

LOCUST: THE OPERA
AN ENVIRONMENTAL MURDER MYSTERY

Music by Anne M. Guzzo; Libretto by Jeffrey A. Lockwood; ©2018
Performed at the National Museum of Wildlife Art's Cook Auditorium, Jackson, Wyoming
September 28, 2018

SCENE I

The prairie; a buck-and-rail fence, dried grass and sagebrush, intense sunlight with a background of tan, golden and sage green.

Musical Interlude-- projection of the empty prairie

ENTOMOLOGIST enters. He is excited at seeing so many grasshoppers.

ENTOMOLOGIST

So many devastating grasshoppers.
(Starts sweeping the ground with his net in methodical rows)

So many devastating grasshoppers.
(Continues sweeping, then comes to center stage and looks into net)

So many devastating grasshoppers.
(Looks back and sees the field and fence post)

So many despairing ranchers.
(Slowly making way to the fence, exhausted and hung over)

Too much to drink last night.
(Kneels by fence and starts putting grasshoppers into the killing jar).

So many despairing ranchers. Too much to drink last night.
(Falls asleep)

LOCUST enters down aisle HOUSE RIGHT, slowly, dance-like with the sound of rustling wings from the audience. Sings her way to the stage and wakes the ENTOMOLOGIST.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Startled by the apparition, tries to swat away locust)
What-who – are you?

LOCUST

They call me *Melanoplus spretus*.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Bewildered by this answer)
The Rocky Mountain locust?

LOCUST

Yes.

ENTOMOLOGIST

Extinct for a century,
how have you returned? (LOCUST "how have I returned?")

LOCUST sings with very light dancelike movements. ENTOMOLOGIST, shaken and briefly released from the trance, backs up to fence)

LOCUST

Trillions of my kind
once spread across the land
in storm clouds of life,
storm clouds of life.
Some were blown into the mountains
and frozen within glaciers,
Frozen within glaciers.
Now our tombs are melting,
Yes, our tombs are melting,
Ah! Our tombs are melting,
releasing us from the ice.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Stammers and starts coming DOWNSTAGE)
B-b-but they are dead.

LOCUST

(Circles around ENTOMOLOGIST)
Bodily, yes.
Howbeit the spirit of our kind
(ENTOMOLOGIST is caught in trance and mirrors LOCUST's movements)
is freed to wander the earth!

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Breaks out of the spell)
A ghost?!
What do you want?

LOCUST

(Sharply turns head)
Answers.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Confused and defensive)
Answers to what?

LOCUST

(Grandiosely sweeps arms and comes closer)
My swarms eclipsed the sun

ENTOMOLOGIST

Answers to what?

LOCUST

and outweighed the bison.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Annoyed)

What is your question? What is your question?

ENTOMOLOGIST AND LOCUST

My (your) swarms outweighed the bison,

And eclipsed the sun.

(ENTOMOLOGIST is caught in trance again and mirrors LOCUST)

ENTOMOLOGIST

What is your question?

What is your question? Tell me!

LOCUST

Answer my question!

ENTOMOLOGIST

What is your question?

What is your question? Tell me!

LOCUST

Answer my question!

(Circles around ENTOMOLOGIST)

ENTOMOLOGIST

Tell me!

(Frozen in confusion and the trance)

LOCUST

(Angrily but still-both are DOWNSTAGE CENTER)

How did we vanish?

Who was our killer?

Tell me!

(Swings arm toward ENTOMOLOGIST, placing a sleeping spell)

Tell me!

(Spell pushes ENTOMOLOGIST toward fence)

Tell me!

(ENTOMOLOGIST repeats "Tell me" and falls to the ground asleep)

LOCUST exits STAGE LEFT while RANCHER makes his way down aisle HOUSE RIGHT.

RANCHER sees the ENTOMOLOGIST asleep and steps up to the stage.

RANCHER

Are you alright?

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Wakes up and mumbles)
Yes.
(RANCHER kicks his foot)
Yes! (RANCHER sings also)

RANCHER

(Crosses DOWNSTAGE CENTER)
What can be done about these pests?
Scientist, can you kill them all?

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Shrugs apologetically)
Poison can only...
reduce their numbers.

