

## Theater review

# The Bewildered Herd in Los Angeles: “Making the puppets jump”

Richard Adams  
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*Written by Cody Henderson, directed by Laurie Woolery. At The Greenway Court Theatre, Fairfax District, Los Angeles, through May 6.*

The title of Cody Henderson’s new play, now receiving its world premiere at the Greenway Court Theatre in Los Angeles, comes from Walter Lippman (1889-1974), the influential American journalist. Lippman argued that for democracy to survive, elites needed to be in charge and the general public kept in check by the comforting illusion that it actually played a significant role in governing society, “so that,” in the commentator’s tart phrasing, “each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd.”

If awards were ever given out for the Author Notes that typically grace program books, Henderson’s would surely win one. In it, he tells an ironically self-deprecating tale of buying his first iPhone, having overcome his resistance to the hype and his troubling misgivings about Apple’s exploitive production methods. He not only bought his iPhone, but “felt really good” when he did. This event becomes the frame for his “note’s” cheeky survey of the history of advertising and its more pernicious cousin, propaganda. I, for one, wish he’d included some of this in the play itself.

The finest moments of *The Bewildered Herd* reveal the subtle and not-so-subtle mind games that husbands and wives, children and parents, would-be lovers and sexual competitors play on one another. Bingo (John Getz) is a consummate ad man, the rigger of the strings that make the puppets dance. His current client is a six-term congressman of dubious corporate/rightist tendencies running for reelection.

Bingo’s wife Annie (Trace Turville) has filled her seemingly empty life with yoga, intestinal cleanses and

barely repressed sexual fantasies about her yoga instructor. His troubled and impressionable daughter Miranda (Corryn Cummins) has just dropped out of the University of California, Berkeley after a few months and returned to the family nest of polished yet momentarily torpid vipers. Bingo’s dementia-afflicted, recently widowed mother (Lisa Richards) has also been moved into the sprawling home with its Southwestern decor.

The outsider who pokes these serpents into action is Todd (Derek Manson), a thirty-something bass player in an “alternative” (i.e., noncommercial) rock band, who has either entered Miranda’s life to save or seduce her—it turns out to be both. He runs comparable games on Annie and even Grandma, claiming that he’s freeing them from the shackles of their delusions by slapping them with hard truths, then using their vulnerabilities to prey upon them sexually.

It’s never clear what these characters are really after, though one suspects that they simply revel in their abilities to bend others to their own will, in other words, the pleasures of power. Scenes of these blatant manipulations hold a certain chilly fascination. They have an almost clinical quality. We observe, curious about who will do what and how, but not to what end. The results of these scenes could be tallied on a clinical trial report. So, while intriguing, they never rise to the level of actual drama.

While it’s not necessary for an audience to “like” a character to sympathize or identify with his or her situation, it certainly helps. And these are an unlikeable lot, their character flaws so dominant, their deeper human needs so hidden, it’s a strain to put ourselves in their shoes or in their hearts. Lacking this, we’re often left with the feeling of observing an insular domestic scene far removed from our everyday lives. The only thing that connects us is the fact

that men like Bingo, the self-important illusionists who try and sell us on soft drinks, pancake mix, political candidates and even ideology, are out there somewhere assaulting our consciousness with their advertising images and campaigns.

Barely touched upon is what kind of political figure Bingo's congressman client is, has been or will be if re-elected. The few references made to the candidate suggest that he's deeply in the pockets of corporate donors. But for Bingo, he's just another product to be branded, packaged, and sold. The playwright's program note offers tidbits about Edward Bernays, the man who dubbed himself the "Father of Public Relations," whose greatest accomplishments were selling World War I to a skeptical American public and making it acceptable for women to smoke in public, and Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi's propaganda minister, who drew on Bernays' theories and techniques. But the play itself never fully addresses the bigger issue of what makes it possible for propaganda to "succeed" in shaping the ways people see their world and the choices they make.

Advertisers, spin-doctors, campaign managers and propagandists, in their arrogance believe that they are in control of people's lives and that what really counts is one's perceptions of the world, not the actual concrete circumstances of those lives. A Bush administration official contemptuously explained to a journalist in 2004 that while he [the journalist] was part of the "reality-based community ... We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality." Hubris goes before the fall.

It is worth remembering that Goebbels' propaganda "succeeded" only in the context of the betrayals carried out by the Social Democratic and Communist Parties. If the German workers had taken power in 1923, Goebbels would be remembered by no one. If the revolution had occurred in the early 1930s, he would be recalled as a second-rate journalist, a failed novelist and a vile anti-Semitic propagandist.

A large photo of bison stampeding over a cliff dominates the wall of Bingo and Annie's home. As much as pundits and "opinion makers" might like to believe that the American population is little more than a "bewildered herd," self-important types like Bingo will be amazed and likely horrified when that herd begins running en masse toward their glass houses and shining towers rather than over the cliff.

The acting ensemble is uniformly game and capable. In other plays and in other venues, each of the performers has

soared. But here one feels their strain to personalize and humanize these scenes of blatant manipulation. Given the play's dynamics, personal revelations feel like fodder for whoever will use those revelations for his/her next manipulation, all of which robs these moments of emotional punch.

There's the core of a very intriguing play here that often gets lost in idle (literally) kitchen sink realism—Miranda's mussel dinner, making waffles, watching home movies, pouring drinks, etc. Such naturalistic interludes have their own inherent little dramas, and even though the playwright tries to link them to his theme of advertising's insidious role in, say, why one chooses Johnnie Walker Blue over Red, or how Bisquick became the queen of pancake batter, these domestic vignettes register as yet more experimental data to be analyzed and assessed.

To some extent, this failure to engage emotionally is a production issue. The Greenway is a barn of a theatre. The set for *The Bewildered Herd* occupies the entire stage. In a play that demands sharp focus and works best when we're allowed to zero in on intimate scenes, this distractingly wide and detailed set defeats our ability to focus. Too often, the actors get lost in the wide open spaces, their voices swallowed by the raftered void. Whenever the director brings her players close together, the possibility of drama rises—only to dissipate moments later when they scatter.

Still, fine moments abound and variations on the interesting theme of public manipulation are thought-provoking, but, for me at least, I was more provoked by what was not being addressed.



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