and minds, and for that you've got to establish a compelling narrative framework." Over the course of the play, Julie and Karl struggle to manage their own hearts and minds, including conflicting feelings of optimism, fear, and impotence: "We can change the future, Karl," Julie begins, to which Karl responds, "Whatever you do, it won't work. That's the awful truth. It's not worth it for me to throw myself in for some noble failure." These feelings are often set to music, producing poignant, Decemberists-esque tunes, like "The Next Forever."[1] While they sometimes devolve into maudlin ponderousness, the self-reflexivity of such interludes is crucial. Rather than *being* preachy or full of gloom and doom, as so much contemporary environmental media is, *The Great Immensity* is *about* preaching and doomsaying: why we engage in these kinds of modes, what emotional tolls they can have, what their risks as well as their rewards can be.

Of course, as middle-class white Americans, Julie and Karl have yet to directly experience the effects of climate change—or, at least, to suffer from them. Our globe-spanning play attempts to go beyond this limited perspective, offering us characters such as Charlie (Dan Domingues), who is an indigenous resident of Churchill, Manitoba—the so-called Polar Bear Capital of the World and the starting ground for Karl and Julie's stunt. The Churchill scenes tell us about the past violence suffered by the local indigenous populations and the current effects of climate change on the polar bears, those charismatic megafauna that draw tourists to the region. However, we don't get much of Charlie's emotional perspective. The pain on view is mainly that of Karl, Julie, and Phyllis: largely psychic and largely anticipatory.

The play's thematic and performative engagement with new media technologies—including video communication, activist hacking, and data visualization—is another of its notable innovations. *The Great Immensity* often alternates between live performance and performance on video monitor, such as when Karl communicates with Julie via a Skype-like program. But even as the play itself relies on new media technology, it raises doubts about the assumed progressive, even revolutionary, nature of that technology. For example, Karl alludes to the role of social-networking sites in the Arab Spring—which, as we now know,

both allowed protestors to communicate with each other and enabled authorities to track their whereabouts—while Julie invokes armchair environmentalism: "All these people watch us and they think it's doing something," she laments, referring to the Earth Ambassadors' multiple appearances on the likes of CNN. "[But] it's just watching."

The play thus deftly thematizes the biggest challenge of climate change: representation. How can those of us in relatively privileged first-world locations visualize what we can't yet see, before it's too late? How can those in nonprivileged third-world locations make visible that which no one wants to see? And how to turn such visualization, if it can be achieved at all, into meaningful, transformative action? The play ends before we see the reaction to Karl and the Earth Ambassadors' stunt, leaving those as open questions for the viewer.

About that stunt. It's here where the play begins to falter and where the kind of campy queerness I initially imagined might have proved valuable. Having learned that Karl and Phyllis's estrangement stems from their fertility struggles, we see them reunite in Churchill near the play's end. Karl gives Phyllis a vial of his frozen sperm for later use, and the two come to their own separate epiphanies in relation to the same powerful cultural force—which, following queer theorist Lee Edelman, we might term "sentimental heteroreproductive futurism."[2] It's worth quoting the play's dialogue at length here:

Charlie: What do you think about when you think about the future?
Phyllis: I imagine I have a kid. Okay, two kids.
Charlie: And their future?
Phyllis: I just hope that things will still be okay.
Charlie: That's your answer. When you think about the future you think about—
Karl: (wheels turning) *The most charismatic megafauna of them all.*
Phyllis: Our kid? My kids?
Karl: Not our kids. The Earth Ambassadors.

What Karl will do, then, is hold the youth ambassadors for (voluntary) ransom, taking each off the grid one by one, only to be returned "if," as he says, "the agreement gets made in Paris, if it gets reinforced, if the world changes its course."

Here, the play is cannily realistic: however much animals such as polar bears have served as heart-string-tugging harbingers of climate change,

human narcissism and sentimentality make the Earth Ambassadors the perfect poster children, quite literally.[3] But without a clear queer sensibility, the play offers no critique of sentimental heteroreproductive futurism. At best, Karl's plan is a cynical exploitation of that ideology; at worst, it's a reaffirmation of it. Indeed, as overstuffed with subplots as it is, *The Great Immensity* here threatens to boil down to a simplistic, tired story: the normative bourgeois family's struggle to continue itself. This story, at least as the Civilians have staged it, does not meet Julie's directive: "You've got to establish a compelling narrative framework."

