

HOW THE WORLD BEGAN



January 16-February 24, 2013

HOW THE WORLD BEGAN
PLAY GUIDE

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108 E. Wells Street
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Milwaukee Repertory Theater presents

HOW THE WORLD BEGAN

By Catherine Trieschmann
Directed by Brent Hazelton
January 16 – February 24, 2013
Stiemke Studio



MARK'S TAKE:

"We live in a society that is growing more stringent in terms of how we express our views. If the play contains a lesson, it is to ask us to listen to the other side – to remember that nothing is ever as black-and-white as we might think, and that we could all become more well-rounded individuals by being more tolerant of those who hold opposing viewpoints."

-Mark Clements, Artistic Director

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SYNOPSIS



Ben Charles

This synopsis of the play contains spoilers.

A tornado has destroyed the majority of Plainview, Kansas, including its high school. Micah, a sixteen year old student, meets with his new teacher, the five-month pregnant Susan Pierce, in a trailer serving as a temporary classroom. Susan explains that she joined Rural Corps, an aide organization that places new teachers in struggling rural areas in order to finish her teaching certificate while also receiving health insurance.

Micah confronts Susan about a comment she made in their third period biology class. Prior to the events of the play, Susan lectured the class on the beginning of life on earth. She stated that the leap between non-life and life was the greatest gap in scientific theory—adding, “unless of course, you believe in all that other gobbledy gook.” This comment compels Micah to ask Susan for clarity on what she meant.

At first, Susan claims that she did not say it, but after some pressing by Micah, she admits that she may have. When asked what she meant by “gobbledy gook,” she states that she must have been referring to some earlier scientific and non-scientific theories, such as spontaneous generation. Micah presses Susan by asking if God creating the world is an example of spontaneous generation. After Susan’s admission that it is, Micah asks if the belief that God created the world is the gobbledy gook about which she was talking. Susan refuses to answer and accuses Micah of putting words in her mouth. She spells out that non-scientific theories have no place in a science classroom. Susan says she is not sorry for her statements.

The next day, Gene Dinkel, the town’s postmaster, visits Susan in her classroom. Gene welcomes Susan to town with a lemon meringue pie made by his wife, Ruby. Susan learns that Gene is taking care of Micah because his mother died of cancer and his stepfather was one of the seventeen victims of the tornado. Susan shares her concern for Micah’s anxiety, and suggests they consider taking him to a therapist. Knowing that Micah and Susan had an argument the day before, Gene tells Susan that her students think she said that a “belief in God is a bunch of gobbledy gook.” Before she can respond, Susan begins to experience ligament pain from her pregnancy. Gene calms her down and serves them both some pie. He asks if Susan would apologize to Micah. Susan agrees to apologize for allowing Micah to think that she believes faith in God makes Micah stupid. Gene gets Micah from his truck, and Susan apologizes. Micah refuses to accept the apology because it is not an apology to the entire class.

Several days later, at a planned meeting to discuss the incident, Susan reveals that she awoke one evening to a burning cross in her front yard. Someone had set a scarecrow with a gorilla mask on fire that burned down to a cross. Susan believes that it is an act of terrorism, and thinks she is being branded an anti-Christian evolutionary zealot. Micah knows who did it, but is hesitant to reveal them. After some pressing, and Susan reminding Micah that lying is a sin, Micah reveals the names of the boys who did it.



Deborah Staples, Ben Charles and Marty Lodge

Production Photos by Michael Brosilow

SYNOPSIS (cont.)

Susan wrote a letter to the editor of the Plainview Bulletin and wants Gene, Micah, and other prominent members of the community to sign it with the hopes that they can all move past the incident. The letter states that science does not claim to know all of the secrets of the universe, and that having faith is very important to the healing process. “Faith is the cornerstone of rebuilding Plainview. Science gives us the mechanics to make it happen.” Upset that the letter does not address what happened in the class, Micah refuses to sign it. Gene tries to persuade Micah, but Micah yells at Gene for always trying to fix everything. Micah thinks that Susan should confess to God, so that God does not destroy Plainview. Susan exclaims that God does not exist, there is no heaven, and leaves the classroom.

