

SEPTEMBER 23, 2017 | SHAPIRO ON THEATER

Philly Fringe review: 'A Period of Animate Existence'



A scene from Pig Iron Theatre Company's 'A Period of Animate Existence.' (Photo courtesy of Maria Baranova)



SHAPIRO ON THEATER
A BLOG BY HOWARD SHAPIRO

Pig Iron Theatre Company made its reputation by playing with forms as it developed the content of plays. Its new and most ambitious work to date, the FringeArts-supported "A Period of Animate Existence," is much ado about form. The content part — or what I could pin down as content — seems to have gone extinct.

Which is strange, because this major entry in the Philly Fringe Festival is supposed to be about extinction. The show is said to be in five parts, modeled after a symphony; in fact, performers are listed for four "movements," not five. It's the creation of Pig Iron leader Dan Rothenberg, who directs it, plus set designer Mimi Lien and composer Troy Herion.

They use the five massive extinctions through history as a jumping-off point, and focus on what appears to have been the worst one: the Permian-Triassic extinction, around 250 million years ago. Several factors combined — including a greenhouse effect — to kill off maybe 96 percent of all marine species and about 70 percent of species on land, including insects. (The show would have you believe that 96 percent of everything died out.)

"A Period of Animate Existence" is a Big Deal on the Annenberg Center stage. It has about 90 performers including members from many established groups: The Crossing, Contemporaneous, the Philadelphia Boys Choir and Chorale, Philadelphia Girls Choir and Philomusica. It has some magnificent odd-ball costumes by designer Loren Shaw (particularly at the show's end), crystal sound design by Nick Kourtides and precise lighting by Tyler Micoleau. The movement around and in front of a superb on-stage orchestra, from choreographer Beth Gill, contributes greatly to the spectacle. All of this is about the show's form.

As for the content, here's what you get: A beginning done in darkness, except for light that slips through an opening in the stage curtain to slowly circle the ceiling of the theater, twice. It's accompanied by Herion's eerie, dissonant music that becomes bolder by the scene's end, and Dave Tennent's video design of something resembling an eclipse.

The show moves on to a scene with an elderly woman, and a little boy who wants her to hear something, apparently life in general. (Not sure here.) There's some lovely harp playing and then, the best part of the show – a musical number sung passionately with a nothing-new refrain: "Something always was, something else will be. Let that set you free." That, along with an idea in the following scene – "the right to immortality is no privilege" — is what stands for insight.

I sat there wondering when "A Period of Animate Existence" would make a point, take a stand, somehow resolve itself. For instance, there's a sweet circle-of-life part with a little girl, her mother and grandma, but in the service of ... what? There's a small meditation on the meaning of the word "alive" — *if planets move, aren't they alive?* we are asked.

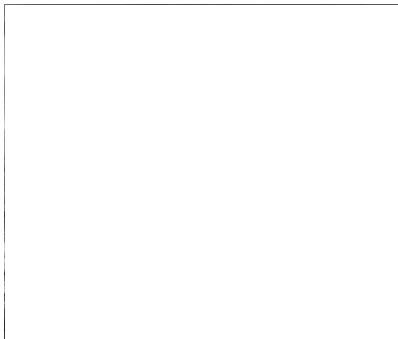
The last part involves wrestlers in three rings. They move deftly and swiftly, and the meaning of their appearance is never clear. Are they dying out from conflict, given that only one remains at the end? Do their repetitive movements show that humans do the same things over and over with no change in results? Are they Darwinian examples of survival? Name that metaphor!

Snippets of music Herion wrote for woodwinds and harp are beautiful. The extravaganza has some compelling moments over a two-hour running time — that comes with the definition of a spectacle. Yet "A Period of Animate Existence" is overwhelmed by the realization of its high concept. In the end, it feels over-produced and under-thought.

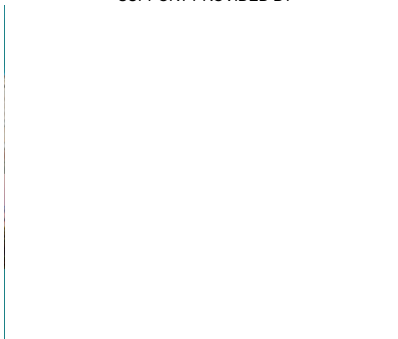
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"A Period of Animate Existence" runs through Sept. 24 at the Zellerbach Theater at Annenberg Center, 3680 Walnut St. at the University of Pennsylvania.

For more information about the Philly Fringe Festival, which ends Sept. 24 (some shows extend past that date), visit fringeats.org.

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