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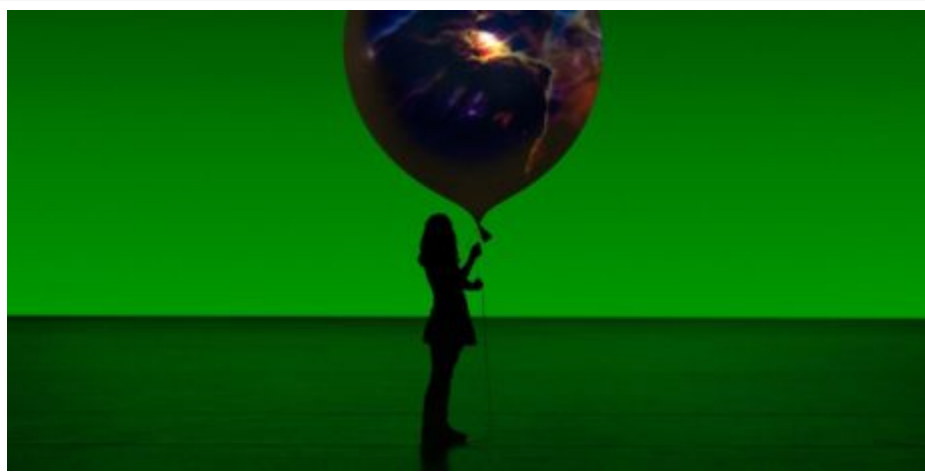
by **Walter Bilderback** on [September 23, 2017](#)



If you open the dictionary and look up the word 'life,' one entry reads: 'a period of animate existence.'

Composer Troy Herion gives this explanation for the title of **Pig Iron Theatre Company's** newest work. ***A Period of Animate Existence*** is the largest project Pig Iron has ever taken on: it has 87 performers, including the Grammy-nominated choir **The Crossing**, instrumental ensemble **Contemporaneous**, an elder choir and a children's choir. Its big themes are Life and Extinction: the lead creators – Composer Herion, Set Designer Mimi Lien, and Director Dan Rothenberg – were inspired by a range of contemporary writers who have addressed the concepts of the Anthropocene and the Sixth Extinction.

This is the most impressive work I've seen from Pig Iron, and you should grab a ticket if you can.



A Period of Animate Existence. Photo by Maria Baranova.

It is a big piece, wrestling with big ideas. It is also full of beauty, in sound, image and movement, and frequently moving. Lien has been Pig Iron's scenic designer for years, and this year won a Tony for *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812*. Her work here (beautifully abetted by lighting designer Tyler Micoleau) is the best I've seen from her. Rothenberg similarly takes advantage of the scale he's been allowed, particularly in the pageant of Movement Four. Herion's music is continually engrossing, exciting, and challenging: he finds a different musical vocabulary for each of the movements, now grand and cosmic, now colloquial, now "composed static" (Movement Three).

The Anthropocene is a proposed new geologic era in which we are now living, where (quoting theorist Timothy Morton in the playbill) "human activity has become a geophysical force on a planetary scale." The word comes from *anthropo* ("man") and *cene* ("new"), and the era succeeds the Holocene, the unusually mild 12,000 year period since the last Ice Age, during which almost everything we conceive as "human civilization" arose. The Earth has seen five great extinction events in its history. Most biological scientists believe we are on the verge, or in the midst of a sixth extinction event, which may be one of the defining features of the Anthropocene, since it too is a result of human actions.

There are many ways of trying to wrestle with the Anthropocene, intellectually and artistically. *A Period's* general focus is from a "zoomed-out perspective," as Herion says in an [interview](#), and is strongest when it opens itself to the uncanny (a phrase used by Lien), which includes "emotions that I don't have a name

74 [Rothenberg](#)). It is structured in five movements, intentionally imitating the 19th century symphony

Shares

74 Movement One established the "zoomed-out," uncanny perspective. Monumental chords emerge out of
ness. Projections mention the five great extinctions, drawing particular attention to the fifth, which
d off the dinosaurs, and the third, which killed 96 percent of all varieties of life on earth. What seems
74 a black sun appears: it later turns out to be a giant cone which rotates. The cone appears and
appears inside a frame that seems to move forward and back, iris-ing in and out, within a black
lum. Lights finally rise a little to reveal the ensemble Contemporaneous playing onstage, with silvery
entire forms writhing next to them. Designer Lien quotes Timothy Morton in her program notes.
on is best-known for championing the idea of [hyperobjects](#) – objects and concepts (like climate
age) that are too large for the mind to really grasp. The music, set, and lighting give Morton's idea an
sttling concreteness.