After the weekend, Micah shows up in the classroom where Susan is packing up her belongings. Micah tries to give her the insurance check that he got from his stepfather’s death. He wants to make sure that her baby is taken care of, since Susan has lost her insurance along with her job. She refuses to take the check, saying that it would be inappropriate. Micah reveals that he does not want the money because he wanted his stepfather to die. Because he did not tell his stepfather to come down into the cellar when the tornado hit, Micah feels responsible for the deaths of the other sixteen people killed by the tornado. Without beginning the discussion over again, Susan assures him that it is not his fault.



Deborah Staples and Ben Charles

INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT

A discussion with Catherine Trieschmann, playwright of How the World Began.

What was your inspiration for writing How the World Began?

I moved to rural, Western Kansas in 2005 because my husband accepted a job teaching philosophy at Fort Hays State University. Part of his area of specialty is Philosophy of Science, so pretty quickly he was invited to participate on panels about creationism and evolution, as this is still an ideological conflict in Kansas schools. Listening to the passionate positions that people took on these topics, I became fairly fascinated in the psychology of it all. What makes a person take up the cause of intelligent design, for example? Why is it so important theologically to contest evolution? And why is it so difficult for the scientific community to listen (not agree, mind you, but just listen to), the concerns of religious folks? Soon after we arrived in Kansas, the little town of Greenberg, just south of us, was completely destroyed by a tornado, which got me thinking a lot about disaster relief, the caprice of nature, and the theology of suffering. In many ways, *How the World Began* was an attempt to understand living in rural Kansas.

How the World Began is a play that can push some buttons, but those buttons may be different in different regions. What have the different reactions to the play been in its productions in New York/California/London/Denver? How do you think Milwaukee will receive it?

I have never been to Milwaukee, so I look forward to finding out how the play is received there! In London, audiences were definitely more removed and objective about the issues, I think, although it is interesting to note that the director, who was from Northern Ireland, found the themes very relevant to his coming of age in Belfast--an area, of course, rife with religious tension. I must also say that audiences tend not to have monolithic responses to the play. I have sat in many different talkbacks, or observed them quietly from the back row, and there have always been people who identify or sympathize more fully with one character or another--sometimes to their own surprise. I think in New York, New Yorkers were a little sensitive to how the New Yorker was portrayed, as Susan is arrogant and patronizing at times, but my goal as a dramatist is always to write complicated, sympathetic, frustrating, flawed, feeling characters, and hopefully Susan is no exception.



Catherine Trieschmann

Let us hypothetically say you have not written *How the World Began* yet. If you started writing it today, and based on the things that have happened since you wrote *World*, what hot-button, polarizing issue would that newer version of *World* focus on?

This is a tricky question, as I do not begin with hot-button issues in formulating plays. I am much more focused on landscape and character and let the themes and issues arise organically from there. I can say, however, that the juxtaposition of pro-life advertisements next to gun shops throughout Kansas struck me as soon as I moved there, and the question of how we value life as it is played out in rural landscapes is probably something I will visit in my work one day. Western Kansas has a vibrant hunting culture and is predominantly Catholic and pro-life. It is also one of the few areas of the country that is de-populating. I think this mix of tradition and rural culture pressing against global change in economics and weather patterns is pretty fascinating stuff. There is an image of an old farmer listening to weather reports on his radio juxtaposed with his grandson on the iPad at the kitchen table that has been percolating in my mind for awhile. Who knows if it will go anywhere?

You are a playwright living in Kansas. What is it like being a playwright in an area that is not considered a major theater market? What are the challenges that come with that?

Well, there is definitely a divide in my life. In Kansas, I am just a stay at home mom who takes her kids to school and tries to keep the dirty dishes to a dull roar. I feel like I have this secret life as a playwright, where I get to travel the country and work with fantastic, interesting people. Then I go back home to my cocoon in Kansas, write, and take care of the kids. It is pretty fantastic, actually. The American Theater does not just happen in New York, so I feel like even NYC-based playwrights travel a lot. It is unusual that I live in rural Kansas, but I do not think the travel aspect of my job is unusual. I wish I lived closer to a major airport. You have to drive at least three hours to get out of Hays. Of course, I certainly miss seeing great theater on a regular basis, and I would say that is the hardest thing. I read a ton of plays, but there is nothing like seeing a strong script brilliantly realized. And I miss shop talk. I love talking about theater almost as much as I love making it.

CONTEXT

While cloaked in the debate of creationism vs evolution, *How the World Began* is really a play about three individuals, with good intentions, trying to work past their individual differences and come together for the good of a community recovering from disaster. Here are a few words from director Brent Hazelton:



Brent Hazelton

How the World Began...

