

# Arts In LA

## The Behavior of Broadus Sacred Fools Theater Company

Straight up, the Sacred Fool–Burglars of Hamm co-production of *The Behavior of Broadus* is the most audacious, provocative, entertaining, original musical to premiere in LA since 2008's *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, to which the new show bears more than a little resemblance.

Not only did both receive workshopping and support from Center Theater Group (for which, bless CTG), but each exhibits the same cheerfully anarchic spirit; the same harum-scarum, period-mashing, fourth-wall-breaking theatricality; and equal 20/20 hindsight as to the effect of historical personages and events on the present day.

The behavior *Behavior* charts is that of Dr. John Broadus Watson (1878–1958), to whose life story the Burglars librettists (Carolyn Almos, co-director Matt Almos, Jon Beauregard, and Albert Dayan) hew more closely than did Alex Timbers and Michael Friedman in their evisceration of our seventh president. Watson (impersonated charismatically by Hugo Armstrong) escaped a hardscrabble Southern upbringing and fundamentalist conditioning to earn a psychology Ph.D., becoming a pioneer in the movement known, and somewhat eclipsed today but still hanging on, as “behaviorism.”

Broadly (Broadusly?) speaking, that's the Pavlovian, anti-Freudian notion that science must observe and experiment upon human subjects. Probing into that which is interior, dreamlike, or hypothetical is rigorously proscribed.

As the musical faithfully synopsisizes, Watson applied his faith in the power of psychological conditioning first to the behavior of maze rats (impersonated charmingly by Andrew Joseph Perez); then to child-rearing (he beat Dr. Spock to the punch by decades with 1928's bestselling *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*); and finally to advertising, where he propounded the notion that products sell not because of the facts we consumers are told about them but by the seductive narrative woven around them. (Sound familiar?)

The musical takes awhile to gain its footing. Act One, in particular, fails to establish the evening's tone for long stretches; for a while it looks like we're just in for a cartoonish series of easy, cheesy satirical targets (religious mania; egotistical scientists; vain, dumb flappers) with little point beyond childish cynicism. As adroit as Armstrong is, he can't quite get a handle on Watson in the first half, forced to bang around alternately as clodhopper, fraud, dupe, and true believer.

Once Watson's personal and professional lives merge after intermission, the ideas start pinging, and Armstrong's performance takes on full potency and poignancy. We see Watson as much a prisoner of his own theories as their booster: His parenting system sadly backfires on his own sons, and he's haunted by his incomplete, world-famous experiments on the infant known as “Little Albert,” in whom Watson instilled a fear of rats without following through to undo any potential damage. (Amir Levi chillingly portrays the grown Albert in Watson's heartbreaking hallucination.)

We're also invited to consider behaviorism's role in making us all consumerists, and in advancing the effects of authoritarian political systems generally. Few musicals offer as much food for the mind.

There's plenty of ear and eye candy too. The score, credited to the sensational composer Brendan Milburn (*Sleeping Beauty Wakes*), as well as to Matt Almos and the Burglars generally, is sophisticated and tuneful at once, and—praise be—heavily period influenced as well. Choreography by co-director Ken Roht is sharp and apt throughout, avoiding showiness and camp. Most memorable of all are Jason H. Thompson's brilliant projected images, whether literal or symbolically tinged, of the outside world Watson was so eager to bend to his behaviorist will.

Reviewed by Bob Verini  
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