October 4 – 30, 2016

Setting: A sub shop in the middle of America, 2009.

There is NO intermission. This play runs approximately one hour and 30 minutes

Study Guide

Spoilers ahead!

Study guide prepared by Maddie Odegaard, Marketing & PR Department Intern
CAST

Sheri ................................................................. Emily Eisele+
Ted................................................................. Gavin Hoffman*
Jamie............................................................. Val Landrum^*
Bob/Customer/Gregory/Sandwich................. Mueen Jahan*

*Member of Actors’ Equity
+ Equity Membership Candidate
^Artists Rep Resident Artist
CREATIVE TEAM

Scenic Designer.................................................................Megan Wilkerson^
Lighting Designer.............................................................Kristeen Willis Crosser^
Costume Designer..........................................................Emily Horton
Sound Designer.................................................................Jen Raynak
Properties Master.............................................................Kaye Blankenship
Voice & Text Director.......................................................Mary McDonald-Lewis^
Dramaturg.................................................................Luan Schooler
Resident Fight Choreographer.........................................Jonathan Cole
Resident Stage Manager..................................................Carol Ann Wohlmut^*
Assistant Director...........................................................Nate Cohen
Production Assistant.........................................................Karen Hill+
Board Op.................................................................................Jason Coffey

^Artists Rep Resident Artist
*Member of Actors’ Equity
+ Equity Membership Candidate

#The scenic, costume, lighting, projection and sound designers are represented by United Scenic Artists

ABOUT ARTISTS REPERTORY THEATRE

Artists Rep’s mission is to produce intimate, provocative theatre and provide a home for artists of varied backgrounds to take creative risks. Artists Rep is Portland’s premiere mid-size regional theatre company and is led by Artistic Director Dámaso Rodriguez and Managing Director Sarah Horton. Founded in 1982, Artists Repertory Theatre is the longest-running professional theatre company in Portland. Artist Rep became the 72nd member of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) in May 2016 and is an Associate Member of the National New Play Network (NNPN).
When the American Dream is dashed, try making a sandwich! A trio of disparate and desperate ‘sandwich artists’ find themselves abandoned by their fast-food franchise and left to their own devices in this utterly amusing and ridiculously believable story of making ends “meat and cheese.” This post-recession, comedic commentary embraces the humor in misery, the creativity in despair, and the ingenuity of the human spirit as this indomitable group bands together to succeed on their own damned terms.

"AMERICAN HERO underscores that even when the work may get you down, the people you work with can give you a lift." - The New York Times

"AMERICAN HERO calls to mind a range of anxiety-generating post-recession narratives." - NBC New York

"AMERICAN HERO is a supersized dark comedy about life, liberty, and the pursuit of sandwiches." - Detroit Performs

"The themes and memes presented in AMERICAN HERO is that the individual is still the cornerstone of economic growth, that when given a chance to innovate, most everyone can find and use those creative muscles once again, and within that gift there is always hope." - Berkshire On Stage and Screen

"AMERICAN HERO is a meaty play with plenty to chew on, so be sure to go and grab a bite." - Berkshire On Stage and Screen

"Wohl has a light touch with the comedy." - Times Union
About the Playwright

Bess began her career as an actress, earning an MFA from Yale, and has since become a writer, developing for the stage, motion pictures and television. She is currently at work on a family drama about the meat business for HBO. She is also working on an original musical about the adult entertainment business, a recent commission from the Center Theater Group in Los Angeles.

Her first play, CATS TALK BACK, had its world premiere at the Yale Cabaret while she was a student at Yale. It was subsequently performed at the Williamstown Theater Festival and finally at the NYC International Fringe Festival where it won the award for Best Overall Production. Her play, TOUCH(ED), had its world premiere at the Pioneer Theatre Company earlier this year. BARCELONA was recently workshopped at Ojai Playwrights Conference. Her plays have been produced or developed at The Vineyard Theater, The Pittsburgh Public Theater, The Northlight Theater, TheaterWorks New Works Fesitval, and The Geffen Playhouse. Her work has also been supported by the MacDowell Colony, where she was recently a fellow. Upcoming productions include the world premiere of her play, IN, at the Pioneer Theater in 2011.

Her screenplay adaptation of her play, IN was included on Hollywood’s Black List of best feature scripts. She has also developed for network television, and recently wrote an original pilot for Twentieth Century Fox Television/FBC.

