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Review: Shaky therapy at work in 'The Bellflower Sessions'



Rob Nagle and Stephanie Erb in "The Bellflower Sessions" at the Whitefire Theatre. (JD Murray)

By David C. Nichols

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"The Bellflower Sessions" refers to therapeutic interviews between a downsized bourgeois and an unhinged shrink. If they represented the sum of Andy Bloch's black comedy, this uneven vehicle might equal its ambitious parts.

Under Bryan Rasmussen’s direction, the exchanges between ticking time bomb Jack Calvin (the valiant Rob Nagle) and Dr. Wendy Bellflower (an assured Stephanie Erb) carry wild, satiric thrust. Jack, first introduced via incarcerated direct address, reluctantly contacts Bellflower on the tacit recommendation of drinking buddy Grant (Michael Monks).

Jack hopes to resolve his issues with wife Molly (Marshelle Fair), Derek (Kevin Benton), her upscale former TA, and Jack’s titanic frustration with the indignities of post-millennial life. However, he doesn’t bargain on Bellflower’s own pathology.

Thanks to Nagle and Erb, the doctor/patient scenes suggest a stage variant on Lisa Kudrow’s “Web Therapy” Internet series. This is problematic at several levels, starting with playwright Bloch’s goal of an Everyman-Loses-His-Reason allegory, à la Michael Douglas in “Falling Down.”

Alas, the zany comedy and social melodrama don’t exactly gel so much as uneasily cohabitate. It’s hard to believe, for example, that Calvin and Molly were ever passionately in love, nor do the nonstop clever zingers support an ultimately somber overview. There are at least three different plays afoot, culminating in an ironic ending that, though legitimately surprising, bespeaks authorial contrivance more than narrative logic. Rewrites are prescribed.

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“The Bellflower Sessions,” Whitefire Theatre, 13500 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks. 8 p.m.

Fridays and Saturdays. Ends Oct. 13. \$25. (818) 990-2324 or www.brownpapertickets.com. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.