

ENTERTAINMENT

Review: Square product theatre's 'Horses' takes absurdist view of financial ruin

By Adam Goldstein for [DAILY CAMERA](#)

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If you go

What: square product theatre company's production of Amelia Roper's "She Rode Horses Like the Stock Exchange."

When: Through May 13

Where: The Carsen Theater at the Dairy Arts Center, 2590 Walnut St., Boulder

Cost: Tickets start at \$24

More info: squareproducttheatre.org

Leave it to an Australian playwright to find the humor, humanity and farce in the worst American financial disaster since the Great Depression.

Amelia Roper's comedy "She Rode Horses Like the Stock Exchange" takes an unflinching and absurdist view of the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007, a financial mess that ultimately pushed the world economy to the brink of collapse. What emerges from the square product theatre troupe's current production of the show running at the Dairy Arts Center until May 13 is a portrait in everyday corruption that feels all too immediate. Rather than a cautionary tale of lessons learned, the piece, directed by Niki Tulk, comes off as a warning of excesses that haven't changed in 10 years.

Those larger messages come in a stark setting: a park in Connecticut on a lazy Sunday. Set designers Emily K. Harrison and Tulk opt for minimalism; the lights come up in the Carsen Theater to reveal a square patch of grass and a lone branch hanging in the background. These simple elements become the framework for the action between four flawed characters mired in the muck of a corrupt financial system.

Amy (Harrison) and Henry (Jihad Milhem) appear first, a New England couple visiting the park on a lazy Sunday and intent on enjoying all the stereotypical perks of the bucolic setting. Very quickly, however, the playwright exposes flaws and fissures in the pair's supposedly ideal life. Amy is an investment banker, and Henry is a nurse; they've recently purchased a new home, with plenty of rooms, big windows and a yard big enough for a vegetable garden.

But all of these perks of being dutiful players in the capitalist system can't hide a feeling of emptiness that pervades the relationship, a quality that's clear in the absurdist dialogue between the two, which echoes the best work of Samuel Beckett. The couple's life feels directionless. Even their Sunday picnic seems hollow, as Henry seems to garner more enjoyment out of spotting random dogs and Amy is more intent on the trappings of wealth and success — a moose head in her new home office, a desire for a hypothetical passion that is markedly absent in the pair's relationship — than actual fulfillment and happiness.

The sense of barrenness only grows with the arrival of Sara (Michelle Moore) and Max (Andrew Horsford), another couple that arrives at the mark dressed in their best formal duds, toting a standing lamp and bags stuffed with formal dinnerware and fancy fixings like foie gras. Max and Amy have connections in the world of investment banking, ties that underline themes of ambition and sexism as the play progresses. Sara, sporting a spiffy cocktail dress, is a proud fan of privilege — she loves to travel to exotic locales, and she seems at a loss as to how to properly process the setting of a public park.

The dialogue between the four players has a wandering, unmoored quality. In the constant barrage of arguments, musings and inquiries between the characters, Roper touches on themes ranging from female empowerment to the ridiculous marks of male privilege in America. As the four crowd over the picnic basket and the full history of Max and Amy's careers in the banking industry are revealed, the thrust of the comedy turns more and more toward the question of corruption and financial excess. "We live in interesting times," Amy observes, and it becomes a euphemism for an era of soulless and unchecked greed.

Indeed, the show seeks to capture in character form how the flimsy facades of a corrupt system began to dissolve in earnest in 2007. The square product theatre crew is incisive and observant in their service to the text, finding every laugh embedded in every beat.

Harrison is delightfully merciless in her portrayal of an ambitious and spurned banker; Milhem is endearingly clueless as someone who's along for the ride in a journey rife with excess and corruption. Moore gives an unsettling portrait of unchecked privilege, and Horsford's manic performance as a portrait of a flawed financial system's most grievous sins is a highlight of the show. Tulk's direction weaves all of these portrayals together smoothly, and the production finds the playwright's full potential.

This one-act comedy is an exercise in absurdity, and considering the subject matter, the form is entirely appropriate. A decade after the crisis, the crookedness behind the financial implosion still feel cartoonish and unreal. The square product theater's careful take on Roper's material, however, shows that the attitudes behind the crimes don't seem all that far removed. We're still living in a society where greed is the norm, and this show brings that reality home with laughs and ridiculousness. It's a bit terrifying.