RANCHER

(Looking out into the field, stolidly)
These creatures drove my grandfather from his farm.
Arriving like a summer blizzard –
blanketing fields;
leaving nothing.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(With sympathy, crossing to RANCHER)
I've read such tales of misery.

ENTOMOLOGIST AND RANCHER

I've read such tales of misery.

RANCHER

(Steps forward with righteous anger)
These insects seem as a Biblical plague.
But I am a pious man.
Why have they returned?

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Has been in own world looking around at grasshoppers, but picks up insect to show him)
These are not the locusts of your grandfather.
They are normal grasshoppers.

RANCHER

(His brow wrinkles in confusion)
Tell me the difference.
Tell me. Tell me!

ENTOMOLOGIST

(With a professorial tone)
Locusts are grasshoppers –
with the power

RANCHER

With the power?
(Backs up)

ENTOMOLOGIST

To transmogrify.
(In trance-like state)
Like Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde.

RANCHER

(Surprised and apprehensive-- backs up)
Monsters? Monsters?

ENTOMOLOGIST

As bodies darken
and wings lengthen,
they form terrible swarms.

RANCHER

(Worriedly)
Will such locusts return?

ENTOMOLOGIST

(To RANCHER)
Never again.
(Aside)
Or so I thought.

RANCHER

But Why?

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Lost in thoughts- hears the ghost for a moment)
Nobody knows...

RANCHER sees that ENTOMOLOGIST is lost in thought, shrugs and exits STAGE LEFT

SCENE II

The study of the Entomologist, including: a wooden table (with desk light, books, a whiskey bottle and a glass) and a chair on a braided rug; a mantle with an unlit candle, a slowly turning electric fan

Musical Interlude

ENTOMOLOGIST begins to pick up jar and walk over STAGE RIGHT to study area, puts on robe and sets down net and jar. He sits down at desk, exhausted and confused.

ENTOMOLOGIST

So tired, but sleep won't come.
And no answer comes,

to explain the locust's fate.

(Hears the storm coming, turns off fan, crosses in front of desk to window, holding robe tight)

But a storm is coming.

The temperature it is dropping.

The night grows strangely cold.

(Looking into distance like a trance, but stops, has a thought)

Wait!

I remember...

Could it be?

(Hurries back to the desk and starts paging through books)

Perhaps what released their spirit,

also ended their life.

(Stands with one of the books, crosses study like lecturing)

Here it is.

Today the climate warms.

But then, the opposite –

a Little Ice Age.

Crops failed. The Thames froze.

Across five hundred years,

(Crosses to desk)

Yes!

cold weather –

a deadly blow to the cold blooded!

(Slams the book closed with finality and settles in for well-deserved sleep)

LOCUST ENTERS through STAGE LEFT slowly, dancelike

LOCUST

(Crosses into study closer and closer)

Awake, awake!

You are not done.

(Flits over to desk and leans into ENTOMOLOGIST'S face like a cat)

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Stirs and is startled by LOCUST. He's annoyed and tired.)

Be gone.

Let me sleep.

I have your answer.

(Gestures toward her with the book and tries to sleep again)

LOCUST

(With a sigh, turns page, hands book back over)

Read carefully.

Seeing only your science,

you overlooked our story.

The Earth was warming as we were dying.

(On last line, crosses DOWNSTAGE CENTER)

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Gets up and joins LOCUST)

It can't be.

(Looks through the pages and shakes his head)

LOCUST

Admit your error. (ENTOMOLOGIST replies "No")

My kind survived the cold,

LOCUST AND ENTOMOLOGIST

and flourished with rising temperatures.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Tired and defeated, crosses to desk)

What else changed at such a pace,

to account for your extinction?

LOCUST

(Turns away and starts crossing STAGE LEFT)

No rest for the wicked.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Freezes, surprised)

But I'm not wicked.

LOCUST

(Completes exit)

We shall see...

ENTOMOLOGIST sits at desk, exhausted and confused.

ENTOMOLOGIST

The storm has cut the power.

(He tries lamp and it doesn't turn on. Goes to mantle and lights a candle. Crosses back to desk)

No matter how modern,

fire still shapes our world,

serves our needs.

Fire, fire, firmmmm (Falls asleep)

LOCUST

(The sound of rustling wings from the audience as LOCUST enters and approaches the sleeping ENTOMOLOGIST but keeps a distance)

You cannot rest.

Find the answer.