Indeed, what *The Great Immensity* does not seem willing to fully explore is the fact that, for all the ways in which the Child (to use Edelman's influential formulation) embodies our fears about a greatly compromised future world, she or he also embodies our (misplaced?!) hopes and potentially justifies our continued, destructive existence. As Phyllis testifies at the summit in one of the play's last scenes, "These choices here in Paris—yeah, they do matter more than anything else. To me. To my kid. Or my two kids. We can give them suffering, or we can give them a chance." As long as we can reproduce ourselves, whether biologically or ideologically or both, the mortality, culpability, and limitations that climate change forces us to face can still, if ever so slightly, be mitigated.

Depending on perspective, then, audiences may want *The Great Immensity* to be, or to say, something else. But as the singular (to my knowledge) occupant of the climate change musical genre, it's an ambitious and admirable effort.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Seymour *is an assistant professor of English at California State University, Fullerton, where she teaches courses in literature, media, and the environment. She is the author of* Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination *(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013) and several journal articles. Her favorite musicals are* The Sound of Music*,* Meet Me in St. Louis*, and* Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, even though the latter offends all her feminist sensibilities.*

NOTES

1. "The Next Forever," from *The Great Immensity*, with music and lyrics by Michael Friedman and performed by Trey Lyford, is now available as a stand-alone video http://vimeo.com/39213500.

2. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

3. For more on the role of polar bears in climate change discussions, see Una Chaudhuri's essay, "The Silence of the Polar Bears: Performing (Climate) Change in the Theatre of Species," in *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, ed. Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Review of *The Great Immensity*

NICOLE M. MEROLA

In a 2010 interview conducted by Sarah Kozinn, Steve Cosson, cofounder and writer-director of the Civilians, a New York City–based investigative theater company, notes that one goal of the company is to avoid producing a "theater of assurance" in which audience members "get to experience some conflict so that the world [they] want to believe in is restored" at the end of the performance (197).[1] Rather, Cosson says, the company is interested in using theater to dismantle "overly narrow preconceptions of how people work, how the world works, how social systems work" (196) and to "encourage people's doubt and curiosity" (197). This nonreassuring approach to theater is particularly well suited to the company's climate change musical *The Great Immensity*, which premiered at the Kansas City Repertory Theater (February 17–March 18, 2012) and was performed most recently at the Public Theater in New York City (April 11–May 1, 2014). In choosing climate change as a topic for theatrical investigation, the Civilians pose questions central to both environmental humanities scholars and climate change scientists: What kinds of discourse and form facilitate understanding immensely complex earth systems processes? How might particular modes of discourse and form enable humans to confront, rather than deny, the material consequences of changes to these systems?

More specifically, *The Great Immensity* interrogates key elements of climate change discourse, including extinction and last-of-its-kind narratives and the related topics of charismatic megafauna and the iconicity of the polar bear; sea ice loss and the polar regions as barometers of climate change; the relationship between climate change and the in-

creasing intensity of tropical storms; high-carbon lifestyles and personal complicity with climate change; climate change denialism; the business-as-usual political inaction at climate change summits; the trope of saving the planet for future generations; and the climate change affects of hope and despair, the relationship of each to climate change action, and the efficacy of particular kinds of direct action. In addition to exploring issues directly related to climate change and its material socioecological consequences, the musical engages with the spectacularization of the natural world, asking its audience what, exactly, humans want to see and know (or know and willfully ignore) about the planet and their relationship to it. The overarching concern of *The Great Immensity*—dramatized through the narrative thread in which Karl, an unemployed filmmaker, decides to join the Earth Ambassadors, a United Nations youth group, and the mostly anonymous Internet collective Ship Chat to stage a protest at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris—is its exploration and critique of the notion of finding an idea, a statistic, an image, an accumulation of data, or a direct action that will "flip a switch" and finally make clear, once and for all, that, as Karl plaintively contends, "we are actually breaking the world."

