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Los Angeles Theater Review: THE BELLFLOWER SESSIONS (Whitefire Theatre in Sherman Oaks)

by [Jesse David Corti](#) on September 10, 2012

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THE PLAYWRIGHT MUST HAVE EATEN A PILLOW, BECAUSE THIS PLAY IS DOWN IN THE MOUTH

Andy Bloch's *The Bellflower Sessions* is a bleak, black comedy about Jack Calvin, a victim of "The Great Recession," and his unorthodox, vulgar, yet purportedly effective shrink, Dr. Wendy Bellflower. In spite of its timeliness and readily relatable subject matter, this is an example of a compelling premise becoming a tedious, meandering affair that, while occasionally funny, falls frustratingly flat. As Calvin's employment and marital woes turn to insanity, it becomes clear that this is a playwright who is using theater for purging instead of storytelling. The Whitefire Theatre celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, and Artistic Director Bryan Rasmussen's weak staging of Bloch's flawed, clamorous play makes me wonder if the real recession we need to worry about isn't economic, but artistic.



Jack Calvin is an unemployed man who would rather spend his time writing screeds against Bank of America—and other blood-boiling corporations—than look for a job or pursue some other means to support himself and his wife and move forward with his life. When the opportunity of a job comes his way, he rejects the offer in such a smug, self-obsessed manner that it leaves both his wife and his would-be employer baffled. Calvin isn't a guy down on his luck; he's just a downer who wants people to plunge into the depths of depression with him. When Calvin goes to therapy, it feels like Bloch (who has written for the stage under the pen name Rooster Mitchell) has an agenda against psychiatry, as *Bellflower* is used as a device to push her patient to the brink. Bloch doesn't come close to navigating the black comedic territory that Christopher Durang nailed in *Beyond Therapy*.

The break in this two-act play is unnecessary (running time 90 minutes *with* intermission), as there is neither a time shift nor a variance with John Burton's oddly arranged set. Rasmussen stages 80% of the production on stage-left or stage-right, and the nearly 20% that is played center is upstage; the only two instances of down-stage center action are two monologues.



The five-person cast provides a mixed bag of performances. The normally funny and intelligent Rob Nagle plays the lackluster lead, John Calvin. It's unfortunate that director Rasmussen didn't know what to do with Nagle's abilities, as the performance remained one-note far too long. Stephanie Erb as Dr. Bellflower is funny, fearless, and adroit at handling the demands of being seductive, abrasive, intelligent, persuasive, and abnormal all at once; her wordless, introductory bit involving a Zen sand garden was guffaw-worthy. Michael Monks as John's best friend Grant Lerner stood out with an immediately engaging earthiness that rose above the play and its tone. Marshelle Fair as Molly (John Calvin's wife) lacked the conviction required of her strong character and spoke key lines too softly to be heard. Kevin Benton as Derek Coles (Molly's longtime friend) was nuanced, precise and well grounded, but also spoke some key lines too quietly. To say it's disturbing that actors lack the art of projection and diction in an 85-seat house is an understatement. "Infuriating" would be the word.

Though there are bits of clever plotting peppered near the end involving the supporting characters, Bloch offers a ranting, pontificating script which, without focus, offers nothing that resonates as social commentary. One hopes that thirty years from now neither this economic cycle nor this piece is repeated.

photos by JD Murray

The Bellflower Sessions

Whitefire Theatre in Sherman Oaks

scheduled to end on October 13, 2012

for tickets, visit <http://www.brownpapertickets.com>