As an actress, Bess has appeared onstage in New York, regionally and at Williamstown Theater Festival (five summers) and in numerous films and TV shows, where she has given birth, solved crimes, committed crimes, been wrongly accused, and come back from the dead.

She is a graduate of Harvard, Magna Cum Laude, where she was awarded the Rona Jaffe Writing Prize and the Tennessee Williams Scholarship. At the Yale School of Drama, she was a recipient of the Rebecca West Scholarship.

Wohl won the 2015 Drama Desk Sam Norkin Off-Broadway Award that recognizes excellence and significant contributions to the theatre for establishing herself as an important voice in New York theatre, and having a breakthrough year with the eclectic AMERICAN HERO, PRETTY FILTHY and SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS.

She is originally from Brooklyn, New York, and divides her time between New York and Los Angeles.
DIRECTOR’S CORNER

About the director

This is Shawn’s first time directing for Artists Rep. He recently directed the Portland Premiere of E.M. Lewis’ THE GUN SHOW at CoHo Productions starring Resident Artist Vin Shambry.

He is in his third season as Artistic Producer at Artists Rep, where he has produced 16 shows to date and coordinated with companies such as Profile Theatre, Portland Shakespeare Project, Risk/Reward, Hand2Mouth, Corrib Theatre, PHAME and the Grammy-nominated band Tiempo Libre.

In 2001, he co-founded the Furious Theatre Company in Los Angeles where he served as co-artistic director until moving to Portland in 2014. He is the recipient of the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award, the Back Stage Garland Award, LA Weekly Theatre Award, LA Stage Alliance Ovation Award and the Pasadena Arts Council’s Gold Crown Award. With Furious Theatre, over 25 productions including the award-winning rolling U.S. Premiere of FOXFINDER with Artists Rep and THE PAIN AND THE ITCH with The Theatre@Boston Court. He is a co-creator of foundfootage.net with Matt Pelfrey (MTV SKINS) and directed several episodes of the web-series A.G.A.N.G. He is a member of Actors’ Equity Association.
I have a confession to make: I still believe in the American Dream. I can’t help but intuitively struggle toward the idea that if you work hard enough you can be successful and build a good life for you and your family. I believe this even though I have seen plenty of evidence that this is not the case.

Families buried under medical bills. Families that go bankrupt from paying their children’s college tuition. Parents working two jobs to take care of children they never get to see. And yet I push forward in the tenuous hope that my efforts will make all the difference for my future and that of my family. Am I a victim of American propaganda?

On the surface AMERICAN HERO may seem like a light situational comedy, a feel-good play about working-class Americans surviving in a post-recession economy as “sandwich artists.” Can you make a sandwich in 20 seconds? But the characters are real and their tribulations all too plausible. Jamie, Ted and Sheri still believe in the upward momentum of the American Dream even as they are forced to work minimum-wage jobs at a chain sandwich shop in a desperate effort to move off the bottom rung of the economic ladder.

As for the owner of the sandwich shop? His position is an even bigger leap of faith. Bob thinks he is going to be an entrepreneur. A job maker and a community contributor. But the reality is starkly different. Most popular sandwich franchises require 11% of the gross sales to be paid back to their corporation as part of the agreement. Gross sales. If they are fortunate, the average franchise ends up making only $50,000 in profit. If the owner has to also pay back loans, this profit is reduced even more significantly. These statistics are, of course, not listed in the franchise marketing portfolio.

Each of Bess Wohl’s characters is an underdog. They are all Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the hill only to have it roll back down. This is the frustration many feel today as they struggle with the American Dream. Is it futile? Are we all blinded by the historical hype? Or is there hope that if we work together we might just be able to roll that boulder over the hill?
Sheri — an overworked, awkward 18-year-old — sits with Bob — an American immigrant. Bob is opening up a franchise sandwich shop and looking to hire three employees and Sheri hopes to be one of them. Bob, to Sheri’s surprise, hires her on the spot.

Some time has passed and the shop is about to open. Along with Sheri, Ted — a relentlessly positive 43-year-old — and Jamie — a sexy 33-year-old — have also been hired. Bob is training them to make sandwiches based on instructions from a manual provided by Corporate. Bob is very intense and calculated. Sheri, Ted, and Jamie become frustrated with all of the technicalities of the training manual.