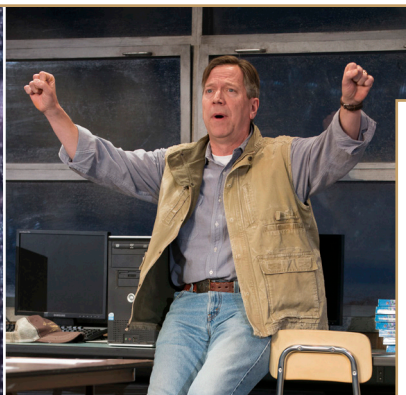
“...is a fundamentally human piece of theater that casts a remarkable light on contemporary America. And in so doing, it discovers an increasingly polarized society that seems to show no signs of becoming less so. It discovers a nation that, built on the compromise inherent in representative democracy, seems to teeter on the verge of completely losing its ability to have meaningful, respectful, and productive conversations.”



Deborah Staples

When discussing hot-button issues, like those discussed in *How the World Began*...

“...we know what we are supposed to do. We’re supposed to practice tolerance. We’re supposed to listen. And we’re supposed to empathize. But that’s all so much harder when we know we’re right. When we know that our viewpoints are fundamentally, unalterably, and objectively correct. When that voice deeper than intellect and fuller than emotion, a voice deep down in that primal part of ourselves that we might consider to be fundamentally essential to our beings or our souls or our sense of right and wrong or our *whatever*, screams at us that we must not change our minds and must not hold our beliefs hostage to expediency and that we *are not wrong*...what do we do? When truths collide, what *should* we do? What *can* we do?”



Marty Lodge

The play shows us...

“...the missteps and failures of three fundamentally good, well-meaning people. It hints at the beginnings of a way forward and suggests that we’re perhaps better served by reminding ourselves of our common interests instead of being distracted by our differences as we all strive to exercise those tricky, inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness alongside one another.”

The next five pages of this guide provide some context for the ideas discussed in this production.

CONTEXT: CREATIONISM

Creationism, at its broadest definition, is the belief that an omnipotent Creator made all things. In the 18th century, those who believed that a higher being created all species individually were called “advocates of creation.” Charles Darwin coined the term “Creationist” in 1856, a term still commonly used today. As the creationism-evolution debate developed, the term “anti-evolutionists” also became common. Today, there are many different forms of creationism. Below are some of those forms.

Young Earth Creationism

Young Earth Creationists believe that the Earth is 6,000 years old according to the lineages in the Bible. They believe that God created the Earth and all life on it in six days. Some Young Earth Creationists follow the Omphalos hypothesis that states that God created Earth to look older than it is.

Old Earth Creationism

Old Earth Creationism is an umbrella term for several different beliefs about creationism. The first of these beliefs is Gap Creationism, which states that a long gap of time elapsed between God creating Earth and God creating life on Earth. Some Old Earth Creationists interpret each of the six days of creation as a long period of time, perhaps even thousands or millions of years. Other Old Earth Creationists accept most modern physical science, including the Big Bang, which they see as a demonstration of God’s creative power. However, they reject much of modern biology, believing that God created life sequentially, introducing new kinds of species that are not genetically related to others.

Intelligent Design

Intelligent Design claims that there is a force beyond nature, a guiding force, or an intelligent designer directing changes in species. The theory of intelligent design states that certain features of the universe and living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection.

Evolutionary Creationism and Theistic Evolution

Evolutionary Creationism and Theistic Evolution are both ideas that claim God creates through evolution. Evolutionary Creationism says that nature has no existence outside of God’s will, that the events of creation happened, but not in time as we know it, and that Adam was not the first biological human, but was the first spiritually-aware one. Theistic Evolution accepts most modern science, and says that God is present outside the realm of science, specifically in the creation of the human soul. This is the position taught at mainline Protestant seminaries, and is promoted by the Catholic Pope.

Methodological Materialistic Evolution

Methodological Materialistic Evolution says that God does not directly interfere with evolution, but that God created evolution.



CONTEXT: EVOLUTION

Evolution is the belief that life on Earth originated and evolved from a universal common ancestor approximately 3.8 billion years ago. Species would preserve traits that were most functional for the roles that they performed, a phenomenon known as natural selection. Scholars credit Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace with formulating the Theory of Evolution through natural selection. Below are some of the fundamental ideas of Darwin's theory.

