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Bill W & Dr. Bob

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A scene from Bill W & Dr. Bob, now playing at Theatre Three.



Even if you've never attended an Alcohol Anonymous or an Al Anon meeting, through sheer ubiquitous osmosis we've become familiar with the vocabulary; friend, surrendering, making amends, higher power, with a liberal dose of coffee and cigarettes thrown in as props. In fact, the play opens with a man saying, "Hi, my name is Bill" and some in the theater actually responded with a familiar, "Hi Bill." The origin of each phrase, indeed the origin of AA and its two founders are the subject of Theatre Three's production of **Bill W & Dr. Bob** now playing in the company's downstairs stage.

Bill Wilson is a down-on-his-luck stockbroker struggling to remain sober and keep his marriage to his wife, Lois intact. Dr. Bob Smith is a physician in Akron, Ohio wrestling with his own sobriety, often

operating while intoxicated and continually disappointing his long suffering wife Anne. Through a series of seemingly random circumstances Bill and Bob meet in 1935 and eventually form what is now known as Alcoholic's Anonymous.

Bill W & Dr. Bob is a slow-moving biodrama that probably plays like gospel to the converted and merely interesting to the casual observer. The play falls victim to the same disease that a lot of biographic plays do: an endless series of 'then this happens', 'then this happens' and 'then this happens'. Each scene change requires the lights to dim and then brighten again with the next scene set at a different location and often with different characters. While Director Kerry Cole's actors are extremely efficient at moving props on and off stage and maneuvering fast costume changes, Playwrights Stephen Bergman and Janet Surrey fail to avoid this staging pitfall making Bill W & Dr. Bob seem less a play than a series of 20-odd sketches.

However, despite these shortcomings a solid cast of versatile actors keeps Bill W & Dr. Bob from seeming like a dull history lesson. Greg Forshay plays Bill Wilson as a hotheaded but determined survivor. Explosive at times, effective throughout Forshay gives a natural, non-fussy performance that anchors the play. Forshay's partner, Jerry Crow (Dr. Bob Smith) matches Forshay's authenticity and even surpasses it. Together they make a believable pair of drunks struggling, often with each other, but always towards a treatment for alcoholism. As mentioned earlier, there are a series of ahas sprinkled throughout the play as demonstrated when Bill and Bob first meet and end up talking through the night with the help of a lot of coffee and cigarettes. This isn't exactly "What do the numbers mean" or "What's the smoke monster?" territory but are still interesting and moving Easter eggs, especially when Bill and Bob ask a drunk if he "can just make it through today without drinking."

Stephanie Dunnam is the sturdy, stand-by-her- doctor's wife Anne. In an underwritten role, Renee Krapff plays Bill's wife, Lois Wilson. It's a one-note role but Ms. Krapff hits her note well and I have to admit getting a little teary eyed in Bill and Lois pivotal is-she-going-to-leave scene. Obviously having much more fun is Andrew Dillon billed as the 'man' and Elizabeth Rueff as the "woman." Dillon and Rueff, both beautiful, play all the other characters in the show: a bellhop, a waitress, an abused wife, a prayer leader, a drunk, etc. They appear to be having a blast and provide some much needed comic relief. Dillon makes a complete circle playing a man trying to keep Bill sober in the first act, and then later playing the successful first convert that joins Bob and Bill as the third member of AA. Rueff's most memorable and believably funny role is as the wife of the above-mentioned convert. She doesn't know what Bill and Bob are up to but she's willing to try anything. Bill and Bob send her back to Bob's house to meet Anne and Lois and we witness the first Al Anon meeting.

In real life Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith forged a treatment for alcoholism and in AA, an organization known around the world with millions of active members. Their story is both compelling and inspiring. Bill W & Dr. Bob, the play, is a well-acted sturdy, but lackluster, preaching-to-the-choir account of their lives. Easter and Christmas churchgoers will leave more educated but unmoved.

Bill W & Dr. Bob continues through April 25, 2010 (an extension of it's original posting) at Theatre Three in their downstairs stage, Theatre Too, 2800 Routh Street, Suite 168, Dallas, TX 75201. For more information visit www.theatre3dallas.com

Doug Dodasovich is a playful free lance writer and designer who is passionate about live theater, dance and film. He and his husband, Mark enjoy reading, traveling, friends and family of choice and their 3 miniature dachshunds, Roxie, Velma and Seymour.

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