The musical directly confronts the contours of the world's splintering through plot events, dialogue, multimedia staging, and songs that employ grief, dark humor, irony, parody, sarcasm, and satire. By using these tactics, *The Great Immensity* joins a fledgling group of literary and performed texts—including Ian McEwan's novel *Solar*; Helen Simpson's short story collection *In-Flight Entertainment*; Fuels America's "We Love Oil!" campaign; Conservation International's "Nature Is Speaking" campaign; and various segments on *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show*, and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*—that take climate change and its effects seriously but engage climate change discourse aslant, through approaches that are both irreverent and incongruous. Of particular note in this regard is the way *The Great Immensity* offers a double treatment of science and scientific research. The Civilians developed *The Great Immensity* in collaboration with faculty and students from the Princeton Environmental Institute, and the aim of conveying accurate scientific information suffuses the entire performance. On one hand, the musical foregrounds the importance of scientific study and empirical data, exploring concepts such as deep time, evolution, and extinction in ways that are funny, smart, sharp, and melancholy. On the

other hand, through, for instance, sarcastic references to a thirty-year-long study of the howler monkey that has yet to yield any understanding of why they howl and to the "baby plant people," who study a two-week period in the development of plants' leaves, it satirizes the hyperspecialized nature of scientific research and situates science as only one way of understanding the world. Also notable for their irreverence, and their earworm quality, are composer and lyricist Michael Friedman's musical numbers—in particular, the song focused on paleoclimates and plate tectonics, the song about how little has been accomplished at various climate summits, the torch song in which a female scientist lustily and melodramatically declaims her affection for charismatic megafauna, and the barbershopesque number focused on the demise of the last passenger pigeon and the last golden lemur.

In many respects, *The Great Immensity* functions as a memorable intervention into climate change discourse. Its dialogue and songs, in large part because they mix pathos and humor, have incredible staying power. The musical effectively engages with a hallmark tension of the Anthropocene: it simultaneously elevates humans to a tectonic force able to influence earth systems and demotes humans to just another species subject to the same forces as all other things, animate and inanimate, on the planet. Within this universalizing tendency, it also ably inserts difference. Through references to technology, global trade, the consumption of fossil fuels, the arctic, and the multinational composition of the Earth Ambassadors, *The Great Immensity* makes clear that the causes and effects of climate change are unevenly produced and will be unequally experienced. The motif of disappearance is underlined in multiple registers—a husband mysteriously vanishes, nonhuman animals go extinct, cargo ships appear and disappear from radar, members of an anonymous Internet collective are variously disguised or uncovered, habitat is fragmented, a Native community is forcibly relocated and disintegrates. So too is the notion of contingency, especially as applied to the continued existence of *Homo sapiens*.

For an audience already well-informed about climate change, perhaps the most interesting thing about the performance is the way it self-reflexively works at cross-purposes. At one level, the Civilians are interested in producing a performance that engages in consciousness raising. At another, the idea that there exists a switch and that all we have to do is find and flip it is revealed, ultimately, as a form of false

reassurance. The last scene of the musical features Karl alone on stage in the aftermath of what is supposed to register as a shocking direct action. The Earth Ambassadors, one child from every country represented in the United Nations, have resorted to voluntary, off-the-grid exile aboard the cargo ship *The Great Immensity* as a way to pressure developed nations at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris to finally compose, sign, and enact a binding agreement; Karl has joined them in order to disseminate their story. But in keeping with the notion of nonreassuring theater, the end of the musical resists closure. The disappearance of the Earth Ambassadors is not staged; and in the last scene, it is not clear where *The Great Immensity* is or how long it has been circling the globe, just out of reach of the radar. All the audience knows is what Karl sings directly to it, and the mournful lyrics of the final song are ambiguous. The "us" in the phrase "the next forever without us" could refer to everyone aboard *The Great Immensity* or it could refer to all humankind. Similarly, the "you" in the phrase "you are the contingency" could refer to Julie, the organizer of the Earth Ambassadors' action; to Karl's wife, Phyllis; to the audience; to all humankind; or given the musical's emphasis on evolutionary and planetary timescales, even to all carbon-based life. The way *The Great Immensity* trails off at the end—with dangling narrative threads, with an incomplete sentence for its last lyric, and with an unresolved melodic line as its last sound—is, ultimately, the most discomfiting and powerful thing about it. The state of limbo in which *The Great Immensity* leaves its audience is, unfortunately, all too consonant with the state of limbo in which the recently concluded 2014 Climate Change Conference in Lima has left the world. We are, once again, left to wait. In the words of the song that closes *The Great Immensity*, we are all the widows who "wait for the ships that won't come."

