

Call for an Anti-Hero: A review of *Tabletop*, a play by Rob Ackerman

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Tabletop, a production of The Working Theatre in New York City, written by Rob Ackerman and directed by Connie Grappo, is not a play to relax with after a hard day at work. It captures with excruciating accuracy just what goes into making those 30-second commercials for frothy fruit drinks, ice cream, pizza and beer that we ingest visually and aurally every time we turn on the TV. This is a working world in which anxiety reigns supreme, deadlines are impossible to meet, bosses holler orders and curse out employees who slip up under pressure, all because the client is breathing down *his / her* neck and money is being hemorrhaged for every wasted second.

“For me, this is a play about pain, but people always seem to find it funny, which confuses me. If you ever had a bad boss, this show is cheap therapy,” says playwright Rob Ackerman, whose years working as a “Tabletop” technician in advertising inspired him to write the play. Maybe the therapy is a little cheap, because despite its many merits, *Tabletop* enacts but fails to confront the fundamental problem of this work world. We are presented with many problems—the boss is abusive, his employees sacrifice private life, ideals, integrity in order to keep their paychecks, their union divides rather than empowers them, competition devours talent. The satire sizzles and dialogue snaps like a wet, locker-room towel, but one ends feeling rather like the Hero (the pink frothy fruit drink about which the commercial in the play is being made)—spun around and whipped up, because having raised these issues, the play steps away from them.

The action of the play corresponds exactly to the activity of a workday in a “Tabletop” production studio, giving the play a visceral immediacy. Mark Plesent, Producing Director of the Working Theatre says, “*Tabletop* shows real work being done in real time, right before our eyes.” The four man crew, which consists of Oscar, the electrical technician; Jeffery, the prop manager; his assistant, Ron; and Dave, the assistant cameraman need to set up a fruit arrangement in order for their boss, Marcus, to film the Hero being poured into a cup set in its midst. They have failed to accomplish this the previous day, and are under pressure to get it done right this time.

Once they get the dynamic “pour” they need, they have to film a cup of this Hero, arranged now with a swirl on top, rising and turning in sync with some voice-over to be added later.

None of this is easy. Ron is given a chance to do “the pour,” but his hand slips, splashing the pink stuff all over the fruit, and necessitating a tedious clean up and reset. For the second shot, Ron has created the perfect “swirl” on the Hero, which everyone loves when they think it is Jeffery's creation, but which they can't use once they discover it is Ron's, because he is non-union. Still, it is *so* perfect that they decide to use it anyway. Ron then proposes to use a turntable of his own devise for the synchronized rise/turn. It works beautifully, but his chutzpah in usurping his position angers Marcus to the point where he fires him. Ron agrees to go, but grabs his Hero to take with him. At the same moment, the client rings that he is on his way over to see the shoot in progress.

Marcus, in desperation, offers Ron Jeffery's job as prop manager if he'll return the Hero. His assistant Andrea objects that the unionized crew members could walk out, but they agree not to. The crew gets back to work, but once again, Ron's assumption of equal status within the team infuriates Marcus. He pins Ron to the ground shouting, “You work *for* me, not *with* me!” In a startling move, which at once heightens and defuses the crisis, Andrea spills the Hero out on the floor, declaring it has gone “lacey” with sitting around so long. Marcus releases Ron in order to pathetically try to scoop the perfect swirl back into the cup. The client is on his way up. Marcus orders everyone back to work, but his authority has been lost. Ron insists that he say “Get back to work, *please*.” “Get back to work, *please*,” says Marcus. One hero has fallen, another one risen, and so the play ends.

And yet does all this merely boil down to an issue of greater politeness? Surely, mutual respect would go a long way to improve this work environment. Ackerman's play indicts a system that pits workers against one another, and insists on the hierarchy of clients, bosses and workers, one that creates a state of high anxiety under the illusion that this produces the best work. This system is fundamentally counter-productive, resistant to creativity, and unable to maximize the strengths of its workers. Competition feeds on the conflict of egos and thus the characters steal one another's ideas rather than share them, hide their identities, sacrifice their personal lives, and ultimately lose self respect for the sake of a paycheck, or the status symbols it buys. Most of these problems would be

remedied by politeness, respect and collaboration—but the play presents a graver problem, which won't be solved by everyone saying “Please.” Director Grappo says of the play that it allows us to “to peek through the keyhole at the process of workers engaged in a moral struggle to collaborate,” however, by ending on the note of etiquette as ideology, the moral issue is obscured.