ement Two is a song, “Humans,” with lyrics by Herion, Rothenberg, and co-librettist Kate Tarker, | by singer/cellist **Daniel de Jesús** with a chorus of Philadelphians moving around him. (Most are teurs recruited for the project, but it includes members of The Crossing and some theater essionals, including Pig Iron co-founder Dito van Reigensberg.) It’s a lovely melody, and some of the s leap out: “Something always was/Something always will be/Let that set you free,” or the final “A e cell still dividing all of us each one of us.”



The company. Photo by Maria Baranova.

Movement Three returns to the uncanny: a solitary food truck in an empty space against a background of static. The truck’s electronic sign continues to advertise its long-gone wares, along with philosophical musings from an undefined intelligence.

Movement Four seems to be the longest movement. Introduced by a young girl played by Margalit Eisenstein, it’s general form is a pageant performed by an elder choir and a children’s choir. Among its highpoints are a conversation between the girl and her Grandmother (Nancy Boykin), who is both The First Grandmother and The Last Grandmother, and a running skirmish between the girl and a young boy (Simon Kiley), who has a very pessimistic outlook on the future. The music here is light and superficially conventional, performed in an onstage bandshell.

The final movement returns to the “zoomed-out” and uncanny. Projections remind us of the trilobites, early arthropods who were the most successful animals on earth for 270 million years, surviving the first two great extinctions, only to perish in the third. Here, Herion’s music is performed by The Crossing, Philadelphia’s superb vocal choir. Dressed by costume designer Loren Shaw as trilobites, they sing a beautifully intricate arrangement. In front of them, members of Drexel University’s wrestling team pair off in three circles, struggling against each other until only one wrestler is left, beaten and exhausted, crawling toward the center as lights go out. The metaphorical meaning of the wrestling was either too complex or too simplistic for me, but the music provided an overpowering ending for the piece.

A Period is most successful in its odd-numbered movements, when it maintains its “zoomed-out,” uncanny scale. It is here I also feel most aware of Rothenberg’s “emotions that I don’t have a name for.”

When *A Period* moves to a more human scale, it reveals a challenge of the Anthropocene as a concept for living in the world, rather than a geophysical demarcation. Just who is included in the “anthropo” of Anthropocene? All humans? Equally? The Artist’s Statement for *A Period* says “We find ourselves in a perilous time.”

A Period’s Anthropocene is heavily influenced by **James Lovelock**, **Yuval Noah Harari**, **Elizabeth Kolbert**, and **Timothy Morton** (along with a seasoning of Henri Bergson’s élan vital); a different Anthropocene (perhaps with a different name) and a different extinction story, emerges in the writing, say, of **Jason W. Moore**, **Rob Nixon**, **Ashley Dawson**, **McKenzie Wark**, **Christophe Bonneuil & Jean-Baptiste Fressoz**, or **Donna Haraway**. The first group, to simplify, tends toward a notion of “universal human nature;” the second, generally speaking, sees our “perilous time” as a result of choices made by certain people, in certain societies, with certain political and economic goals, who have always faced degrees of resistance in pursuing those goals. One is a philosophical perspective; the other is political. Both are important for trying to come to terms with the crisis confronting all of humanity.

I would hope that there is a way to tour this piece, but viewing it in the wake of multiple Category 5 hurricanes in the Caribbean as well as catastrophic flooding in South Asia and West Africa, it’s hard to ignore that *A Period of Animate Existence*, for all its artistic accomplishment, is more a work of art for people who go to the theater in places like Philadelphia, where the philosophical can take precedence in our minds, than it is for an audience in Bangladesh, Nigeria, Micronesia, or Cancer Alley in Louisiana, where existence is an immediate question. Are there artists of equal talent and vision (and founders/presenters with equally deep pockets) to create works that address those societies’ period of animate existence?

Running Time: Approximately one hour and 50 minutes, with no intermission.



The children’s choir. Photo by Maria Baranova.

A Period of Animate Existence plays from through September 24, 2017 and is presented by Pig Iron Theatre Company, performing at the Zellerbach Theatre at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts

– 3680 Walnut Street, in Philadelphia, PA. For tickets, call the box office at (215) 413-1318, or purchase them [online](#).

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