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Anthropocene: Jeanette Winterson's The Stone Gods," minnesota review *83 (2014): 122-132; and "'for terror of the deadness beyond': Arctic Environments and Inhuman Ecologies in Michelle Paver's* Dark Matter," Ecozon@ *5, no. 2 (2014): 22–40. She is currently working on articles focused on teaching climate change cultures and on affect and the Anthropocene.*

NOTE

1. See Sarah Kozinn, "Discovering What We Don't Know: An Interview with Steve Cosson of the Civilians," *TDR* 54, no. 4 (2010): 188–205. All parenthetical citations refer to this article.

After the Beautiful Sorrow

Affective Resilience and *The Great Immensity*

ANTHONY LIOI

In the past twenty-five years, the American musical has departed from urbane satire (in which dilemmas are dispatched by wit) and utopian innocence (in which dilemmas are dissolved by love) to confront the moment after the happy ending. The tragicomic tone of the new American musical is well-suited to ecological catastrophe, because the metanarrative of apocalypse is common to stage and green. Apocalypse, in its biblical form, is a comedic genre in which cosmic history resolves on the side of the righteous. What happens after the end of that ending? In Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's *Into the Woods* (1987), the second act poses this question after the fairy-tale weddings, redemptions, and victories of act 1.[1] Faced with an angry giant bent on revenge, the characters panic while the witch sings:

> It's the last midnight,
> It's the last wish,
> It's the last midnight,
> Soon it will be BOOM, SQUISH!

Indeed, *boom* and *squish* befall more than one character, sundering parents from children, husbands from wives, hopes from realities. Afterward, the survivors band together in communities that outlast consanguinity through fostering, friendship, and civic alliance. After the "last" midnight, there is a dawn in which the people sing into a new, unwritten story.

This need to sing through dooms of love is explored in *The Great Im-*

mensity, a climate change musical by the Civilians, a Brooklyn-based investigative theater group. The words-and-music team of Steven Cosson and Michael Friedman must fit the round peg of dystopia through the square dance of *Oklahoma!* (1943), *The Wizard of Oz* (2011), and *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* (1967). They chose *not* to adapt Sondheim, the archon of the "serious musical," to the problem of strange weather. In a queer genre, they play it straight, grounding a planetary problem in a woman's quest for a missing husband. Phyllis's search for Karl takes her to a research station in the Panama Canal, where the effects of climate change are explained, and then to Churchill, Canada—"the polar bear capital of the world"—where she meets teenage Earth Ambassadors who have recruited Karl to their conspiracy: they will kidnap themselves in advance of the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. They hope that children, as the "most charismatic megafauna of all," will shock the great powers out of their complacency. Aided by Dark Web hackers and indigenous activists, Karl departs with the ambassadors, leaving Phyllis a canister of sperm that underlines the drama of stalled reproduction. *The Great Immensity* radicalizes the approach of *Into the Woods*, affirming the power of alliance without providing any closure. There is no happy ending to undo; instead, there are wacky-sad, plangent songs of *la lutte continue*.

Honestly, I had expected something snarkier, along the lines of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (2008). I had not expected to cry so much or to approve of having my tears jerked. *The Great Immensity* strikes an earnest pose shared by the scientists, activists, and indigenous people overwhelmed by intimate yet planetary losses. There are moments of sarcasm—the Chinese mentor of the Earth Ambassadors incarnates impatience with American exceptionalism—but these do not rule the structure. When Cosson and Friedman want to teach, they teach, as in the exposition of the failure of past climate summits. When they want to pine, they pine, as in the song of the last living lemur searching for a mate who will never arrive. The frustrated romance plot is sometimes skewered: a singer characterizes her desire by admitting "I'll soon fall for a big, tall, charismatic megafauna / That I can love until it's dead." A better parody of the green imaginary there is not. Nevertheless, *The Great Immensity* is a play, not a metaplay, an ironic meditation on the impossibility of this and the self-contradiction of that. The fact of planetary emergency means that there will be no place of escape, not

even irony. The characters must sing, because fear and dread have arrived, so hope and determination are required. A tragic ending would be redundant: we can witness one of those by watching cable. This is a play about a problem the audience must confront without the advantage of catharsis. Put another way, it is not a work of melancholy, an argument for the "beautiful sorrow" of lost love. Instead, it is a work of affective resilience.