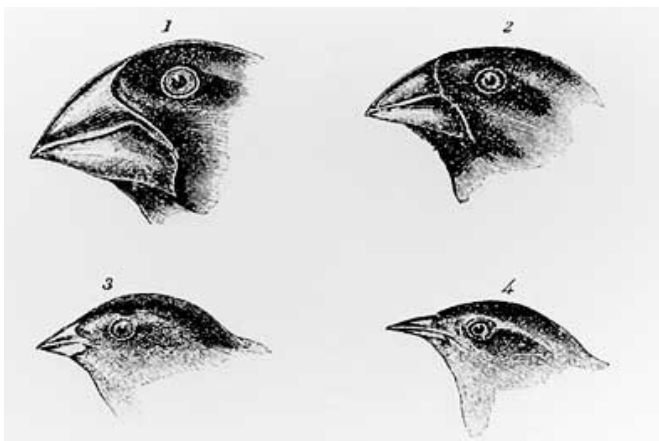
- Species change over time and space. The species living today differ from those that lived in the recent past. Darwin claims fossil records support this theory.
- All organisms share common ancestors with other organisms. Over time, they may divide into different species. Darwin's theory states that if one looked far enough back in time, any pair of organisms would share a common ancestor. For example, the theory posits that humans shared a common ancestor with chimpanzees around eight million years ago, whales around sixty million years ago, and kangaroos over 100 million years ago. The similarities of certain organisms reflect the traits from a shared common ancestor.
- In Darwin's view, evolutionary change is slow and gradual. Darwin claimed the long episodes of gradual change in organisms in the fossil record, along with the fact that no one had observed the sudden appearance of a new species in Darwin's day support this theory. Since then, biologists and paleontologists have documented a wide range of slow to rapid rates of evolutionary change within lineages.

Darwin was not the first person to suggest that life could change over time. French scientist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck had a very different idea of evolution. Lamarck believed that species could pass on traits that they had gained in their lifetimes to their offspring. Lamarckian evolution had two main ideas that were considered to be true. The first was the idea of use and disuse, that species would gain or lose different abilities depending on whether they used them or not, and the second was that a member of a species could pass on traits or abilities gained in their lifespan to their offspring. His main example was that giraffes needed to stretch their necks to reach high leaves, and so they strengthened the muscles in their necks by stretching them, and the giraffe's offspring would therefore have longer necks when they were born.

NATURAL SELECTION:

Darwin paired his Theory of Evolution with his Theory of Natural Selection. Natural selection contains four components.

- Variation: Organisms have variations in appearance and behavior, such as body size, hair color, facial markings, voice properties, and number of offspring. However, some traits show little to no variation among individuals, such as the number of eyes in vertebrates.



Darwin's Finch sketches detailing minute changes in beak formation

- Inheritance: Some traits are consistently passed on from parent to offspring.
- High Rate of Population Growth: Most species have more offspring each year than resources can support. This leads to a struggle for those resources.
- Differential Survival and Reproduction: Individuals possessing traits best suited for the struggle for resources will contribute more offspring to the next generation.

CONTEXT: COMMUNITIES AFTER TRAGEDIES

The action of *How the World Began* occurs after a tornado destroys the majority of Plainview, Kansas, and kills seventeen people. The community to which the characters belong is beginning the rebuilding and healing process after this tragedy. When communities experience tragedy, they cope in many ways as individuals and as a whole. Below are some examples of community reactions to recent or local tragedies.



SANDY HOOK MEMORIAL

Shrines and memorials give communities a way to express their sorrow. In the wake of the Sandy Hook Shooting, where 26 people – mostly children – were shot and killed, the community of Newtown, Connecticut created numerous memorials in remembrance to the victims.



HURRICANE SANDY

After Hurricane Sandy, the United States came together to offer relief to those affected. Some donated money, food, and items to organizations like the Red Cross, to help those affected by the hurricane. Others gave their time and energy to help restore and rebuild communities lost in the storm.



BARNEVELD, WISCONSIN, TORNADO

In 1984, a tornado leveled the town of Barneveld, 30 miles west of Madison. The surviving water tower became a symbol of strength and resilience. People gathered in a town garage daily to comfort each other and share whatever supplies they had.

SIKH TEMPLE SHOOTING IN OAK CREEK

Candlelight vigils allowed mourners to gather as a community to mourn the tragedy. After a gunman opened fire at a Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killing six people, local Sikh leaders held a vigil for the victims. They welcomed outsiders from all over to come into their sacred spaces to pray, eat, and learn about the Sikh religion.



