

# REVIEW: The Wilbury Group's *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*

*By William F. Oakes, East Bay News*

Odds are, when you encounter a play entitled “Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson”, you will have no luke-warm reaction to it. You’ll either love the show or hate it. Well folks, I loved it. The production by Providence’s The Wilbury Group presents American history as a rock ‘n’ roll nightclub act and is a rough and ready riotous romp. “Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson” is comprised of equal parts slapstick, smarts and sheer silliness and the polarization produced by the title is part of the point.

Andrew Jackson, our nation’s seventh President, was, both in his day and in the annals of history, a man who provoked strong and contradictory opinions. ‘Old Hickory’ was lauded as the hero of the battle of New Orleans and damned for his forced relocation of American Indian tribes. The political image of himself as a ‘man of the people’ garnered him considerable acclaim as well as the nickname ‘King Mob.’ The musical takes a no-holds-barred look at his life and times but, especially as it presents this story as Vaudeville, that most indigenous and populist of American Performance styles, is ultimately most successful in depicting just how divided and contrary the collective American heart has always been.

Throughout the evening’s zany historical irreverence this is the point underscored again and again—think that we are a divided nation now? Guess what! We were as divided in our nation’s infancy and what’s more, we’re still arguing over the same things! The show’s rousing opening number happily declares “Populism Yea, Yea!” then spends the rest of the evening asking “Yeah, what then?” “People are confusing”, a despairing President Jackson remarks, “you don’t know what you want.” Along his journey to the White House he encounters our preening and posturing political forefathers in Washington and campaigns both on ‘change’ and the need to ‘take this country back’. And the more things change the more our conflicts remain the same.

This take on the American political psyche has a lot in common with the way, say, that Jon Stewart or “The Colbert Report” satirizes politics today—the operating philosophy behind the work is the same, in that the play’s authors Alex Timbers and Michael Friedman have taken the time to research and know all their facts about their subject before proceeding to make really goofy jokes about it. And while wackiness abounds the evening’s comedic sketches provide an awful lot of factual knowledge about Jackson, his life and times—I’ve never learned so much while laughing so hard in my life! And amidst the considerable ribald and slapstick humor there are also jokes about Susan Sontag and Alexis de Tocqueville. Throw in the great rock songs into the mix and “Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson” proves to be one heck of an enjoyable wild ride!

This sort of show, seemingly roughhewn on the surface, requires considerable finesse in order to pull the trick off and happily The Wilbury Group’s ensemble has the requisite chops. The production takes place in the large and utilitarian warehouse space on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Butcher Block Mill in Providence. The audience is seated cabaret style on round tables at one end of the hall. The sets are minimal and there is a definite underground vibe to these proceedings especially when, at the start of the show, the entire cast marches menacingly through the audience like a band of marauders on a mission of conquest.

And what a cast they are! Joe Short, in the title role, is every inch an “Old Hickory.” Lean, mean and thoroughly in control of the scene he saunters about the stage with a Rock Star’s swagger. His charisma onstage is boyishness combined with a jagged cutting edge and it’s a winning combination that makes you want to both cheer him in concert and vote for him come November.

The rest of the collective ensemble seems as vast as a young nation with lots of actors playing various roles, all are deft, delightful and delirium provoking as they juggle their many parts.

Comedic standouts abound here. Clare Blackmer is a riot as The Storyteller, our show's gleeful and indefatigable narrator. There is a sort of homespun hilarity that shapes her ends upon the stage, it's a bit as if the tale was being told by Mammy Yokum.

Hurricane force levels of laughter are provoked from the audience by the combined efforts of Kelly Seigh, Dave Rabinow, Stuart Wilson, Andrew Stigler and Brien Lang as they portray Martin Van Buren, Henry Clay, John Quincy Adams, James Monroe and John C. Calhoun. Each play their respective forefather to the absolute hilt as various types of political hacks and puffed-up puppets; of special note is the absolutely demented facial expression of Mr. Rabinow as Henry Clay and the arch look on the face of Ms. Seigh which seems to embody sheer satisfaction with pure hypocrisy.

In other roles, Alyssa Gorgone was both strong and sweet as Rachel Jackson. Jo-an Peralta was fantastically feral as Jackson's adopted son Lyncoya. Nicole Cooney made for a marvelously winsome presence as the "Ten Little Indians" Soloist.

The onstage biography of a large and messy life, especially as the tale is told as a series of sketches, will, by its very nature contain some meandering. But we are scarcely aware of that fact as the Direction by Josh Short and David Tessier keep the action tight, driven and constantly moving. A light and nimble touch is maintained on the reins here and while the humor is appropriately broad it is never allowed to become too heavy-handed. What's more the poignant aspects of the play, particularly as it pertains to the 'trail of tears', are neatly underlined and stand out for being played with simple emotional honesty.

Mr. Tessier also serves as bandleader here, heading up an onstage rock band that is solid, tight and kick-butt. The songs are all lots of fun, perhaps in the end more fun than memorable, but the cast sings them all with considerable aplomb.

That does, however, bring me to my one complaint about the show. At least on the night that I attended there were some problems with audibility-I was sitting in the first row and from time to time, especially in some big group numbers, I had real difficulty hearing what people were singing. Obviously that's a huge problem for a musical, and I think the fault lies not with the acoustics of the hall but that the microphone levels weren't properly checked and rechecked prior to performance. Most of the time we could hear OK, especially when the older and more trained actors were onstage, the problem only occurred in the group numbers. All of which amplifies my problem with on stage microphones, which I've even seen at the high school level, we are training a generation of performers who have to rely on electronics to fill a room with their voice.

My only other complaint is that the show is closing all too quickly, with final performances this weekend that I wouldn't miss. The show merrily takes potshots at history (Heck, Jackson even takes aim at the Storyteller at one point which seems to epitomize the spirit of democratic action at play here-we will suffer no other but ourselves to tell our stories) and is audacious, unafraid to be stupid and unapologetically smart. That makes this bold and brass show a lot like America itself. Of it I sing!

*The Wilbury Group presents "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson" at the Butcher Block Mill, 25 Eagle Street, Providence RI now through July 28 only. See listings for details.*