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

by [Christopher Soden](#)

Bill W. and Dr. Bob's episodic, sometimes sparse approach to the material (to avoid mawkishness) served the story well.



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

There are treacherous waters involved, most likely, in a drama concerning the inception of Alcoholics Anonymous. This kind of material. The lives annihilated by alcohol addiction, wading through the trauma and despair, how do you begin to address it without manipulating or exploiting the audience? How do you investigate such a touchy subject without leaving us feeling battered and hopeless? These are the questions (one might speculate) facing playwrights Stephen Bergman and Janet Surrey when they collaborated to write [Bill W. and Dr. Bob](#) (playing in Theatre Too at [Theatre Three](#) through April 25). However, the story behind the start of A.A. is a play that avoids a potential weepfest while staying true to its material.



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

Bill W. begins with Bill Wilson explaining how he and Dr. Bob Smith, kindred spirits though miles apart, first came to connect and work out the fundamentals of A.A. and its philosophy. The play is set in 1925, and shifts back and forth between the home Bill shares with his wife, Lois, in Brooklyn, and the one shared by Dr. Bob and Mrs. Anne Smith in Akron, Ohio. This was back when very little was understood about substance abuse and the distinction between that and addiction. Bill is a good man (just like Dr. Bob) who uses alcohol to deal with life's frustrations, but is unable to stop after the first drink. He tries various solutions, believing it's a matter of character and will. He prays, he joins other alcoholics in prayer, he struggles to find work and deal with the intense emotions that leave him feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable.

In Akron, Dr. Bob is also struggling to sort through the train wreck of his love affair with the bottle. Like Lois Wilson, Anne Smith is devoted to her husband, though unsure where the answers lie. Faith has supplied them

with some respite, but Dr. Bob seems to relapse over and over, with little discernible progress. Then, by a supposed coincidence, Bill finds himself intersecting with Dr. Bob, after a business trip to Ohio that has failed to yield lucrative results. Bill is gravitating dangerously close to the hotel bar. After getting a list of other drunks from an Episcopal Priest, his persistent calls land him at the doorstep of Dr. Bob and his wife. Bob is none too thrilled with this arrangement, but after discovering just how much he can identify with Bill Wilson, fifteen minutes of tentative conversation turns into the beginning of an exceptional friendship.

As suggested above, much of *Bill W. and Dr. Bob* explores the tenets of A.A. the two men worked out through slow, painful, trial and error. The show parses out its emotions very carefully, with lots of comic respite mixed in to alleviate the bombastic possibilities of the topic. We see more aftermath than drunken behavior, and there are the brawls and long nights of the soul, the forbearance and unfortunate choices. I'm not sure *Bill W.* has any momentous turns or dramatic arcs. Its episodic, sometimes sparse approach to the material (to avoid mawkishness) served the story well. It shows us the blueprint for a humble, formidable program that has probably saved thousands (if not more) lives.



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

When you know the premise of the show, you have to wonder if it's going to fall somewhere between *The Iceman Cometh* and a public service announcement. As we come to know Dr. Bob and Bill Wilson, we grasp that their lives and the lives of those who care about them are at stake. As we might expect, the treatment of the narrative is dry, measured, sober, with lots of ironic humor thrown in. We learn the ideology and logic between the now well-known 12 Steps. Inebriation is revealed as a luxury those who suffer from alcoholism cannot afford. In 1925 this was nothing short of a breakthrough, though *Bill W.* is deliberate in not presenting either of these two men as miracle workers or saint-like humanitarians, though they very well may have been. The road to salvation they paved was for drunks to help other drunks stay sober. Without recrimination or pity. Revolutionary, isn't it?

Bill W. & Dr. Bob boasts a versatile, dedicated and modulated ensemble cast: Jerry Crow, Andrew Dillon, Stephanie Dunnam, Greg Forshay, Renee Krapff and Elizabeth Rueff.

Christopher Soden is a theater critic who also [writes for content partner The Column.](#)

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