Awake, awake.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Slowly lifts his head from the book and rubs his face)
I am so tired,
I cannot think.
But...
I remember...
(Reaches for a book, opens it and slowly turns the pages)
About fire,
about natives,
and about changes to the land.

LOCUST AND ENTOMOLOGIST

(LOCUST and ENTOMOLOGIST cross DOWNSTAGE CENTER, hypothesizing together)

Native people and creatures,
depended on one another.

LOCUST

And fire?

ENTOMOLOGIST

Somewhere in these books,
Somewhere in these books...
(He begins flipping through pages faster, searching anxiously)

LOCUST

(Stills his hand firmly but gently; the ENTOMOLOGIST looks up at her)
Native people burned shrubs and trees,
expanded the prairies,
that fed the bison,
that fed the people.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Puzzling to assemble the pieces of a new theory)
And locusts flourished on the grasslands
along with bison
and Natives.
Until...

LOCUST

(With sadness and stillness)
Until your kind came.
And the native people died,
and the fires died.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Pacing, thinking)
So trees and shrubs spread,
instead of fire.
And your precious grasses—
retreated.

LOCUST

(Patiently, like a teacher to a student, but without any sense of shared excitement)
So it would appear...

ENTOMOLOGIST

(With exuberance)
The answer!
You disappeared along with fires!
(He takes a drink from the whiskey glass in celebration)

LOCUST

(Softly, gently refutes the Entomologist)
But my kind vanished in a few, few years.
The forests took decades to expand.
And the prairies survived.
We did not.

LOCUST exits. ENTOMOLOGIST is dumbfounded and deflated.

Musical Interlude--During a brief intermezzo, a low rumble of thunder is heard, followed by increasing patter of rain, then punctuated by a huge, thunderous boom (using audience hand percussion and a thunder sheet).

ENTOMOLOGIST

Thunder shakes the ground,
like the rumble of a stampede.
Or a bison herd?
(Again tries the desk light, which comes on as the power is restored)

Might there still be a connection?
(Opens a new book from the stack and flips through)

There it is!
Return, wretched phantom.
Learn your fate.
(Sits at desk cockily, props up feet, takes a drink)

(The sound of rustling wings from the audience as the LOCUST ENTERS. Entomologist lifts his head to face the LOCUST and points at her, almost as an accusation)
Your kind was linked to bison.
Their loss meant your demise.
(Gestures grandly to the open page and LOCUST approaches to look)

LOCUST

(With calm patience, but dismissively)
Such faith in your numbers.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Points emphatically, even angrily at the book)
Look at the data!
Bison shaped the prairie—
churned the soil,

left their waste.

LOCUST

(With a tone of admiration, facing out)
A beautiful idea.
So many creatures,
so tightly linked.
(A dramatic pause)
But no.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Plaintively, overlapping his voice with her "no")
No, no, no, No?!
(Cries out, buries head in hands)

LOCUST

(Calmly explains away his theory)
We laid our eggs in compact soil,
not that churned by hooves.
We sought sandy beds for our young,
not the black ground.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Pounds the table in rhythm, getting angry; this frightens LOCUST and she backs away)
The opposite then?!
The loss of bison favored your kind,
What settlers witnessed was unnatural.
And when the ecosystem balance returned,
you faded away.
(Standing, pointing at LOCUST. Both are frozen in tableau)

LOCUST

(Returns to dancelike motion)
But my kind was frozen into layers of ice,
formed long before your people arrived.

Not an aberration,
our swarms were joyous flights
of reproductive fancy —
(Swings arms over and crosses to desk playfully)

ENTOMOLOGIST

Dammit!
(Exasperated, stands. Is full of anger, accelerating)
I can find no cause,
no ecological change —
at the right time,
at the right scale,
in the right way.
(Each of the last lines includes a pound on the desk)

Tell me!

(This has frightened the LOCUST. She backs up and turned away, folded her wings together)

(ENTOMOLOGIST feels remorse, is deflated)

The answer must be hidden

somewhere in the data.

Numbers don't lie.

LOCUST

(Crossing back over, matter of fact)

Nor do they tell the truth.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Slowly, weary, spent)

I need rest;

leave me alone.

This room was a place

where I could always return,

where I could find safety and comfort.

Until you came and ruined my life!

Cruel spirit,

I implore you,

give me back my sanctuary.

