The musical at the end of the world



Mother (Tilda Swinton) is having a bad dream. Sleeping beside her is the sweet and affable Father (Michael Shannon). She wrestles herself out of a nightmare and is comforted by her husband. She lies to him and says she’s okay, but she’s clearly not.

How could she be? She knows everything. She knows if she were to crawl out of bed and leave her home she’d be met with a cold salt mine. She knows that directly above the salt mine, the world is on fire – that everyone is dead. She knows that the man she’s sleeping beside, that sweet and affable husband, is responsible. And she knows she’s not innocent either.

The End is a musical with songs sung by the six survivors living in a luxurious bunker. They’re all benefactors of the oil business, which is to say, they’re still alive. It’s a carefully constructed house of cards that after 20 years of living underground has become routine. But when Girl (Moses Ingram) arrives, their false sense of safety is threatened and the lies they’ve told themselves to make it through each day

slowly begin to erode.

It’s a curious and surprising project from director Joshua Oppenheimer, best known for his stunning documentary *The Act of Killing*, in which he and his co-directors ask their subjects to reenact mass murders they were involved in during Indonesia’s civil unrest in the mid ‘60s. I sat down with Oppenheimer ahead of *The End*’s nationwide theater expansion. We talked about the obvious thing — his big leap from documentary filmmaking to musicals — and more curiously, what it tells us about people when their wristwatch costs more than a car.

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The Verge: I want to start with the obvious question here, which is why did this story demand a musical? What is it about that genre that you wanted to explore?

Joshua Oppenheimer: Musicals are really the quintessential genre of false hope, and I say false hope because I think it’s actually despair in the sheep’s clothing of hope.

The idea that no matter what, the sun will come out tomorrow — or its more extreme form in the end, that our future is bright, which is what the family is singing as they kind of stare into the abyss at the very end of the film, desperately trying to convince themselves that that’s the case — it’s utterly passive because little Orphan Annie, when she sings “the sun will come out tomorrow,” she’s just willing it to be the case and counting on good luck.

And I think that passivity comes from this deep place, a deep sense of disempowerment. It’s an American genre because we claim to be a democracy, but in a way we’ve always been this quite rough and tumble, brutal oligarchy with a Constitution

that is hardly democratic at all, with everything from the electoral college to the Senate, to gerrymandering to the lifetime appointments on the Supreme Court to our systems of checks and balances. Here's a country which tells itself you have all this power to shape your future, but not only do we have less social mobility than almost any other industrialized nation. The rags-to-riches story turns out to be a lie. But the democratic story is also a lie.

***The End*'s opening is interesting because of its warmth. You have the Father consoling the Mother after a bad dream, but as time goes on, we learn that these characters have done some pretty bad stuff.**

We set up several things in that scene. We set up haunting and suppression. We set up a Father who is warm and caring. We set up a bad relationship because the Mother immediately lies to him. We set up some kind of Mexican standoff or whatever the problem is – they can't talk about it because the Father has to act like it's fine.

That scene used to come elsewhere in the script and later in the film, and that was an inspiration in the editing to put it at the beginning because it offers the keys to unlock all of the dynamics In the first ensemble song: the Mother's ill at ease, Father comes from the dining room and sings "Forever the Strength of Our Family." Mother immediately turns away and goes to the flowers. We instantly connect that, for anyone who's paying attention, to the scene that just preceded it. Whereas before [in the original edit] that scene was there, people would miss that.

Michael Shannon's performance is especially surprising. He's very sweet and endearing. And his singing is so human. How'd you know that was the right voice for this role?

He has this honeyed, easy voice, like those sort of knit sweaters that he's wearing. But he's so sincere that he's not

got that macho fear of almost keening in his longing for love. So he goes into the pitches, into falsetto with ease, both in song and in speech.

He becomes this almost like Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, but with this kind of roiling rage that can become self-hatred or rage and, which is inherently somehow dangerous and off-balance underneath. I think he's much more interesting than Mr. Smith.

