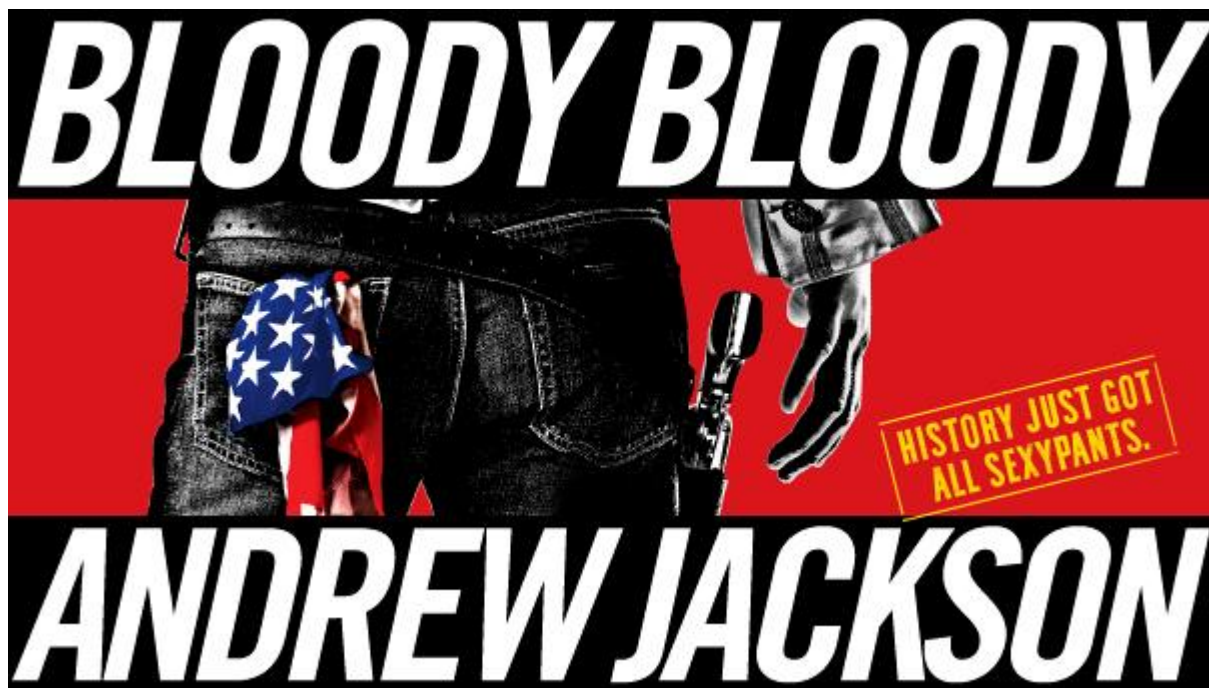


## Populism! Yeah? Yeah!!



### Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson

On a chilly weekend shortly before Christmas, the Stunning Significant Other (hereafter, SSO) and I took a quick trip from snowy, abstemious New England down to New York City. With no Friday night plans in place, as Metro North whisked us toward Grand Central I asked her if there were anything in particular she'd like to do that evening. Any restaurants she'd like to visit? Perhaps we could see what the Metropolitan Opera was performing? Or maybe a Broadway show? I will confess that I was not entirely lacking in ulterior motives in asking these questions. She replied that it would be great to see a show—but what was playing? Well, I cautiously replied, there was a soon-to-close musical that I'd heard was really great. "What's it about?" Well, I ventured, even more cautiously, it's about antebellum politics and Manifest Destiny. "That sounds absolutely awesome," was the response. (A word of caution: I would not try this with just any significant other. It helps if he/she is also a devotee of nineteenth-century Americana. You've been warned.)

The opening number offers the essence of the show's take on Jackson's appeal, and also its less-than-subtle link to current political events.

That's how we found ourselves at the Bernard Jacobs Theatre on West 45<sup>th</sup> Street later that evening, ready to see "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson." This musical, originally conceived by Les Freres Corbusier, a downtown theatre troupe that is "devoted to aggressively visceral theatre combining historical revisionism, sophomoric humor, and rigorous academic research," had its roots in the downtown theater scene, although it was first performed in Los Angeles. This production was brought to Broadway by the Public Theater in fall 2010.