After some practice, the store is now ready for its grand opening! Sheri arrives after Ted and she is visibly tired. Sheri works the night shift at El Taco and most of the time, she sleeps in her car before coming to work at the sandwich shop. Jamie arrives, in an outfit complete with a mini skirt and stilettos. Ted finds her attractive, but he is married with two kids and wouldn’t dare jeopardize the relationship with his family.

They successfully make it through their grand opening. Ted is ecstatic, but Jamie doesn’t understand what the fuss is about. Jamie is surprised when Ted reveals that he previously worked at Bank of America. Ted and Jamie are noticeably flirtatious with each other. Sheri interrupts and brings attention to the fact that they need the security code, but Bob isn’t there to help them. In fact, he hasn’t been there all day. Sheri must get to work, but Ted and Jamie stay, in the hopes that maybe Bob will show up eventually.

Some time has passed and Bob has still only been in the store for a brief moment. Sheri calls the Corporate regional offices, which take her message. They advise that they keep the store open.

Not long after, a customer is there and he is unable to get the sandwich he wants because they are very low on inventory and out of many essential ingredients. The customer is very angry and the three are left trying to explain the complicated situation. They wonder if staying open makes sense anymore, especially since distributors haven’t been paid.

Late at night, Sheri is alone and has fallen asleep at a table. She “awakens” to a human-sized sandwich standing at the door. Sheri is confused and afraid, leading the sandwich to proclaim that he is eating her fear. He explains to Sheri that if she wants the business to succeed, she must get creative and take initiative. After her dream, Sheri decides to purchase ingredients from the grocery store.

The plan works and the three employees find a groove and are successful in keeping the store open and their customers happy.
Next, Gregory from Corporate comes in the store. He never received any of the messages they sent to the regional offices, but he did find out about the operation from Jamie, who was expressing concern over the whole situation. Ted and Sheri are disappointed that Jamie has ratted them out.

Jamie did not intend to cause trouble, but she was scared that if she didn’t confess, she could be in further legal trouble. She ends up standing up for her team though and feels threatened, so she picks up a knife and lunges toward Gregory. Although he dodges, the knife tears his jacket. Jamie immediately regrets her action and is in shock. Gregory is upset, of course, and explains that the entire company is having financial struggles. He, like the three of them, is just doing his best for his family.

The truth is that Gregory came to their store to award Sheri for her ingenuity and service to the company. She has been named the Employee of the Month for the whole regional division! She gets to fly to the corporate headquarters in the morning. Gregory will not let Jamie off the hook for the assault and he vows to have her arrested. As Gregory goes to get the police, Ted tells Jamie to escape through the back.

Sheri arrives at the shop, back from the corporate headquarters to find Ted making lots, and lots, of sandwiches. Ted believes Bob will come back, now that the store is a success. Sheri has to tell Ted that Corporate is shutting down the store. Ted is disappointed, however it seems that he has been reunited with his family. They turn the sign to “closed,” eat sandwiches, and relish in their newfound freedom.
They say that tragedy plus time equals comedy, and Bess Wohl’s American Hero feels like a testament to that idea. Inspired by two terrible events – the suicide of a Quiznos franchise owner in 2005 and the Great Recession that began two years later – AMERICAN HERO uses those dark events to spark a lithe, buoyant examination of the power of individuals to decide their own destinies. Three minimum wage workers walk into a bureaucratic franchise nightmare; comedy ensues.

Franchises offer a very particular kind of bureaucracy, one that demands absolute adherence to procedures and standards set by corporate headquarters. A franchise is a storefront operation that is owned and operated by someone who is licensed to use the name and operating procedures of a larger entity, and who pays that larger entity for the privilege of doing so. The individual shops benefit from the name recognition and procedural expertise of the franchisor, the franchising corporation makes money on fees and royalties.

Opening a franchise store can be very appealing to people without much business experience. In theory, each store is backed up and supported by the capable, experienced people at the corporate headquarters, all standing ready to assist in making each store a success. And there are clear guidelines
for absolutely everything: Headquarters tells you what suppliers to use, how to staff your store, which software to use, how frequently to clean the bathrooms, and so much more.