CONTEXT: MAJOR CASES REGARDING EVOLUTION EDUCATION

The debate of evolution or creationism has polarized the United States since the late 18th century. Today each state has the right to choose whether or not they include evolution in state curriculum. It is illegal to teach creationism in public schools, as it violates each student's right to exercise his or her religion freely. Below are some of the major cases that have influenced various state laws regarding evolution.

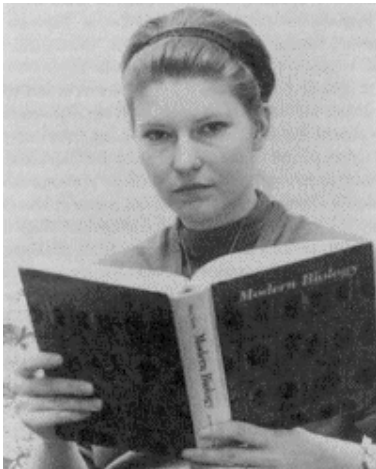
1925 – Tennessee v John Scopes

What Happened: Tennessee pressed charges against John Scopes for denying the Biblical account of man's origin. Scopes lost the trial, but won the appeal due to an error by the judge.

The Effect: As the first major case in the debate of teaching evolution or creationism, it captured the nation's attention and started the legal conversation about the issue.



John Scopes



Susan Epperson, the Arkansas teacher who successfully challenged her state's anti-evolution law in the 1968 Supreme Court Case.

1968 - Epperson v Arkansas

What Happened: The United States Supreme Court invalidated a 1928 statute prohibiting the teaching of evolution.

The Effect: It stated that State curriculum could not “be tailored to the principles or prohibitions of any religious sect or dogma.”

1982 - McLean v Arkansas

What Happened: A United States Federal Court quashed an Arkansas “balanced treatment” statute which required public schools to give equal treatment to “evolution science” and “creation science”. The court found that “creation science” is not a science, and that the statute violated the Establishment Clause of the Constitution. The Establishment Clause states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.”

The Effect: The ruling was not binding outside of the court's district, but the Supreme Court considered the case during *Edwards v Aguillard*.

1987 - Edwards v Aguillard

What Happened: The United States Supreme Court ruled Louisiana's "Creationism Act" unconstitutional.

The Effect: The Court found that by advancing the religious belief that a supernatural being created humankind, the act impermissibly endorsed a particular religious viewpoint. In addition, the Court found that when laws forbid the teaching of evolution except when creation science is also taught, the law undermines comprehensive science education.

2000 – LeVake v Minnesota Independent School District #656

What Happened: Rodney LeVake, a biology teacher, sued the school district for reassigning him to be a general science teacher after the district asked him to teach evolution and he refused. He claimed it violated his right to exercise freedom of religion, his freedom of speech, due process, and academic freedom.

The Effect: A district judge ruled against LeVake on all counts. LeVake appealed, but a court of appeals upheld the decision. The Minnesota Supreme Court refused to review the case, as did the United States Supreme Court.

2005 - Kitzmiller v Dover

What Happened: When the Dover Area School District decided to include Intelligent Design as an alternative to Evolution, eleven parents sued the district, claiming it to be unconstitutional. A US district judge found Intelligent Design to be a form of creationism, and therefore, unconstitutional.

The Effect: As it was the first case regarding Intelligent Design, the case received a great deal of media coverage, and established the precedent that teaching Intelligent Design is unconstitutional.

2006 – Selman v Cobb County

What Happened: Jeffrey Selman and three other parents sued the school district because of a disclaimer put into biology books stating, "this textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered." The parents claimed the disclaimer was unconstitutional.

The Effect: A federal district court judge ruled the disclaimer unconstitutional. After a series of appeals, the lawsuit reached a settlement, as the school board agreed to not disclaim or denigrate evolution either orally or in written form.



Newspaper headline from the Selman v. Cobb County Trial

VISITING THE REP

Milwaukee Repertory Theater's Patty and Jay Baker Theater Complex is located in the Milwaukee Center downtown at the corner of Wells and Water Streets. The building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company.



Milwaukee Repertory Theater. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

The Ticket Office is visible on the left upon entering the Wells Street doors. The entrance to the Stiemke Studio is located by the large rotunda staircase.

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