Apparently the audience for a loosely historical musical satire about our seventh president was not as large as the producers had hoped. The show, which cost \$4.5 million to stage, closed on January 2, 2011, after only 120 performances, finishing its run substantially in the red.

"Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson" combines the emo-rock musical stylings that made "Spring Awakening" such a smash earlier in the decade with an irreverent, free-wheeling approach to American history and presidential politics. In this respect, it is reminiscent of the little-seen but highly entertaining "President Harding is a Rock Star," a glam rock musical that got its start on the experimental stages of the East Village before enjoying a run in Washington, D.C., in the run-up to the 2004 presidential election. Indeed, one of the main messages of BBAJ is the importance of media appeal—and particularly sex appeal—in the marketing of presidential candidates: the posters for the show seen on bus shelters around New York showed this image (fig. 1), whose slogan "History Just Got All Sexypants" seemed to be one of the key themes (if not desires) of the show.



Fig. 1. Publicity image from "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson." Courtesy of the show's Website, [www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com](http://www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com)

The interior of the Jacobs Theatre was a welter of old-timey bric-a-brac, taxidermy, velvet swagged curtains, portraits of nineteenth-century political figures, duct tape, strings of lights, piles of empty beer cans and liquor bottles: picture Peale's Museum, trashed by the Delta Tau Chis. Suspended from the ceiling was a stuffed horse, its legs trussed together by a chain. I waited all evening for it to burst open and shower something—Confetti? Whiskey? Worthless currency from the pet banks?—over the audience, to no avail.

Much of the press that BBAJ received related to the undeniable charisma and appeal of the show's star, Benjamin Walker (fig. 2). He swaggered onstage at the outset of the show in tight jeans and a military jacket, a holstered pistol at his side, surveyed the audience, and declared, "You guys are sexy as shit!" After some additional prefatory patter, he declared "I'm Andrew Jackson! I'm your president! Let's go!" And the night was off to the races with the show's opening full-cast number, "[Populism, Yea, Yea!](#)" (A song that I was singing to myself on the way over to the theater—the SS0 thought I had made it up.) The opening number offers the essence of the show's take on Jackson's appeal, and also its less-than-subtle link to current political events, describing populism as a movement that is

*For people like us,  
Who don't just think about things—  
People who make things happen.  
Sometimes with guns,  
Sometimes with speeches too,  
And also other things.*



Fig 2. Benjamin Walker as Andrew Jackson. Courtesy of the media gallery at [www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com](http://www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com)

The ironic, winking connection to contemporary politics runs throughout the musical, and can at times verge into the self-satisfied (as many reviews of the show noted, this tone did not translate well from smaller downtown venues to the scale of a Broadway production). The musical offers a loose—very loose—outline of Jackson's upbringing on the Tennessee frontier (his family is depicted as being killed by Indians, cementing young Andrew's remorseless hatred of the people whom he would as president persecute so thoroughly), and offering an explanation of his later populist politics in his father's rants against the urban elites of the East who don't give a damn about the needs of citizens in the West. The show races to put Jackson in action, in the War of 1812. It is in the wake of his stunning victory at the Battle of New Orleans that Jackson the public figure—the real subject of the musical—comes to the fore, in a song titled "I'm Not That Guy." Jackson struggles with the implications of life in the public eye, including the exposure that a career in politics would bring to his marriage to his wife, Rachel, whose lack of an official divorce from her first husband before marrying Jackson would dog him throughout his career. Walker as Jackson quickly reconciles these misgivings, however, and at the end of the song declares what the rest of the musical will show to be the primary tenet of Jackson's political beliefs: "Who am I? I'm Andrew Fucking Jackson!"