The challenge is that the corporate guidelines don’t necessarily fit every store’s situation, nor do they guarantee that operators are set up to succeed. In some cases, the required products must be purchased at inflated prices from a company that pays the franchisor a portion of each sale. There is no flexibility on what products are sold: if you own a McDonalds, you must offer the full menu with no alterations, even if some items simply don’t sell in your location. Prices are also fixed* – Subway’s $5 Footlong sells for $5, no matter how much it costs to make. If corporate announces a coupon special, the store must participate – even if it costs far more than it brings in.

Certainly some franchises are better than others, but the franchise system itself is inherently lopsided: individual franchisees have all the responsibility and no authority; the corporate franchisors have all the authority and no responsibility. Corporate gets to make all the decisions, whether they have the slightest clue what’s going on – or not.

AMERICAN HERO is situated in this crazy, Kafka-esque world where distant bureaucrats seem to pull all the strings, and the individuals are left to figure out how to survive in an unfair world. And yet, even when the deck is stacked against them, it turns out that individuals can be surprisingly heroic.

* This accounts for the intense pushback against raising the minimum wage in the fast food industry: owners of individual franchise stores cannot raise prices to reflect higher labor costs, and in many cases, they cannot cut back on staff either. The only place to get the money is from their already thin profit margin.

“Quiznos has killed me. Destroyed my life. Destroyed my family life for the past seven years. It has been a harrowing experience. We just could not get out of it. All doors were shut. Can someone stop this?”

–From the suicide note left by Bhupinder “Bob” Baber, Quiznos franchisee. November, 2005.

**Fast Food CEO Hourly Wages in 2014**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>CEO Name</th>
<th>Hourly Wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chipotle co-CEO</td>
<td>Montgomery Moran</td>
<td>$13,489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chipotle co-CEO</td>
<td>Steven Ells</td>
<td>$13,471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starbucks CEO</td>
<td>Howard Schultz</td>
<td>$10,285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunkin’ Brands</td>
<td>Nigel Travis</td>
<td>$4,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yum! Brands (KFC, Taco Bell,</td>
<td>David Novak</td>
<td>$4,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pizza Hut)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy’s CEO</td>
<td>Emil Brolick</td>
<td>$3,645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domino’s CEO</td>
<td>Patrick Doyle</td>
<td>$3,571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dine Equity (Applebys, IHop)</td>
<td>Julia Stewart</td>
<td>$2,766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panera Bread CEO</td>
<td>Ronald Shaich</td>
<td>$1,292</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Max Krantz, Maximum Wage! How Much CEOs Earn an Hour, USA Today, April 6, 2015
Fast Food, poverty wages


Even at full time, the federal minimum wage of $7.25 per hour fails to provide sufficient income for workers to provide food, housing, health care, transportation and other basic needs for their families. Low work hours in many of the growing service sector industries reduce earnings even further. When employers pay poverty wages, workers must turn to public programs to meet their basic needs. Earned income tax credits, publicly subsidized health insurance, income support and food subsidies allow these working families to bridge the gap between their paychecks and subsistence. This is the public cost of low-wage jobs in America. The cost is public because taxpayers bear it. Yet it remains hidden in national policy debates about poverty, employment and federal spending.

Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of enrollments in America’s major public benefits programs are from working families. But many of them work in jobs that pay wages so low that their paychecks do not generate enough income to provide for life’s basic necessities. Low wages paid by employers in the fast-food industry create especially acute problems for the families of workers in this industry. Median pay for core front-line fast-food jobs is $8.69 an hour, with many jobs paying at or near the minimum wage. Benefits are also scarce for front-line fast-food workers; an estimated 87 percent do not receive health benefits through their employer. The combination of low wages and benefits, often coupled with part-time employment, means that many of the families of fast-food workers must rely on taxpayer-funded safety net programs to make ends meet.

[Fast Food, Poverty Wages] estimates the public cost of low-wage jobs in the fast-food industry. Medicaid, the Earned Income Tax Credit and the other public benefits programs discussed in this report provide a vital support system for millions of Americans working in the United States’ service industries, including fast food. ... For this analysis we focus on jobs held by core, front-line fast-food workers, defined as nonmanagerial workers who work at least 11 hours per week for 27 or more weeks per year.