But he's so avuncular. And I love that. And then he's so surprising. [Shannon] is so free as an artist, as a performer that he'll just go where his inner life takes him and that it makes him sincere and broken. I mean, everyone I cast has something that shares that unguardedness that I think makes them collectively not so much a troop as… I've kind of come to describe them as Doomsday cult members signing up for the rapture. They're hopeful and they're lost and they're shockingly mortal.

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I loved how cold the bunker was. And it's with the knowledge that outside everything's on fire, right? How'd you go about location scouting for that and also, why is the apocalypse so cold?

Everything really emerged from the songs. When the songs were these desperate attempts to convince themselves that everything will be okay is musicalized as in all the Golden Age musicals and musicalized false hope, I realized that the audience should be able to forget sometimes that they're in the bunker. As we hum along with them as they sing, we should forget with them that they're trapped in a bunker. And that meant that there should be exteriors that led us to this kind of termite colony or ant colony model of a bunker where you

have a large underground cavern structure, and then some of the caverns are finished into these beautiful rooms, and some of them are just raw.

And that led to the idea that we would have exteriors be the salt mine. We shot three weeks in a salt mine, and there was just a feeling that it should sort of feel like moonlight. There's a lyric, "You can shine like snow in the moonlight," and I think that inspired [cinematographer] Mikhail Krichman and I to make the salt mines sort of cold and blueish. And then the rooms could be cozy in contrast to that when they're not. When they're not though, the paper flowers would be like a shocking red.

Then the layout of the rooms were built in studios, and the layout was determined by the structure of the songs. You're watching people literally breaking down in song. We want to bear with us to that, which meant it didn't feel right to cut if we didn't have to. We tried to figure out how the lead vocalist in any number could bring us through their natural action to the next person. That led to certain floor plans and ideas.

We found floor plans that could accommodate all of our ensemble songs. That became the design for the bunker. And in a sense, the floor plan of the bunker actually somehow has as its DNA, the structure of the songs.

I want to ask you about the role of luxury wristwatches in this film. Everyone is wearing something special – which is a common class signifier in films, but in an underground bunker, they felt especially poignant.

There's two things. First, I wanted to make a third film in Indonesia with the oligarchs who came to power through the genocide there. And I couldn't because I couldn't safely return to Indonesia after *The Act of Killing*. I started researching oligarchs in analogous situations elsewhere. And I

found someone was buying a bunker, and that inspired *The End* indirectly. But as I was on that journey and in the years working in Indonesia, I always knew that a sign of corruption was when people – and sign of a corrupt country in general – was when people's watches cost more than their cars. That's how you knew that government officials were corrupt.

I really became interested in the watches while making those two documentaries in Indonesia and researching these real-life oligarchs. I collected lines similar to the ones the Son says when he gives the Girl a watch. He talked about rose gold and alligator skin and the most accurate time piece ever made. And that was sort of in the back of my head. Then I wrote that song about time. [singing] *Seconds ticking past so fast before you notice and they're gone. But I remember time when moments did not disappear, when you closed your eyes, a single breath could go on and on forever. So how few breaths we might have left meant nothing much at all.*

That lyric cemented the role of watches in the film because… Now I'm coming to the real point: ultimately time is the antagonist, right? From the very beginning? Son is doomed eventually to end up alone because mortality is the antagonist in all stories. And when the parents die, the son will end up alone. Will he choose to kill himself? Will he live out the rest of his days in bereft loneliness. The film is about this family, these nameless characters are all of us because the family is each and every one of our families. But at the same time, it's the entire human family and we are facing the existential antagonist of time as we decide collectively whether or not we're going to address the ecological crisis, whether or not we're going to address climate change before it's too late.

Time is really something I want the viewer to be keenly aware of. And also how if we can't be present with each other because we're lying to each other or because we're unable to apologize for the ways we've heard each other. Therefore we're

constantly worried about tiptoeing around no-go areas that hollow out our relationships, then we lose a quality of time in which we simply can be together and share this history of what we all are.

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