

British Theatre Guide

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How the World Began

Catherine Trieschmann
Arcola Theatre
(2011)

When the World Began covers similar ground to *Inherit the Wind*, Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee's 1955 parable fictionalising the 1925 Scopes "Monkey" Trial, but from a contemporary perspective.

That play now seems old-fashioned, as viewers are forced to confront the debate between Creationists and those that believe in science and evolution. The subject seems even more incredible when set amongst Bible Belters in 2011.

The setting is a school in the ironically christened town of Plainview, Kansas during the aftermath of a tornado that left 17 people dead. This must have been a terrible challenge for a community that believes every word in both testaments of the bible.

Coincidentally, like Neil Labute's [Reasons to be Pretty](#), which enjoyed its British Premiere the night before, the first half of the drama hinges on a single word.

To say that the new schoolmarm's use of "gobbledegook" during a biology lesson to refer to pre-Darwinian ideas of creation is unwise understates the case. It has the impact of high explosives, causing mayhem from which there may be no return.

It doesn't help that the excellent Anna Francolini's character is a soon-to-be unmarried mother from New York with atheistic tendencies. As such, she almost literally talks a different language from the locals.

The early scenes can be reminiscent of an episode of *Columbo*, as the teacher Susan is first confronted by a 16-year-old pupil, Perry Millward's biblically-named Micah who challenges her statement, and then his not quite guardian.

Where Micah represents the geeky side of fundamentalism, Gene played by Ciaran McIntyre can seem even more challenging, having a much greater degree of worldliness.

Both though attack Susan's beliefs while professing to be doing nothing of the kind, apparently getting to the end of conversations like Peter Falk's detective before turning back for a killer blow.

This can feel overly-planned but once the 90-minute play gets into its key debate that is soon forgotten.

For half an hour or so, the trio wear away at the differences between their world views, setting out the two sets of facts meticulously and allowing audience members to come to their own conclusions.

The topic may have been used before but that in no way diminishes the power of Catherine Trieschmann's treatment. Under Des Kennedy's direction, *How the World Began* is strong enough to engross its audience and even manages to take the mind off the new Arcola Studio 2's wooden benches, which are not sufficiently softened by thin cushions.

This is a lovely piece that works on a number of levels and deserves full houses throughout the run and perhaps a transfer sometime in the New Year.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)