The *moral* struggle involves struggling somehow to create value or meaning in this context, but this message is swirled into the rest of the play's well-blended ingredients. Our laughter at the state of sexual excitement, which the characters get into over the special effects in a beer commercial, or the perfection of Ron's swirl should have a self-reflective sting. The overriding metaphor of this workplace is a battlefield—yet it is clear that nothing worth sacrificing one's life for is happening here.

The problematic nature of working within an economy dominated by the production of superfluties is skirted by the play, because of the problematic nature of the character of Ron, the young guy, the guy full of innovation and enthusiasm, the guy who threatens the old order of Marcus and Jeffery and propels the action of the play. He is presented as a positive character. At one point Andrea tells Marcus, “You need Ron,” and in this commercial, high-tech, fast changing world, he does. He is the conscience of the play, pointing out the hypocrisy of the other characters—they are thieves, liars, and whores—whereas he actually likes what he does. He believes that his work is a noble craft, a modern day equivalent of 13th century artisans carving gargoyles, only now they are “adorning the towers of trade.”

But is it preferable to be sincere if it is predicated on self-delusion? Jeffery says, “Ron, you *like* what we do, because you don't *know* what we do?” By making Ron the one who triumphs in the power struggle with Marcus, the play casts him as the new hero. However Ron is no alternative to Marcus and his brand of commercial advertising, merely today's incarnation. And he is essentially corrupt. He admires Marcus, declares as a credo that the making of memorable images is sufficient unto itself, and despite accusing Jeffery of dishonesty, doctors the Hero's swirl with shaving cream to get it to be perfect—a cheat which appalls the other characters, because it exposes them to the risk of being sued.

Thus, the failure of *Tabletop* is not a failure to show, in real time, the conflicts of this workplace. Ackerman's script is quite brilliant at packing in subtleties of character and nuances of situation; the top-notch acting of all the cast, but particularly of Jeremy Webb, as Ron, and Dean Nolen, as Jeffery makes it hard to remember that one has left work, and these aren't one's co-workers. The set—a workshop filled with equipment which could be the backstage area of the theatre set itself, as if things hadn't been set up yet for the very play one is about to see—further contributes to the play's overall realism. The failure of the play is in failing to think outside its own box, or at least to indicate that there is such a place. Yes, within this world,

Ron *is* the only new hero. And in fact, in this reviewer's experience, many workplaces, at least in new media in New York, are quite like Ron's ideal—collaborative, young, innovative, relatively free of counter-productive hierarchy and brutal ego games. Which raises a question once raised by V. M. Belinsky in writing about Nikolai Gogol's work:

“The power of *direct creation* [Belinsky's emphasis], amazing though it was, also did Gogol a lot of harm. One might say that it averted his eyes from the ideas and moral problems that excited his contemporaries, and made him concentrate on facts and be satisfied with the objective representation of facts” (“Gogol: An Anniversary Tribute,” *The Basic Writings of Trotsky*, edited and introduced by Irving Howe, Schocken Books, NY, 1976, p. 321).

One might say the same of Rob Ackerman. Can one conclude, as Belinsky does, that “thinking readers [viewers] perceive other and worthier faces, the squalid reality makes them contemplate an ideal reality and *that which is* clarified for them is *that which should be* [again, Belinsky's emphasis, *ibid*, p. 323]?” Perhaps. When Andrea spills out the Hero in the final act, she declares, “Gentlemen, let's start again. We need a new Hero.” It is up to us, readers and viewers, to formulate who this new Hero should be.

The cast of *Tabletop* includes Rob Bartlett (writer and performer for *Imus in the Morning*), Harvey Blanks, Jack Koenig, Dean Nolen, Elizabeth Rice and Jeremy Webb.

Since 1985, The Working Theatre has dedicated itself to producing plays about and for working people. Past hits include *Belmont Avenue Social Club*, *City Water Tunnel #3*, *I Am A Man*, *Let Me Live* and *Ascension Day*. Moreover, The Working Theatre has premiered new works for a number of fine playwrights including Israel Horovitz, Romulus Linney, Suzan Lori-Parks, John Sayles and OyamO.



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