The term *resilience* runs the risk of becoming what my favorite high school English teacher called a "weasel word," a snappy evasion of affective labor. It chirps *systems bounce back after disruption* like one of Snow White's bluebirds. Such a song begs a number of questions. Why was the system disrupted in the first place? Are those responsible going to be part of the recovery? What is the goal of recovery, and how do we deal with the losses we could not prevent? *Immensity* locates the problem of resilience in the relationships among the frontline protagonists: the Sayisi Dene, victims of Canadian genocide; the arctic First Nations; the polar bears; angry Millennials; and middle-class Americans bearing children into catastrophe. These protagonists voice the songs of extinction to understand how the death of kin crosses boundaries of race and sex, nation and species. They chant as a strategy to manage our communal terror. Here you cannot sing your cares away; rather, you sing to resist the demons of your age.

Clearly, *The Great Immensity* is a work of affective, not simply emotional, resilience. One must enter the songs bodily to get the full effect. One must not merely witness another's indomitable will to survive. There is too much to do. The action is incomplete, and the characters are left hanging. Karl disappears with the Earth Ambassadors, the people of Churchill contend with starving polar bears attacking their garbage, and Phyllis addresses the Paris summit with a call to action that ends the play. This is no *ABC After School Special* in which the children of the seventies learn to persevere in the face of adversity. It is a performance of scientific and existential truth that can propagate through the audience in bits of recounted dialogue, fragments of melody hummed on the way home. It is a revision of musical utopia: not perfection as a refuge from sorrow but solidarity arising from the breath itself. This sort of resilience bounces us back from the despair of the affluent that blights discussions of climate justice. *What are we to do?* cries the global middle class, *afflicted as we are by corrupt politicians and pumpkin-spice*

lattes? Sing like a lemur, says *The Great Immensity*, disrupt business as usual, make new friends and influence the Anthropocene.

To further my preference for affective resilience as an ecodramatic strategy, I compare *The Great Immensity* to two contemporaneous works, Karen Malpede's *Extreme Whether* (2013) and Bruno Latour's *Gaia: Global Climate Tragi-Comedy* (2011). There is not enough space to do justice to either work here, but it is possible to discuss contrasts of strategy. In *Extreme Whether*, Malpede fictionalizes the struggle of climate scientists like James Hansen of NASA as they try to raise the alarm in the midst of petroculture. *Extreme Whether* presents a family drama in which the Hansen figure and his girlfriend and graduate student struggle with his sister, who is married to an oil lobbyist, while they all mentor the scientist's transgender daughter. Like Cosson, Malpede uses the figure of the scientist to work climatological exposition into the plot, along with the conceit of family argument as political conflict writ small. By confining the action to a Walden-like retreat, however, Malpede relies on a microcosm to stand for the planet, whereas Cosson wrote a quest to generate a flow of cultures and polities. Though Malpede succeeds in fashioning symbolic drama, there is no instrument to carry the action into the world, so the microcosm of the stage amplifies the sense of confinement, like the frog in a warming pond who appears as side character. In contrast, Bruno Latour's *Gaia* relies on a carnival-cosmos named after James Lovelock's Gaia, the self-regulating biosphere. In the rough draft of the play available on his website, Latour populates the stage with scientific, literary, and mythic figures to represent the material and semiotic system of planetary crisis. One expects exactly this from an actor-network theorist, and the approach carries distinct charms, which enact his "compositionist" intention to take "up the task of searching for universality but without believing that this universality is already there, waiting to be unveiled and discovered."[2] The drawback, however, is the creation of a staged hyperobject, the representation of a biocultural realm that dwarfs the human in spatial and temporal dimensions. What can one do when faced with a hyperobject but feel like an absurdist character in search of an author?

What is needed at this moment is not a drama of family dysfunction or a pastiche of cosmic misrule so much as an affective toolkit that helps us cope with the catastrophes endemic to our era. In this task, *The Great Immensity* succeeds better than anything I have seen so far.

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NOTES

1. My main reference for this production has been Stephen Sondheim, James Lapine, Jonathan Tunick, Bernadette Peters, Joanna Gleason, Chip Zien, Tom Aldredge, Robert Westenberg, and Paul Gemignani, *Into the Woods: Original Cast Recording* (New York: RCA Victor, 1988), sound recording; see also Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, *Into the Woods* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

2. Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010), 474. See also Bruno Latour, Frédérique Ait-Touati, and Chloé Latour, "Gaia: Global Climate Tragi-Comedy," trans. Julie Rose (rough draft 1, Bruno Latour's official website), http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/KOSMOKOLOS-TRANSLATION-GB.pdf.