

The Bellflower Sessions

By Jennie Webb | Posted Sept. 11, 2012, 6:34 p.m.

The Bellflower Sessions theater

Whitefire Theatre



Photo Source: JD Murray

In Andy Bloch's new comedy "The Bellflower Sessions," Jack Calvin is presented as an incarcerated Everyman, someone who's gone around the bend after being worn down by the daily grind. Apparently he snapped, crossed some mysterious legal line, and is locked up in a home for the criminally insane. What fun we'll have finding out what got him there, huh? Who can't relate to the frustration of negotiating undecipherable street parking signs? There are a lot of laughs, which are mined pretty darn expertly by a few standout performers. But frustration reigns as the playwright goes down several questionable paths that don't earn a potentially provocative payoff.

Under Bryan Rasmussen's direction, the fabulous Rob Nagle heads the cast as the unemployed, downtrodden Jack, a grown-up, caustic Charlie Brown who sees everyone as the girl who's about to snatch away the football. Jack spends his days writing emails to CVS and Bank of America detailing customer-service transgressions, while his wife, Molly (Marshelle Fair), repeatedly tries to rally him and turn him back into the man he once was. Unfortunately, it's as hard to get a

clear picture of Jack as a corporate go-getter as it is to imagine this mismatched pair as a couple. Jack admits that he needs help, but he doesn't want it in the form of the high-paying job that's handed to him on a platter by his wife's successful friend Derek Coles (Kevin Benton). Instead, he asks drinking buddy Grant Lerner (a dry and smooth Michael Monks) for the name of his former shrink, and against his pal's emphatic advice he makes an appointment.

So we finally meet Dr. Wendy Bellflower (Stephanie Erb) and get to the titular therapy sessions. Played with superb ballsiness, Erb's oh-so-unconventional psychiatrist is a hoot; she and Nagle are a joy to watch navigating some outrageous material. The problem is that it's never plausible. During therapy Jack's hatred and mistrust of women comes as a surprise. The only one with more convoluted views is Grant, who shares confessions with Derek over beers, spilling out additional misplaced dramatic elements. Still, their marriages are as unpersuasive as Jack's. Domestic scenes between Jack and Molly don't hit home, and while entertaining, Dr. Bellflower's deranged power plays are off the charts.

Despite director Rasmussen's clever compartmentalized staging and the valiant efforts of Nagle, Monks, and Erb, "The Bellflower Sessions" is as confused as its Everyman, straining for credibility and getting mucked up by a whole lot of misogyny.

Presented by and at the Whitefire Theatre, 13500 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks. Sept. 8–Oct. 13. Fri. and Sat., 8 p.m. (800) 838-3006 or www.brownpapertickets.com. Casting by Ricki G. Maslar.

Critic's Score: C-