• MORE THAN HALF (52 PERCENT) OF THE FAMILIES OF FRONT-LINE FAST-FOOD WORKERS ARE ENROLLED IN ONE OR MORE PUBLIC PROGRAMS, COMPARED TO 25 PERCENT OF THE WORKFORCE AS A WHOLE.
• THE COST OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE TO FAMILIES OF WORKERS IN THE FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY IS NEARLY $7 BILLION PER YEAR.
• AT AN AVERAGE OF $3.9 BILLION PER YEAR, SPENDING ON MEDICAID AND THE CHILDREN’S HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAM (CHIP) ACCOUNTS FOR MORE THAN HALF OF THESE COSTS.
• DUE TO LOW EARNINGS, FAST-FOOD WORKERS’ FAMILIES ALSO RECEIVE AN ANNUAL AVERAGE OF $1.04 BILLION IN FOOD STAMP BENEFITS AND $1.91 BILLION IN EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT PAYMENTS.
• PEOPLE WORKING IN FAST-FOOD JOBS ARE MORE LIKELY TO LIVE IN OR NEAR POVERTY. ONE IN FIVE FAMILIES WITH A MEMBER HOLDING A FAST-FOOD JOB HAS AN INCOME BELOW THE POVERTY LINE, AND 43 PERCENT HAVE AN INCOME TWO TIMES THE FEDERAL POVERTY LEVEL OR LESS.
• EVEN FULL-TIME HOURS ARE NOT ENOUGH TO COMPENSATE FOR LOW WAGES. THE FAMILIES OF MORE THAN HALF OF THE FAST-FOOD WORKERS EMPLOYED 40 OR MORE HOURS PER WEEK ARE ENROLLED IN PUBLIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.
WHEN A FRANCHISE WORKS

Although companies that offer franchise opportunities may seem less than stellar, there are some companies that certainly handle the prospects better than most. The CEO of the Franchise Business Review even admits that franchisees have the opportunity to refine the concepts of the company. In a recent study, a survey was given to employees of franchises. Below is a list of nine franchises that have worked out much better than the franchise in AMERICAN HERO. Included is a brief description of how they are successful. It’s interesting to note that only one of these franchise opportunities is in the food industry.

9. Visiting Angels – The senior care industry is becoming increasingly necessary and will continue to grow. With a startup investment ranging from 62k-84k, the average franchise grosses $1 million dollars a year.

8. Wild Birds Unlimited – This company provides exceptional training for franchise owners and they continue to train them as the business grows. They are even given marketing plans for the year. With a startup investment ranging from 104k-172k, the average sales of a franchise is more than 500k.

7. Cruise Planners – With a startup investment of around 15k, this company provides high returns. They are the largest, privately owned, nationally recognized and continually awarded travel franchise in the country. Additionally, the industry is not really affected by fluctuations in the economy.

6. Fitness Revolution – Although the startup fee has a large range between 12k-115k, fitness programs like this are growing rapidly. They have the opportunity to step in and successfully meet market demand.

5. Weed Man – The investment is quite high compared to the previous companies, but the average gross margin is as high as 53%. There is a need for the lawn care industry and they see an 80-85% renewal of customers.

4. Sotheby’s International Realty – Franchises have the opportunity to connect with some of the most prestigious clientele. The company provides their franchisees with many resources to be able to thrive in the industry, including development resources. It is a spendy investment though, as it can peak past 600k.

3. Precision Concrete Cutting – With a 130k investment that includes everything and an average yearly sales of 550k, this company ranks high in owner satisfaction. They are even federally mandated through the ADA. Their operationalization is like no other, as they have many patented techniques.

2. Kona Ice – These franchises are successful because they are mobile, with allows for changes in plans and no burden of a fixed location. This is certainly not your ordinary business, as it is focused on having fun. The startup investment is about 100k, but they offer low, fixed royalties, low overhead, and low food costs.

1. Home Instead Senior Care – This is successful for similar reasons of Visiting Angels and also has a similar startup cost.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Would you continue working for a company under the conditions that Sheri, Jamie and Ted face?

Drawing from the successful franchises listed previously, what could many fast food restaurants do better to support their franchisees?

Would you ever consider being a franchisee?

Sheri does what she thinks is right for the franchise. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt you had done the right thing, but you found out maybe another move would have been better?

Jamie was in a pretty desperate situation at the end of the story. How would you react to a situation of that kind? Did you feel sorry for her?