

THEATER REVIEW | 'ARTIFACTS OF CONSEQUENCE'

An Insufferable Pop Song Might Just Save Us All

By JASON ZINOMAN
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Great art may stand the test of time, but a terrible pop song can stick in your head forever. That's why when the world is coming to an end and the human race must choose which cultural works to preserve in an underground bunker, don't bet against Huey Lewis.

In this scenario dreamed up in the deliriously imaginative and talent-rich "Artifacts of Consequence," an offstage jury of select survivors of an environmental disaster must decide the fate of everything from "The Crucible" to a Hula-Hoop. When it comes to plays and musicals, "the artifacts" are introduced to the committee of critics by a pale, beaten-down troupe of performers (Hanna Cheek, Tobias Burns, Amy Newhall) who sing, dance and act with the polished technique and cool personality of robots trained at a dystopian Juilliard. It's an artist's paranoid nightmare of the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) grant-selection process.

Staged cleverly by the director Kristjan Thor, these shows within a show begin listlessly before evolving into small epiphanies of joy. Ms. Cheek, the spunky dynamo from "The Pumpkin Pie Show," packs an emotional wallop in a scene from "Our Town," and Mr. Burns's debonair charm and old-Hollywood voice prove that even when facing the apocalypse, "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning" simply cannot be resisted.

Presented by Electric Pear Productions and Performance Lab 115, this fantastical drama by the gifted young playwright Ashlin Halfnight ("Mud Blossom") always seems one misstep away from ludicrousness, but that can be a very exciting place to be. With a slowly unraveling plot shrouded in mystery — think Adam Bock's "Thugs" script-doctored by [Philip K. Dick](#) — Mr. Halfnight sets up two visions of the world: one practical, survival at all costs, represented by Minna (Rebecca Lingafelter), the officious gatekeeper of the museum of American culture warehoused in a labyrinth below a flooded earth; and the other, more romantic and dedicated to a belief in the elevating powers of art, embodied by the rugged Dallas (Jayd McCarty), who goes to the surface to find new materials to archive. Mr. Halfnight presents both sides, but make no mistake: this show is as much pulp fiction as theater of ideas. Every argument leads to oblivion.

Ari (a delightfully goofy Sara Buffamanti), a surrogate daughter to Dallas and Minna, is the third member of this subterranean family, and she serves as a guinea pig for the play's exploration of the impact of culture in a crumbling society. Since she has spent most of her life in near isolation among rooms of videocassettes, magazines, Twizzlers and GM and [Chrysler](#) cars, she speaks in hackneyed ad slogans and snippets of movie dialogue that reveal a mind that can't imagine an unhappy ending. She's a pathetically impressionable creature of a degraded culture, but when she gleefully sings Mr. Lewis's "Power of Love," the pleasure on her face is not merely manufactured, it's also real. And by the end, it might be all she has left.

"Artifacts of Consequence" continues through May 2 at the Wild Project, 195 East Third Street, East Village; (212) 352-3101, electricpear.org.

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