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Theater review part deux: *Bill W. and Dr. Bob* at Theatre Three in Dallas

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Bill W. and Dr. Bob enlightens and teaches without crossing over to preachy.



Jeffrey Schmidt

Andrew Dillon and Greg Forshay in *Bill W. and Dr. Bob* at Theatre Three

I vividly remember the very first time I heard the name Bill W. It was 1989 and I had just recently moved to Milwaukee with my husband, two step-daughters, nine-month-old baby, and another on the way. We stopped in at a fast-food restaurant to grab a bite to eat. There was a gentleman in his early 30s sitting a few tables away. I still can't explain why these next events happened. He and my husband exchanged a nod, "hello" and a few pleasantries as we sat down. A few minutes later, this "Green Martian" called out across the tables, "Are you a friend of Bill W's?" and my "Green Martian" husband gave another nod. I didn't know at the time who the Martians were referring to.

I wondered about this incident for years. How did this absolute stranger know something about my life that I didn't? My now ex-husband was actively "using" again. And even more puzzling, how did one "Green Martian" recognize another whom he'd never met before?

[Bill W. and Dr. Bob](#) (playing in Theatre Too at [Theatre Three](#) in Dallas through April 25) is the first meeting I've gone to since I left Al-Anon. The story begins with a Prologue set in 1939 in which Bill Wilson, played by the astonishing Greg Forshay, states "My name is Bill and I'm an alcoholic". The audience responds in turn, "Hi Bill."

This opening scene sets the stage with Bill W. on one side and Dr. Bob on the other as we watch two very separate experiences unfold and then learn how they came together to create AA. The play moves through the years 1925 to 1935 with the Epilogue in 1955 wrapping up the meeting.

David Walsh's set utilized every ounce of space beautifully. Theatre Two, downstairs inside Theatre Three, is a rather compact area and a theatrical challenge to encompass large props, several actors and create a feeling of two separate environments happening simultaneously.

Dr. Bob and Ann Smith's house is in Akron, Ohio while Bill and Lois Wilson's home is in Brooklyn. Several other locations such as the hospital, hotel lobby, and bar are also presented to us throughout the evening.

There's only one way to get to Theatre Two -- down a narrow stairway. It's an interesting twist that people with disabilities are not able to see this play about people with disabilities. The American Civil Disabilities Act definition includes alcoholism and addicts in its realm of people with impairments to a "normal" life.

Anyone who has experienced alcoholism in any form whatsoever realizes these impairments. Stephanie Dunnam's character, Ann Smith, spends years "waiting to come alive" as she so astutely puts it as the not-so-innocent bystander/victim of her husband's demise. She captures the essence of every enabling woman I've met along my way in Al-Anon. Her pain is raw and real and her existence is at a standstill. Her life so intertwined with her husband's that his successes and failures are hers to bear as well. Yet, she's helpless to control anything in her own environment. She is forced to depend on the undependable to survive.



Jeffrey Schmidt

Elizabeth Rueff and Andrew Dillon in *Bill W. and Dr. Bob* at Theatre Three

Stephanie Dunnam is so remarkable in this role. Tears flow down her cheeks in response to Dr. Bob (Jerry Crow)'s attack on her unwanted attempts to help him. "Stop trying to save me!" he bellows at her with a quickness and force that made me jump. Too many "egg-shell" moments to count gave strong credibility to the actors; yet admittedly, brought me back to those times a little too realistically.

Many lighthearted snippets wrap these very deep-seated emotional tugs. Dr. Bob proudly states that he vowed religiously never to attend church again. Jerry Crow delivers an incredible role of drunken surgeon trying to turn recovering alcoholic. Though he remains onstage for scenes focusing on the other home, he does not detract from the main focal point. His theatrical experience and abilities clearly show through as does his impeccable timing for invoking chuckles.

Intermission felt like a bathroom break in the meeting as everyone stepped into the hallway to discuss their first encounter with a drink, sobriety, a meeting, an alcoholic, AA, the big book and so forth. I noticed there was no separation between the play and "real-life." Notably lacking, the glass of wine to sip and buzzing about the scene changes, sound, play, directing, etc. The audience wasn't commenting about the actors but rather discussing their very own life experiences with complete strangers. It's a phenomenon I wasn't expecting.

Greg Forshay's Bill Wilson most intrigued me. I watched his eyes glisten over and tears roll down as he recalls his first drink. Greg reaches down deep and transforms into an alcoholic so that every pore of his being ignites this persona. His bark is frightening and alarmingly realistic. Just as quickly, Greg's tears often betrayed his hard-shelled soul and rolled down his cheeks for the entire world to see his exposed self. His mood swings were performed with such a spice of reality that his role was exceptionally disturbing to witness.

Lois Wilson is left to run the household, perhaps even more so, after Bill W.'s sobriety. The playwrights, Stephen Bergman and Janet Surrey, delve head first into the interpersonal workings of not only the person addicted to alcohol but the person addicted to recovery. There seems to be a choice between the better of two evils. These writers don't just deal with it lightly and flicker it away. They recognized and display all of the various roles that alcohol plays and the multi-facets of its character.

Lois Wilson, played by Hilary Couch, reads a letter Bill wrote while visiting Akron, Ohio. Couch is captivating. Her delivery in this performance is truly moving. Both she and Stephanie Dunnam (Ann Smith) do an amazing job of letting us all experience the immense destruction and their very personal survival methods.



Jeffrey Schmidt

Stephanie Dunnam and Jerry Crow in *Bill W. and Dr. Bob* at Theatre Three

Stephanie's bargaining and pleading brought many audience members to tears. A gut-wrenching performance!

Kerry Cole exquisitely handles the stage direction with a few minor exceptions here and there. The misplaced hospital bed in the second half of the play makes it impossible for audiences on the side seats to see over the bed to the scene happening across the stage. I noticed one audience member stood a few times in order to look over the bed to the scene on the far side. I had to look around Dr. Bob's backside once or twice to see, but for the most part, everything flowed well.

Both the Prologue and Epilogue are incredibly well-choreographed for impeccably timed interruptions as the lighting switches focus between Bill W. and Dr. Bob delivering their very powerful meeting speeches. It was interesting to note that the realism ends with the acting.

None of the stage props were very exciting and there's much left to the imagination. Invisible tomatoes are fed to Dr. Bob from an empty plain jar using a spoon. Beer mugs wave about with imaginary shooters plunked into the glasses. It made me laugh and wonder if there was some significant meaning in that they actually had real Karo corn syrup in the midst of Peter Pan pretend-food land.

This play enlightens and teaches without crossing over to preachy. It serves to entertain as well as draw that invisible hand signal from one "Green Martian" to another that says, "I've been there too and I get it." Whether you've been a spouse, sibling, parent, child, family, coworker, or friend of an alcoholic, *Bill W. and Dr. Bob* at Theatre Three is one meeting that you should not miss!



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