

## The Public Theater production 'Be Here Now' should 'Be Seen Now'

BY ROB TUKEY - SPECIAL TO THE SUN JOURNAL  
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**With fast dialogue and strong characterizations, the play, which runs through Sunday, June 26, explores how we find meaning and purpose in life.**



*Russell Berrigan as Mike and Janet Mitchko as Bari in a scene from "Be Here Now"*

"Be Here Now" is a fast-paced allegorical play by Deborah Zoe Laufer currently being performed at The Public Theatre in Lewiston. Four

extremely talented actors rip through crisp, scintillating dialogue that contrasts and contests differing belief systems and tackles the human experiences that propel them. The power of the script is palpable as directed by Executive/Artistic Director Christopher Schario and the four terrific players: Janet Mitchko, Russell Berrigan, Sheila Stasack and Mary Mattison Valley.

Clever sets by Amber Callahan change quickly and seamlessly as the several scenes move from the distribution center, to the local pub, a ramshackle cabin and a hospital room.

"Holy crap!" to paraphrase Bari (Janet Mitchko). At least, that's the terse assessment of her situation and the well-meaning attempts of her friends Patty (Sheila Stasack) and Luanne (Mary Mattison Valley) to help her find happiness. Bari's always been a bit of an angry, depressed misanthrope. And losing her job teaching nihilism in New York City to work at the local fulfillment center in her rural hometown has sent her into despair.

As the play opens, Bari's friends Patty and Luanne have browbeaten her into taking a mindfulness class hoping she can learn to "be here now" to appreciate just being in the moment. We learn that she has reluctantly agreed only if they will henceforth leave her alone. You see, Bari avoids commitment, intimacy and appreciation for the simple pleasures in life like the plague. She clings fiercely to the nihilist view that "nothing matters" — we are simply born, we live, we die, the end.

Patty and Luanne claim to have found the happiness and purpose that they believe Bari should enjoy. Patty maintains she has achieved happiness by "working at it," while Luanne says hers is the result of her religious faith. Ironically, both admit to taking prescription mood enhancers and anti-depressants, which only furthers Bari's cynical opinion of their "happiness."

But lately, seizure-like headache attacks have befallen Bari and are becoming more frequent. Her friends, naturally concerned, urge her to seek medical treatment. Luanne uses her spiritual strength and faith to try to help Bari. Patty believes tough love will ultimately convince Bari to seek medical help, so she berates her.

Both Luanne and Patty have also encouraged Bari to keep a "dinner date" they have arranged for her with Mike (Russell Berrigan), another former childhood friend who has also returned to Cooperville from the city for reasons revealed later. Bari is hesitant but decides to go only so she can gently explain to him that she is not interested in dating.

At the local eatery, Bari waits for Mike outside on a bench. Arriving by bicycle, he is exuberant about a discarded baby stroller and wicker hamper he finds in a recycle pile. Bari deems these items “garbage,” which gets the meeting off to a rocky start. Clearly, they’re personalities are like oil and vinegar, which, when shaken, fails to create an agreeable emulsion.

However, when Bari collapses in one of her seizures, Mike is genuinely concerned. To his surprise, when she regains consciousness she appears to be in an altered state manifesting as a bizarre, ecstatic, almost religious experience. Suddenly colors and aromas are more enhanced and Bari finds herself lusting after Mike. She propositions him in a most alluring way that he finds himself unable to resist.

Mike succumbs to her advances but in her subsequent manic euphoria, she thoughtlessly casts him aside as she writes tirelessly to complete her thesis on nihilism. Once her episode subsides, Bari regrets how she treated Mike and goes to his cabin to apologize. Here, slowly the incongruous couple learn more about each other. Mike has a tragic past that has led him to a self-imposed spartan existence. His hermit existence is shared only with a pet crow, Hubble.

As the pair bare their souls and reveal their fears and regrets, a mutual understanding of each other emerges. Bari’s great fear about medical intervention for her seizures is that a cure may destroy the newfound joy and happiness that has come with her obviously life-threatening symptoms. Meanwhile, Mike is forced to face his own demons when Bari suddenly is stricken with her most serious seizure yet.

The soaring dialogue assigned to each of the four actors is realistically delivered by these fine players. Stasack and Vallery convincingly portray facets of societal belief systems we all may recognize if not identify with. And most certainly Mitchko and Berrigan wring every emotion from their relationship as they spar verbally in defense of their own perspectives.

Ultimately, this beautiful and thought-provoking play admirably asks the question, can one find meaning and purpose in life from the past and achieve mindful living? As presented in this commanding performance, for Bari and Mike the answer is there to be found.