



From “Patient Slaps Therapist” to *Bellflower Sessions*

FIRST PERSON by Andy Bloch | September 7, 2012



When I was a kid growing up in Ohio, my father took me to see *Soylent Green*. I loved it, especially that awesome unforgettable ending, about which I was sworn to secrecy. I soon realized that light cinematic fare would never be my thing. Since then, as I’ve written for the stage (under my pen name Rooster Mitchell), I’ve explored the darkest, funniest material I can think of. Years (and years) later, here comes my latest vision, *The Bellflower Sessions*.

The kernel of the idea was a simple three-word concept: Patient Slaps Therapist.

It's always been hysterical to me — the fact that people pay (a lot) to spill their most intimate secrets to complete strangers. Stand back and watch the fireworks if/when things go horribly wrong. I played with that as a "light" dark comedy, the story of a psychiatrist with the power to push a patient head first into the abyss.



Andy Bloch

From there it grew into something much darker and deeper — namely, the anthem of a man battling domestic demons brought on by the emasculation of America's economy. *The Bellflower Sessions* details the journey of Jack Calvin, a guy who loses his job, his marriage and his sanity. Along the way, this self-proclaimed victim of the recession is engaged in battle with his mentally unstable psychiatrist.

The play was chosen as runner-up in the nationwide Onyx Theatre's Sin City Playwrighting Contest (Las Vegas). Producer Scott Disharoon then passed it to Bryan Rasmussen, the artistic director of the Whitefire Theatre, in the winter of 2011. Bryan felt audiences would connect with the play's angry and repressed central character, especially during these current unpredictable, tough economic times, and that the play would fit into the Whitefire's 30th anniversary season. In addition, at Bryan's invitation, I was asked to participate in the Actors Gym, headed by Academy Award-winning writer/producer Bobby Moresco, to further develop the play.

Over the years I've been forcefully loyal to the characters I've created — whether it's Barney Goldrose, the aging comedian sidetracked in a winter storm near Buffalo who ends up inside the log cabin of a serial killer in the *The Killer and the Comic*, or Sam, the triumphant, unassuming leader of the four con women found in *Never the Same Rhyme Twice*.



Stephanie Erb and Rob Nagle

But I have no greater care than that for the sinking plight of poor Jack, played against his own vulnerability, who, through Dr. Wendy Bellflower’s crass manipulation, is coerced into unspeakable ugliness. The first time we see Jack he explains that he is just like us — a regular guy “who needed to get out of the muck” of America’s economy. But he’s explaining this from behind bars at an insane asylum. As the play spins out the story of how he got there, it punches such themes as infidelity — and murder.

If the audience squirms inappropriately fearing that “this could happen to me”, then *The Bellflower Sessions* will have succeeded admirably.

But I don’t want to get too far ahead of myself.

After all, this *is* a comedy.

***The Bellflower Sessions*, Whitefire Theatre, 13500 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks 91423. Opens Sept. 8. Fri.-Sat. 8 pm. Through Oct. 13. Tickets: \$25; Students/Seniors: \$20. www.brownpapertickets.com. 818-990-2324.**

*****All *The Bellflower Sessions* production photos by JD Murray**