A ninety-minute musical that is primarily being played for laughs can't be expected to offer much in the way of historical detail, and BBAJ makes no claim to fidelity to the facts (although the show's Website does offer a link to additional resources for those who are interested in learning more about Jackson and his era). Most of the historical context that is present in the show is offered by the Storyteller (Broadway veteran Kristine Nielsen), supposedly a retired history teacher and admitted Jackson aficionado who periodically rolls onstage in a motorized wheelchair accessorized with an American flag. The central section of the musical deals with the high points of Jackson's career: the election of 1824, and the "corrupt bargain" that put John Quincy Adams in the White House; Jackson's decision to run again in 1828; and his first term in office. Through this portion of the show Jackson shares the stage with the main political players in those events: John Quincy Adams, John Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Martin Van Buren. It is in the depiction of these figures that many readers of *Common-placemight* find the most to enjoy.

Darren Goldstein plays Calhoun as a slick backroom wheeler-dealer, with a voice seemingly lifted from the cartoon chicken Foghorn Leghorn. Lucas Near-Verbrugghe's Van Buren is a fawning, two-faced petty bureaucrat, interested in nothing more than feathering his own nest. The show's version of John Quincy Adams is a far cry from Anthony Hopkins' incorruptible idealist in the film "Amistad." Here, Jeff Hiller plays the sixth president as a stupefied, incompetent, adenoidal lummo; when the deal is consummated that hands Adams

victory in the 1824 presidential election, he clumps offstage and yelps, "This is exciting! I never win anything!" Most notable, however, is Bryce Pinkham's performance as Henry Clay, who speaks in a near-incomprehensible shriek, may or may not have a hunchback, has hair that appears to have been styled by a mid-80s Robert Smith, and is continually stroking some sort of rodent—too sleek for a marmot, too big for a weasel. Perhaps a mink (fig. 3).

For theatre-goers who are familiar with the historical context, all of this is very entertaining. And the key message of this central section—that the qualities that it takes to get elected president are very different from those that are required to govern effectively—is one that has obvious connections to more contemporary periods. Yet many members of the audience seemed a bit baffled. The show's satirical humor seemed to have difficulty connecting with the audience in a venue of this size, and its music and choreography are not as polished as many visitors to New York likely expect to see on a Broadway stage (especially if they paid the full price of over \$100 a ticket).



Fig 3. Darren Goldstein as Calhoun, Bryce Pinkham as Clay, Ben Steinfeld as Monroe, Jeff Hiller as John Quincy Adams and Lucas Near-Verbrugghe as Van Buren. Courtesy of the media gallery at [www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com](http://www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com)

Perhaps more perplexing was the show's shift in tone in its final third, where things turned somber as the focus swung to the one historical event that most members of the audience probably associated with Jackson: the Trail of Tears. A Native American leader named "Black Fox" is depicted as being a close confidante of Jackson, aiding his policies of Indian removal by betraying numerous tribes in his role as Jackson's chief negotiator (the character was called Black Hawk in the show's first run at the Public Theater, but the name was changed after Native Americans who saw the show objected that the character's negative portrayal could lead audiences to think that it referred to the real Black Hawk, the Sauk and Fox war leader of the early nineteenth century). But at the end of the show, Black Fox's own people stand in the way of Jackson's expansionist vision, and Black Fox is forced to take leave of Washington to lead his tribe in what he knows will be a futile war against U.S. troops. Jackson explains that the conflict between Indians and white settlers hungry for land was foreordained from the moment Europeans first set foot on the continent, and that even if he wanted to stop what he refers to as the "genocide" that is underway, he is powerless in the face of historical forces he can't control.

The show concluded with a rousing version of "[The Hunters of Kentucky](#)," an 1821 song that Jackson used as his campaign anthem in 1824 and 1828. Yet despite ending on this energetic note, the underlying theme of the show left one feeling somewhat uneasy. As BBAJ showed, the United States as it is presently constituted is the result of a long list of bad (if not downright immoral) decisions throughout history—decisions that modern voters might regret, but that have also made us who we are. We have been the material beneficiaries of

Jackson's power-mad, bloodthirsty streak, and even if we could right these wrongs, the musical asks us whether we would want to. BBAJ's combination of history and satire was likely not well suited for the Broadway stage—it simply isn't commercial enough to fill that many seats night after night. A smaller venue, and an even sharper edge, would have helped this entertaining historical mash-up enjoy a longer run.