

The Big Chill: Giving AC the Cold Shoulder

Saturday night at Wolf Trap, the open-air amphitheater outside Washington, "Wicked" Broadway baby and "Glee" guest artist Idina Menzel took the stage with the National Symphony Orchestra—and started to complain.

It was hot, you see. Not anything worse than you might expect for a sultry evening in July, but plenty hot enough to discomfit a diva.



DE
GUSTIBUS
By Eric Felten

After each tune she took a languorous breather to sip chilled apple juice, wipe her sweaty brow and gripe that the heat was more than she could bear.

To be fair, the stage lights may have added to Ms. Menzel's ordeal, but her fluttering dress betrayed that she was enjoying the comforts of a fan. She spent more time whining about the weather than she did

singing. It was as if she were trying to lend credence to the thesis of the newly trendy environmental scold, Stan Cox, who argues that our addiction to air conditioning has rendered us unfit for the outdoors.

Mr. Cox has a new book out, "Losing Our Cool: Uncomfortable Truths About Our Air-Conditioned World (and Finding New Ways to Get Through the Summer)"—a rather rambling title that could have been shortened to "AC: Bad." He's been making his case with op-eds in

Everything bad has happened because of—air conditioning?

the Washington Post and Los Angeles Times, and in interviews with NPR, arguing that we've grown so accustomed to air conditioning that we imagine we can't live without it. The tyranny of the chilly hasn't just sapped our tolerance for heat, Mr. Cox claims, it is responsible for just about everything wrong with America.

For starters, he rails against all the energy-gobbling and planet-broiling that air-conditioning entails. But there's so much more that can be blamed on our weakness for chilled air, Mr. Cox argues, such as "settlements of large human populations in fragile environments" (that means you, Arizona and Florida—time to start packing).

He further blames climate control for suburbanization and the horrors of the "car and commuter culture." After all, who would put up with a daily routine of sitting for hours in scorching traffic if it meant sweltering?

Air conditioning is also responsible for our gerbil-wheel lives of "accelerated production and consumption." Chilly environments lure us to shop and keep us slaving away at our desks whatever the weather. Mr. Cox thinks we should heat up and slow down instead. Without AC, an office in August is a miasmic hell, calling for "Shorter summer business hours and month-long closings," and yes, even "siestas." That's one way out of recession.

It would be tempting to dismiss Mr. Cox as a crank if air conditioning weren't becoming such a contentious issue. Good, liberal, environmentally concerned friends in my D.C. neighborhood have come under withering criticism from their crunchier-than-thou acquaintances for running the AC. Central air is getting the Humvee stigmatization treatment. Our intemperate desire for comfortable temperatures has the Carrie Nations of our age in a tizzy.



Idina Menzel: Melting?

No doubt air conditioning is intoxicating, even seductive. Without it, would nebbishy Tom Ewell ever have enjoyed the company of Marilyn Monroe in "The Seven Year Itch"? AC has enabled such modern enormities as glass-box architecture.

But to hear Mr. Cox tell it, there's hardly a societal ill in which refrigeration isn't implicated, from obesity to social isolation. How much more neighborly we'd be, he argues, if we had to escape the heat of houses, hang out on the porch in the evenings and sleep outside at night. (Ah, to slumber on the fire escape with all the other miserable wretches like a scene out of "Rear Window.")

Mr. Cox laments the role of AC in what he calls the "enhanced military power" of the United States. Without it, operations in the blistering deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan might be handled differently: "Air-conditioning the thousands of tents in which many of the troops sleep is not exactly an efficient use of fuel." (Mr. Cox might want to consult with some recent veterans to get a clearer picture of how much sweat they've been shedding along with their blood.)

Without air conditioning, Mr. Cox asserts, America's high-tech military-industrial complex couldn't have metastasized in the "Sun Belt/Gunbelt" of the U.S. South and West. Which is, in turn, responsible for the "political shocks that have hit this country in recent decades." The Red State population growth made possible by air-conditioning has "contributed to the growth in the GOP's power."

Reading Mr. Cox's jeremiad, one might almost be tempted to suspect that, just maybe, his concern for the environment cloaks a cultural and political agenda.

A few years ago, Italian journalist Beppe Severgnini recounted his adventures in the U.S. in the book "Ciao, America!" in which he offered up humorous musings on many of the standard European complaints about the American way of living. Mr. Severgnini allows that he rather admires the Yankee "urge to control the outside world," whether that means sending planes off an aircraft carrier or sending out technicians from Carrier.

He notes that the refusal to suffer the sweaty indignity of equatorial heat is "the antithesis of passive resignation," and thus a perfect expression of the can-do American character. "In America, air-conditioning is not simply a way of cooling down a room," Mr. Severgnini writes. "It is an affirmation of supremacy."

That notion, I suspect, is at the heart of Mr. Cox's overheated complaint.

Write me at EricFelten@wsjtaste.com