LOCUST had begun crossing to STAGE LEFT, but stops at his last words...has a thought.

LOCUST

Sanctuary, sanctuary, sanctuary...

(With sudden clarity and insight)

Of course!

(With a hint of resolution)

That's the answer.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Frustrated, spent, skeptical)

If you know,

tell me.

LOCUST

You must find the answer yourself.

A teacher demands

the student learns.

Listen to yourself,

Listen to others.

Hear the story.

The answer is close.

You are tired, exhausted –

vulnerable

(LOCUST sweeps one arm, a half-spell. ENTOMOLOGIST slumps into his recliner and echoes her word: "vulnerable" as if half-asleep)

This day and night –
revealed not in hours strong,
but in moments weak.

Look not to when I swept across the continent.
Look to when I collapsed, exhausted –
vulnerable.

(LOCUST sweeps arm again, nearly delirious with exhaustion ENTOMOLOGIST echoes her word: "vulnerable")

Places where I could rest –
and find sanctuary.

(ENTOMOLOGIST awakens and reaches for the bottle; LOCUST gestures to the bottle)

Even there you will find a clue.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Holds up the bottle)

Here?

You were poisoned?

But no insecticides,
were spread across the land.

(Tries to pour another drink, but the bottle is empty)

Gone? An eighty proof mystery.

(Laughs hoarsely and madly; clearly spent and physically depleted)

LOCUST

(Softly, kindly, almost as a lullaby)

Look not to the contents,
but to the bottle itself.

Look not to its numbers.

Look to its form.

Let it shape your search and your dreams...

(LOCUST sweeps arm and ENTOMOLOGIST's head drops to the tabletop)

LOCUST exits.

Musical Interlude--An intermezzo of previous music as we are returned to the prairie

ENTOMOLOGIST enters STAGE LEFT and begins sweeping. Tired and hot, he stops and looks around, and then pulls out a flask and takes a drink.

RANCHER enters from the STAGE LEFT and sees ENTOMOLOGIST. ENTOMOLOGIST notices sheepishly and offers the flask as RANCHER steps up on stage.

RANCHER looks around and then takes a drink during first chords of next scene.

SCENE III

RANCHER

(Clears his throat and tries to be dignified)
What are the numbers?

ENTOMOLOGIST

(With growing intensity and emphasis on the first of the three syllables in each case, perhaps)
Outrageous;
Staggering;
Biblical!
(A pause and his voice moderates to convey objective professionalism)
We will do what we can
to control them.
(RANCHER returns the flask and ENTOMOLOGIST takes a seat on lip of stage)

RANCHER

(Looks to the horizon and brings forth a deep, family memory, takes DOWNSTAGE CENTER)
We can fight better than my grandfather could.
When locusts took his homestead in Nebraska,
he headed west—
found a fertile valley;
settled in the Rockies;
became a wealthy man.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Curiously, with a hint of surprise)
He found gold?

RANCHER

(Smiles, with a sense of insight and irony)
Even better.
He found gold *miners*.
The surest payday came from growing food,
for hungry men.
They plowed deep into the Rocky Mountains.
He dug deep into the rich, rich soil.
(Pauses and then speaks with respect and reverence)

Farmers transformed the montane valleys.
(RANCHER AND ENTOMOLOGIST together)

Thanks be to God for:
fruitful labor and
plentiful harvests.
(Pauses again, then continues wistfully)

The wilderness was subdued,
the land made bountiful,
the earth made beautiful—
just like that butterfly...

Both the RANCHER and ENTOMOLOGIST see a butterfly land by the RANCHER.

ENTOMOLOGIST

A Monarch returning to the
mountains of Mexico –
to the groves her grandparents left.
(Crosses behind RANCHER slowly to pick up butterfly)

RANCHER

She marks the start of the flood,
an unstoppable flow of life across the land.
(Both look at butterfly)

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Politely correcting, with a friendly tone, their having imbibed from the shared bottle)
Not unstoppable, my good man.
(Releases the butterfly)

The migration is spectacular,
with millions on the move.
(They both watch a group of monarchs fly from STAGE RIGHT to STAGE LEFT)

But they are vulnerable.
(ENTOMOLOGIST crosses behind RANCHER, still holding onto his shoulder)

The entire population
spills across the continent each summer...
(With growing darkness)
Then funnels into mountaintops each winter,
into groves the size of this pasture –
forested sanctuaries,
coveted by loggers.
(Takes a drink from flask)

RANCHER

(Nods his understanding)
Like cattle, seeking safety,
only to find the squeeze chute is a trap –
a prelude to slaughter.

