

THEATER

Review: A Cast of 87 Sounds a Climate Change Alarm

By LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES SEPT. 24, 2017

PHILADELPHIA — Saturday afternoon was sparkling here: one of those early autumn days with not a whiff of fall in the air. The temperature was close to 90, and when a taxi drove past with an ad on its roof for a production of “The Nutcracker,” the incongruity was jarring. Aren’t the holidays too far off for that?

“A Period of Animate Existence,” the mammoth and muddled multimedia production I’d just seen at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, is concerned with precisely that sort of mind-set, but on a more consequential scale.

Presented as part of FringeArts’s annual Fringe Festival, where it ran through Sunday, it’s a big-ideas piece by the estimable Pig Iron Theater Company, with an eye-catching team of creators: the composer Troy Herion, the Tony-winning set designer Mimi Lien and the director Dan Rothenberg. The playwrights Will Eno and Kate Tarker contributed the libretto.

With a cast of 87, professionals and amateurs, the show’s primary worries are climate change and human complacency in the face of impending disaster. As an unnamed character (the reliably excellent Jennifer Kidwell) tells the audience, “I think there is something biological about our shortsightedness.” She seems, in fact, pretty placid herself.

In the program, the creators write of their own alarm at living in a species-devastating age that some call “the Sixth Extinction,” as Elizabeth Kolbert does in her book of the same name. They intend “A Period of Animate Existence” — whose clinical-sounding title is a wordier way of saying “life” — to be a contemplation of the dangers facing us, and of whatever future we might have.

That’s unlikely to be the takeaway for spectators, though the first section seems promising. Structured like a symphony, in five movements with pauses in between, the show begins with a column of light projected from the stage, panning very slowly across the darkened house. (The lighting design is by Tyler Micoeau.) Underneath, an orchestra plays rumbling music that could be coming from the bowels of the earth, from the time of creation.

In the second movement, a cellist (Daniel de Jesús) plays and a chorus crisscrosses the stage around him, singing. A swath of humanity, these people are dressed in street clothes, and their simple choreography (by Beth Gill) is strikingly beautiful. When they lie side by side on the floor, moving as one, the performance reaches its sole moment of transcendence.

A food cart is the star of movement three, talking to us through its LED sign. “Let us learn and fast what every god learns the hard way,” it says. “The right to immortality is no privilege.” True enough, but the show’s curiosity about machines and their possible ability to think feels awkward, even a little feigned, alongside its more organic interest in children and elders.

There are lots of both in this production, notably in the overlong movement four, which unfortunately is where the show goes awry. The style of each section is different, and this one is essentially a pageant with a brittle narrative strung through it, with neither the charm of the homemade nor the polish of the professional. The one bright spot is the bandstand, its backdrop a red circle edged in flames spiked with giant matchsticks.

But at least the environmental theme there is clear, whereas movement five is mostly just a head-scratcher unless you’re in possession of a news release that explains the pairs of wrestlers struggling on floor mats as a “visualization of Henri Bergson’s ‘élan vital,’” the “vital impulse” that gives life its uniqueness (and, in the

philosopher's optimistic view, explained the evolution of higher forms). Arrayed behind them, in majestic costumes by Loren Shaw that fuse the papal with the insectoid (they are meant to suggest trilobites, long extinct), is a choir called the Crossing, softly chanting.

Such elements of beauty and humor glimmer occasionally throughout "A Period of Animate Existence." More often, it feels like a show whose ambitions are so weighty that its true form is still buried under the research somewhere.

It's foiled, too, by the desire to change the creative language with each movement. These disparate pieces are intended to add up to something whole. At this stage of the experiment, they don't.

A Period of Animate Existence
Annenberg Center, Philadelphia

A version of this review appears in print on September 25, 2017, on Page C2 of the New York edition with the headline: A Cast of 87 Sounds a Climate Change Alarm.