

'The Bellflower Sessions' is welcome therapy for at least 47% of us

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Stephanie Erb and Rob Nagle in 'The Bellflower Sessions'

Credits: JD Murray

Typically, theater critics, including myself, when they critique a play, discuss the play's themes, theatrical elements, notable merits, the sociopolitical context within which the play resides and maybe a short bio of the playwright to further contextualize the story, themes, elements, merits and sociopolitics.

Critics make sure to sprinkle in at least one or two quotable lines that may be used by the publicist so that even if the reviewer doesn't love the show, the theater

company might still benefit in some immediate way from the critic's presence.

But writing that kind of review over and over can get boring. Tedious. Maddening.

So, for this review, in order to entertain myself a bit (because what good is writing if it's not fun for the writer?) I have decided to discuss the play with the various parts of myself - the part that's academic, the part that's

bitchy, the part that's silly, etcetera, and I hope that from reading this conversation as it was carried out by the sundry parts of myself on my bed rather than around a table since I was the only person present and my bed is the most comfortable spot in my apartment, you get a feel for the play's themes, elements, merits and context, and you will feel compelled to see the play and maybe even write about it, too. And, if you write about it in this way, well then, that would be even more fun for me!

I asked the various aspects of myself - those literal (certainly not figurative) voices in my head, what they thought of *The Bellflower Sessions*, written by Andy Bloch (also known as Rooster Mitchell who puts on lots of plays in Chicago) and directed by Bryan Rasmussen (San Francisco-ACT Trained Artistic Director), and this is what they said:

"Dark, funny, dark and funny, dark and funny, dark and funny..."

"Intelligent banter; colorful lead characters; implausible scenarios, perhaps, but delicious nonetheless."

"The crazy main guy is the only sane guy. His friend is an ass; his "therapist" is a nut job; his wife is two-dimensional and tiny - literally tiny; the guy her husband thinks she's humping is elusive and, um, tall; and everyone knows, including the banks, that banks are actually evil. So, I guess it's, um, ironic, that the crazy main guy goes to the slammer (is that where he goes? Or is it an insane asylum?) and no one else goes (or does the nut job go too? In the same way?) But, it should be the banks. It should be the banks that go to the slammer!"

"The name *Bellflower* at first suggests *bell*, which stands for liberty, clarity, the dispelling of evil spirits and the refined manners reminiscent of a Southern lady. The name is therefore an ironical misnomer because the protagonist is anything but free; there isn't a soul around the protagonist who is clear or true, which is partly what spurs the protagonist downward into madness; evil surrounds him in the form of his best friend, his wife and all forms of governing institutions, all of which of course haunts his soul; and the female lead, his therapist, is anything but a belle. She is certainly not the flower the title also suggests, unless one thinks of a Venus Flytrap."

"The character of the wife is the least intriguing. She doesn't fit into this paradigm where the lunatic is the only sane one. She functions somewhat as the voice of reason, but since the protagonist is actually - and appropriately, ironically - the voice of reason, it doesn't completely work. She should be batty, too, in some way that the others aren't. And, no, her particular indiscretion at one point isn't enough. She is just too bland."

"Ouch. I hope the actress who played her doesn't get offended."

"She didn't write the show, she's just in it."

"Rob Nagle, the actor who plays lead character Jack, whose rage has taken over his unemployed daily existence, is astounding, perfect, sublime, superb, amazeballs, terrific and awesome; and Stephanie Erb, as his less-than-orthodox therapist, is also super duper."

"Erb plays a scrumptious, cleavage-donning, Luger-toting tart of a psychologist. If only she were real. I would

love to go to her!”

“So would a lot of people. Especially in LA.”

“The framing device - the bookended direct-address by Jack - is interesting, albeit confounding. I found myself wanting to know for sure who the actor was talking to. When he stands downstage in a jumpsuit speaking directly to us, who do we represent? Are we watching a documentary? Are we fellow inmates? Do we exist? Normally, not knowing such a thing would bother me, and I would interpret such ambiguity as a writing flaw, or at least a missed opportunity, but in this case, I have concluded that such ambiguity wherein we, the audience, might be voices in the character's head, works for me. But barely. Is it 5:00 yet? I would like a glass of bubbly.”

“I don't mind that it is highly improbable that a cantankerous misanthrope like Jack would get a woman like Molly to agree to be his wife - to spend an entire lifetime with him while all he does day in and day out is write angry letters - or that such a hooch-chugging therapist with boobs to spare who has a penchant for sado-masochism would exist in real life, but one does not attend the theater for a rendezvous with real life. What is that therapist's number? I must know her!”

“Existentialist, nihilist, sardonic, funny...It will likely never be 5. Even when it's 5, it won't be 5.”

“Plausible? No. Hilarious? Yes. It will at some point be 5. “

“This play is *Breaking Bad* but without the airtight plot wherein action arises organically and people act poorly because there is no other choice - there is nowhere else to go. Here, the characters have options and simply choose the bleakest path. But they do that in horror movies, too. They go into the basement without turning on any lights, and we don't hate them for it. Do we?”

“But we cover our eyes. And you should never cover your eyes during a play.”

“I loved it. I had so much fun. I laughed so hard throughout. The time flew by. Like a bird. Probably a black bird. A raven. Do ravens fly? They look so big and heavy. The balance of off-color and hilarious reminded me of Mark Roberts' plays, specifically [Rantoul and Die \(http://www.examiner.com/article/a-donkey-walks-into-a-bar-and-talks-to-mark-roberts\)](http://www.examiner.com/article/a-donkey-walks-into-a-bar-and-talks-to-mark-roberts), and the repetition, the rationalizing and the fatalistic tone is, um, Mamet-like, no? Or is it Pinter? Whatever. I dug it. So, sue me.”

“This play is timely, and the hero-cum-villain represents the everyman who is trying to survive inside a swelling plutocracy where corporations are called people but don't act like people. They certainly don't care like people. I absolutely get why the hero becomes a murderous villain! What time is it? I really need it to be 5:00!”

“Andrea, all these voices of yours sound a lot alike. They don't really demonstrate distinct aspects of your personality. They are convoluted. You're a douche.”

“I know. I know. I know. I know.”

“You didn't talk about the playwright. He has two names. Why does he have two names?”

“I have no idea.”

“Idiot.”

“Doodle sack.”

“Kumquat.”

“OK. Now, you’re just saying words.”

The Bellflower Sessions inhabits/invades/commits/steals/murders/sets fire to/bestows laughs upon the [Whitefire \(http://www.whitefiretheatre.com/Whitefire.html\)](http://www.whitefiretheatre.com/Whitefire.html) stage Fridays and Saturdays at 8pm through October 13, 2012.



Andrea Kittelson, LA Comedy Examiner

Andrea Kittelson is an LA-based writer, teacher and performer who calls upon her experiences as a nanny, cabbie, teacher and comic to make deft observations about the LA comedy scene as it unfolds both on and off the stage. E-mail kudos, rebuttals and egregious offers to ak@stuporheroes.com.