

THEATER REVIEW

Playwright James Sheldon takes on American Greed

By Antonia Shoumatoff

James Sheldon's last play, *Shiverman*, performed in London last spring, received a nomination for Best Play of the Year in the off-West End awards. It was reviewed by *The Times of London*, and Sheldon's writing was described as "pugnacious and provocative."

Sheldon's latest play, *The Bonus Room*, opened at Copake's Grange Theatre on September 28. It is a pithy, incisive and creative depiction of the moral bankruptcy and greed that is endemic in American culture.

Sheldon grapples with the timely topic of white-collar crime by depicting three familiar characters who find themselves in "Club Fed," as they call it, a cushy federal prison for multimillionaires. One character, named Ben Bankroft, bears a strong resemblance to Bernie Madoff; another, Bob Graboczek, a Senator, is similar to Rod Blagojevich, the Illinois governor who tried to sell president-elect Barack Obama's Senate seat to the highest bidder; and the third, a ballplayer named Dale Cannon, represents all the sports stars who have been caught taking steroids.

Each character justifies his illegal activity. Ben Bankroft, the Madoff-like character, says: "I gave my clients a stake in the American Dream... I made my stockholders filthy rich." But one of his fellow con-artists in the pen responds that Bankroft's illegal actions resulted in "dooming thousands of people to a life of poverty."

The felons find themselves in a "secure government facility," where they are being persuaded by Dr. Connie Stroheim, the director of clinical trials at the NIH (National Institutes of Health), to partake in the testing of an experimental drug, oxytocin, which is emitted by women during childbirth and can produce feelings of empathy and trust, to see if sociopaths can "produce more cooperative behaviors."

All three of the felons play a trust game, but they figure out how to set up the ballplayer to make a play for the NIH administrator: "If you charm the knickers off that shrink, we might all be home for Christmas." The ruse works, and pretty soon, Sheldon makes a play on the play and shows how duplicitous activity at the highest levels of government is an indictment of the whole system.

Bankroft at first resists taking the drug, saying: "We'll just be like the Average Joe... schlemiels." But under pressure from the others, he finally agrees to take the "love drug" that the doctor promises "will make their dendrites dance." And indeed, when guys come back into the room after having been administered the drug, they hug each other and figure out how to make a comeback.

The concept is that they will take the pension money that Graboczek, the senator, stole from his constituents and stashed in the Cayman Islands and use it as seed money "to give back for the good of society and tap into the philanthropic spirit." After each one tries to blackmail the others, they finally agree to divvy up the cash equally.

Dr. Stroheim, the NIH administrator, gets sucked into the plot after falling for the ballplayer and blackmailing the government for her own benefit. The Madoff character gets excited about once again being able to offer sub-prime mortgages—in Africa.

Stroheim explains that it was the "millions of voters who put Mr. Graboczek in office time and again. The homebuyers and bankers and brokers who made Mr. Bankroft one of the richest men in the world. We were all cheering you on, the whole country, all of us so eager to see you succeed, so we could catch a glimpse of ourselves in your success."

With snappy lines and biting humor, Sheldon succeeds in broadening the conversation that has been dominating the airwaves since the 2008 financial debacle.

Andrew Joffe excels at depicting Ben Bankroft as uptight and neurotic. As Bob Graboczek, Gary Cookson masters the smooth talk of a politician. Deirdre Bollinger's Dr. Stroheim is delightful. Charlie Tirrell's ballplayer is charming but less believable. The actors do some nice ensemble work, and they obviously have fun with it all. Thomas Gruenewald's direction is seamless.

The question one is left with is whether or not there is any redemption for people like this. Or will they never change unless all of us develop a conscience?

Performances of *The Bonus Room* will continue through the weekend of October 5-7 at the Grange Theatre, 628 Empire Road, Copake. The Friday performance begins at 8:00 p.m. There will be two shows on Saturday, at 5:00 and 8:00 p.m. The Sunday matinee will start at 2:00 p.m. Tickets are \$20. For reservations, information or directions, please call (845) 677-4446 or e-mail James Sheldon at jsheldon@orchardcap.com.