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The cast of "Earthquakes in London," left, takes one of the characters in Mike Bartlett's play for a ride around the Cottesloe stage. The drama sets out to portray the twilight of a particular eve of destruction — the perils of global warming. Below, Katherine Kingsley and Michael Arden in Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Aspects of Love," at the Menier Chocolate Factory.

MANUEL HARLAN (ABOVE); CATHERINE ASHMORE

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LONDON

The National Theatre is offering an array of end-of-the-world visions

BY BEN BRANTLEY

If you're looking for a ringside seat at the apocalypse this summer, then the National Theatre is your kind of place. I can't remember a season in which a single institution has offered so many productions with a Götterdämmerung vibe, though of course I missed out on the Weimar Republic.

Under the continually fertile artistic leadership of Nicholas Hytner, the National has opened Moira Buffini's "Welcome to Thebes" — ancient Greek tragedy meets latter-day civil-war-torn Africa — and Georg Büchner's "Danton's Death" — boy meets revolution, loses head.

Even the theater's sold-out glamour hit, a sumptuous revival of Terence Rattigan's "After the Dance," is set on the eve of World War II, when the lights are going out all over a superannuated generation of profligate partygoers.

And should you prefer your end-of-the-world visions straight up, without distracting poetic metaphors or historical distance, there is now Mike Bartlett's "Earthquakes in London," which shook, rattled and rolled at its opening Wednesday at the National's most intimate house, the Cottesloe.

Apparently aspiring to take on London the way that Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" took on New York, this big, untidy drama sets out to portray the

surreal twilight of a particular eve of destruction.

In "Angels" the catalytic crisis was AIDS; in "Earthquakes" it is global warming. Mr. Bartlett follows the entwined fortunes of three sisters — that most holy of theatrical triumvirates — the estranged daughters of a prophet of ecological doom. Sarah (Lia Williams, the West End's reigning ice queen), the eldest, is the government's minister for the environment; Jasmine (Jessica Raine), the youngest, is a professionally surly student; and Freya (Anna Madeley) is pregnant and seriously scared.

"Earthquakes" has been given an inventively gaudy and, you should pardon the word, environmental staging by Rupert Goold, who brought similar floor-show flashiness to Lucy Prebble's "Enron," and the set designer Miriam Buether. A raised orange runway snakes through the audience, set off by recessed stages at either end of the theater and photographic projections of present-day London on the side walls. The action, the images, the talk are all virtually nonstop as personal and public destinies converge and crash.

But one wishes the talk were more original than it is. Mr. Bartlett presents scenes of fractious relationships and Faustian bargains in the making in terms so classic as to be clichéd. The dialogue made me long for the windy but refreshing verbal symphonies of Mr. Kushner's "Angels."

The acting is very good though, intense and free of vanity, and it underscores Mr. Bartlett's fierce notion that human solipsism withstands even cosmic catastrophe. The show also makes energizing use of pop music, by the likes of Coldplay and Arcade Fire, as a common emotional de-



nominator for a city of disparate souls in pain. It is a device that has been used often in films. Paul Thomas Anderson's "Magnolia" comes to mind. But Mr. Goold and Mr. Bartlett convert it into a persuasive and affecting theatrical tool.

I wish I could say I was equally affected by the sweeter strains of pop found in Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Aspects of Love," which has lyrics by Charles Hart and Don Black. This 1989 poperetta, based on David Garnett's 1955 novel about musical beds in the south of France, has been brought back to life by the London theater's favorite mighty mouse, the Menier Chocolate Factory. The Menier revivals of "Sunday in the Park with George," "A Little Night Music" and "La Cage aux Folles" all transferred to the West End here and to Broadway.

"Aspects" would seem to be an ideal

candidate for a makeover by the Menier, which strips big, overdressed musicals down to their soulful essences. It has long been argued that the original deluxe staging of "Aspects," directed by Trevor Nunn, was out of proportion to the show's more modest charms. So Mr. Nunn has returned to right things with a chamber-opera approach.

The problem is that without opulent layers "Aspects" just looks naked and undernourished, like a bony high-fashion model in a bikini. Designed by David Farley, this production uses projections of snapshots from photo albums to establish time and place as one Anglo-Franco family's sexual roundelay stretches over the years. And the entire sung-through show has a feeling of a long, long trail of telegraphic gossip dispatches scrawled on the backs of picturesque postcards. ("Guess who he's sleeping with now?!")

Despite being attractively sung by a cast that includes a vulnerable and wistful Michael Arden and a hard-as-nail-polish Katherine Kingsley, I did not believe for a second that any of the characters were attracted to — much less in love with — one another.

Unfortunately, it seems that this show's greatest shot at immortality will probably be through the sendup of its best-known number, "Love Changes Everything," by the satirical revue "Forbidden Broadway." Remember? The one that went, "I, I sleep with everyone." I haven't been able to get that song out of my head since I saw "Aspects" — I mean the parody, not the prototype.

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