ENTOMOLOGIST

Indeed.
(Gravely nods his assent to the Rancher)
There is no safety to be found
in an ecological bottleneck.

RANCHER

Amen.
(Takes off hat in reverence. ENTOMOLOGIST has offered the flask again and he kindly refuses)

There is no peace to be found
in a whiskey bottle.
Now, I must head to church.
(Steps off stage)

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Confused, not being a church-going sort)
On a weekday?

RANCHER

(Without harsh judgement of the impious scientist)
Not for the Sabbath.
We gather to renovate the sanctuary,
so it will hold us all.

RANCHER exits up aisle HOUSE RIGHT as he sings, walking amiably.

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Remembering a word from the night before...thinking, crossing back to fence)
Sanctuary, locusts, bottleneck...
Sanctuary, locusts, bottleneck...
(Falls asleep)

LOCUST enters with slow, dancelike motions. Rustling of wings heard from audience.

LOCUST

Awaken scientist,
you have the answer.
(Awakens ENTOMOLOGIST just like before)

Hush your numbers.
(Hushes scientist, but helps him up, nudges him CENTER)

Tell my story.
Tell my story.
Tell my story.
(LOCUST steps back)

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Collects himself, begins sadly)
Between irruptions,
your kind found refuge in mountain valleys.
These sanctuaries were bottlenecks.

LOCUST

Yes.

ENTOMOLOGIST

My kind plowed and harrowed,
planted and flooded –

LOCUST AND ENTOMOLOGIST

You (We) destroyed your eggs, your nymphs.

You (We) destroyed your homes!

(LOCUST crossed behind ENTOMOLOGIST to STAGE LEFT, with some sadness)

ENTOMOLOGIST

(To LOCUST)

But we did not know,

or plan, or try –

to end your life.

LOCUST

(Stoically, coldly, facing away)

Had you known,

would it have mattered?

ENTOMOLOGIST

No...

(A pause to reflect and then changes his mind)

Yes.

(LOCUST turns to look)

We would have done more to destroy our enemy.

(Frozen with the weight of these thoughts)

LOCUST

(With some gentleness and support)

Plainly an enemy then.

Maybe a teacher now.

What have you learned, what have you learned?

(LOCUST sits on lip of stage to listen)

ENTOMOLOGIST

(Ponders before answering)

Like you,

we eat everything;

we fly everywhere;

we breed everywhen.

(Another pause as he thinks more deeply)

Like you,

our numbers do not assure survival.

(Turns to LOCUST, pleadingly)

But are you truly gone?

Do none survive

in some small meadow?

(Kneels down to LOCUST)

LOCUST stands up sadly and begins to cross behind ENTOMOLOGIST, who is kneeling.

LOCUST

(CENTER stage, rather still)

Perhaps.

But unless our shadow could sweep again
across the cloudless prairie,

the Rocky Mountain locust is gone.

(ENTOMOLOGIST looks up at LOCUST)

Like you, we are what we do.

LOCUST crosses behind ENTOMOLOGIST

What if your kind could no longer dance?

or write?

or pray?

Dance, speak, pray?

(Has bent down with wings like whispering to ENTOMOLOGIST)

ENTOMOLOGIST

(With a sense of desperation)

But a few of you could be preserved...

LOCUST

(Interrupting)

...or imprisoned –

(Crossing around ENTOMOLOGIST)

like Monarchs inside a glasshouse.

During quiet musical measures, LOCUST steps DOWNSTAGE CENTER. ENTOMOLOGIST walks behind her slowly, create tableau that breaks on descending bass notes.

If you will not protect
the last grove of old-growth forest,
the only patch of tallgrass prairie,
the final tract of arctic tundra...

(Turns to look at ENTOMOLOGIST)

LOCUST begins a sad retreat towards STAGE RIGHT stairs and pit

what hope is there for locusts?

(Sung from aisle HOUSE LEFT)

ENTOMOLOGIST is left on stage, looking out as LOCUST goes down aisle

– END –