

## ***Philly Fringe 2016: Pig Iron Theatre Company's 'A Period of Animate Existence'***

# **Hello, earthlings. Also, goodbye.**

**Toby Zinman**

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This is the Fringe blockbuster: a visual and aural extravaganza by the much-admired, Obie-winning Pig Iron Theatre Company. *A Period of Animate Existence* asks the dire question, “Is life on earth drawing to a close? Are we in the midst of a Sixth Extinction?”

Enormous geological changes happen slowly — it was the Fifth Extinction that finished off the dinosaurs — so it is unsurprising that this show is long and unhurried and ponderous. With a huge cast of musicians, singers, and actors ranging in age from pert young children to limping seniors, the show is presented in five acts, each with its own characters and tone. Created by composer Troy Herion, with Tony-winning set designer Mimi Lien, and directed by Pig Iron founder Dan Rothenberg, it is a stunningly original piece of theater.

Like a kind of reverse Genesis, *A Period of Animate Existence* begins without any human presence. There is a huge, dazzling cone of light that seems to be searching the walls of the theater, accompanied by music I can best describe as melodic groaning. Suddenly the stage is filled with musicians and writhing silver tubes. And just as suddenly, the curtain falls, a soothing harpist plays (she will return later to eat a marshmallow silently and hilariously), and then a little jokey exchange between a boy and an old woman cheers us up.

**Radical shifts**



*In Pig Iron's show, grandmothers, like the rest of us, are about to become extinct. (Photo by Maria Baranova.)*

These radical shifts in mood occur throughout the five “movements,” as the composer calls them. The actors parade around singing, and then fall down like dominos — the precision is remarkable. There is an apocalyptic food truck with its light-up sign announcing both halal dishes and random prophecies.

Act Four is about children who wonder who or what existed before the first grandma; they perform an (overlong) ballet of the solar system as the pageant descends into cute.

The final act is spectacular: a line of actors in red — the costumes look like

the prehistoric creatures called trilobites, although some seem to wear Renaissance-painting halos. They sing hair-raising atonal music, like Gregorian chants that have come unhinged, while in the arena drawn on the stage in front of them fantastic wrestlers battle each other. The effect is to leave us in a state of amazement.

Behind the creators’ sense of urgency about the desperate state of the planet, there is also a sense of wonder at the complexity and enormity of the cosmos. It is rare that art takes on such monumental ideas as the Sixth Extinction and finds a way to speak meaning, almost without words. *A Period of Animate Existence* is an epic undertaking.



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