



CAPE TOWN GREEN BY DESIGN
FIND IT! LIVE IT!

Singing in the rain?

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It wasn't until former US Vice President, Al Gore's documentary about global warming, An Inconvenient Truth, hit international screens in 2006 that a renewed sense of urgency about climate change entered mass, popular consciousness.

It was only recently also that environmentalists were ridiculed, sidelined and labeled "bunny huggers" or "lentil heads".

And as you may or may not be aware, some inhabitants of fairest Cape have always been viewed as slightly flakey, a bunch of "hey, shoo, wow" hippies who care more about Fynbos and wetlands than people.

Perhaps it is because the thought of one of the most beautiful geographical regions in the country reduced to an arid desert or a few waterlogged islands is just too awful to contemplate. Gauteng under water is a less bleak prospect (I jest in case you're taking offence).

So, it is somehow fitting that this utterly unique a cappella musical should be set and premiere in this city.

There are few artists who would dare to or get away with tackling such a difficult political and social issue on stage. Graham Weir is one of them. He is sui generis. From his distinctive influence on the ongoing Not the Midnight Mass series to his highly original musicals, Letters from Patient Essop and The House of Usher, Weir's is a singularly authentic vision and talent. He really is without peer.

This is why producer Simon Cooper and his company Uncomfortable Productions have sunk so much passion and money into this project.

Noah, co-written with Weir's longtime collaborative partner Megan Choritz, is set 200 years in the future where the survivors of a massive flood of 2020 reflect and retell the time of the great ecological disaster.

They recall how people moved to the city in droves, placing pressure on resources, particularly water. It is an apocalyptic city overrun with rats and feral eco-warriors. Citizens are "cell sick" from overusing their mobile phones, the authorities control access to everything and are aware of every move, except when citizens enter no-go zones where they cannot be scanned.

It is in this shadowy universe that a young man, Gareth Martens (Francesco Nassimbeni) is struck by powerful visions of a flood. He urges everyone to build an ark and becomes known as Noah of Cape Town.

Director Jaci de Villiers has created a luminous universe that feels like a cross between a graphic novel and a science fiction movie. The tones and hues are blue, black, grey and umber.

Dicky Longhurst's multifunctional and multi-leveled hexagonal steel set is an extraordinary centerpiece that is as much a part of the action as the strong sixteen-member cast itself. It is amazing to watch as it detaches and reattaches, transforming into a desert, a bar, or a whalebone ark.

Weir's songs and lyrics are sheer poetry conjuring up a world that is almost as sacred as it is bleak. The cast manages the complex arrangements with confidence and ease, a tribute to their musical director Amanda Tiffin.

There are many hair-raising, skin tingling moments. There is also much wit and humour to lighten the action.

Performances that leap out are Nqobile Sipamla as the gritty survivor, Leah, Eben Genis as the melancholic Sol, Gys de Villiers as the fugitive Commandant, Anton Luitingh as Abraham and Christine Weir who plays Mary – a sort of channel for Noah’s visions and who hovers and sways over the character like a slender-fingered hydra who’s a dead ringer for Cher.

But as beautiful as it is, the musical’s key weakness is the absence of a core “message”. In fact the only message is perhaps “build an ark”.

Also there is no clear protagonist for the audience to identify with or who can drive the story’s ideological undertow. There is no obvious villain either. The only baddies are the cops looking for Noah, and perhaps the unforgiving climate.

What the piece needs to create meaningful dramatic tension is a climate change denialist who could argue his point and in so doing perhaps reflect some of the audience’s own environmental foibles. It also needs better dialogue that will reflect the underlying philosophical questions and echoes that are underexploited in the script.

This aside, the overall effect of Noah – the feeling that something quite visionary and exceptional is happening on stage – is what will stay with you long after you have left the theatre.

By Marianne Thamm

Noah of Cape Town. Written by Megan Choritz and Graham Weir. Songs, lyrics and musical arrangements Graham Weir. Directed by Jaci de Villiers. Musical direction Amanda Tiffin. Design Dicky Longhurst. At the Baxter Theatre until August 1.

Review first appeared in the [Sunday Times \(http://www.thetimes.co.za\)](http://www.thetimes.co.za).

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