

Now You See ‘Em see ‘em see ‘em

By **Greg Jenkins** Jenkins Jenkins Jenkins

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Greg Jenkins’ delightful and haunting, Now You See ‘Em, is a ten-minute postmodern adventure infused with undertones of Shakespeare and Beckett. Not exactly a comedy nor a drama, this is a problem play, in which the main character is split between two actors, who together are trying to solve an existential conundrum. Henry One and Henry Two are both versions of the same, “brooding middle-aged man” with a familiarly “frowsy” wife, Emma, providing a counterpoint to their confusion. The two Henrys, dressed alike in jeans and untucked shirts, are nearly identical in temperament, sometimes even finishing each other’s sentences, but Henry One is more of the rabble-rouser, questioning things and stirring them up while Henry Two is more inclined to look for a reasonable explanation. The play is well suited for an intimate space, with a list of names on a white board at the center of the mystery at hand, but the writing is so sharp that the intent would carry in a large house, or (dare I say) as a virtual presentation. Let’s talk about that for a second. This is not a Zoom play. But some theatrical pieces take on additional nuance when reading and imagining them in the midst of an extended period of social distancing. This is one of them. The following exchange will give you an idea, then go ahead and read it yourself. Five Stars. (Format and spacing is playwright’s own.)

HENRY ONE

Well, I have the perception...

HENRY TWO

I get the distinct impression

HENRY ONE

That people around me are, I dunno...

HENRY TWO

Disappearing.

EMMA

Disappearing?

HENRY ONE

And I don't like it.

Now You See 'Em

As the lights rise, we see two middle-aged men standing at a whiteboard. Nearby is a writing desk littered with books and papers. The two men, whom we'll call HENRY ONE and HENRY TWO (for they represent different aspects of the same man) look alike and are dressed identically; each wears an untucked denim shirt, blue jeans and white sneakers. Each is holding a magic marker. On the board is a long list of printed names, both male and female, with "GRANDMA" at the top, "MOOCH" in the middle and "ROBBIE" near the bottom. The guys are preoccupied with the names on the board and are talking thoughtfully to each other as if trying to puzzle something out.

HENRY ONE

And this is the point I'm trying to make, OK? Over time, they add up.

HENRY TWO

Over the years.

HENRY ONE

Yes. They add up.

HENRY TWO

The names do.

HENRY ONE

The names, right. Look at 'em.

(Gestures)

They not only add, they multiply.

HENRY TWO

The names do. The people don't.

HENRY ONE

The people disappear.

HENRY TWO

The people *subtract*.

HENRY ONE

That's it. The people, they just go away.

HENRY TWO

What about . . . Let's see. What about Sarah? She on the board?

HENRY ONE

Who?

HENRY TWO

Sarah. Rabinowitz.

HENRY ONE

Ah! Sarah.

HENRY TWO

From high school. Dark hair, dark eyes.

HENRY ONE

Had a tush with a slope you could *ski* on.

HENRY TWO

Quite an image. Eleventh grade, she took your virginity.

HENRY ONE

Yeah, she could have it. I didn't want it anyway.

HENRY TWO

So where is she today?

HENRY ONE

No idea.

HENRY TWO

There you go, man. Put 'er on the board.

HENRY ONE goes to the board, uncaps his magic marker and prints the first four letters of "SARAH."

HENRY ONE

Is that Sarah with an “h” or no “h”?

HENRY TWO

Whatsa difference? She’s outta here regardless.

HENRY ONE

(Appends an “H” to the name and reflects for a moment)

But there’s a *pattern* here, don’t you think?

HENRY TWO

No question.

HENRY ONE

And I don’t like it.

HENRY TWO

I don’t like it either. But not much we’re gonna do about it, right?

HENRY--both versions of him--frowns in contemplation as his wife EMMA ventures in. A touch frowsy, she’s dressed along the same casual lines as he is. Her skepticism would seem to be often practiced and well earned.

EMMA

I *thought* I heard something in here. What’s up?

HENRY ONE

Nothing. Just talking to myself.

(Gestures at his counterpart)

EMMA

So I see.

HENRY TWO

Actually, I was just talking to *myself*.

(Offers the same gesture)

EMMA

Whatever. So what’s with the board?

HENRY ONE

(Shrugs)

Trying to figure something out.

EMMA

Like what?

(Pause)

Henry?

HENRY ONE

Well, I have the perception . . .

HENRY TWO

I get the distinct *impression*--

HENRY ONE

That people around me are, I dunno . . .

HENRY TWO

Disappearing.

EMMA

Disappearing?

HENRY ONE

And I don't like it.

EMMA

What do you mean, disappearing?

HENRY ONE

You know. One minute they're here . . .

HENRY TWO

Next minute they're gone.

EMMA

People are disappearing before your eyes?

HENRY ONE

It's a little more subtle than that. But once they're gone--

HENRY TWO

They're sure as hell gone.

EMMA

Really.

HENRY ONE

(Nods)

Take my grandmother up here.

(Taps the board)

She was the first.

HENRY TWO

She disappeared when I was just a kid.

EMMA

She got old and died, Henry.

HENRY ONE

Certainly did.

HENRY TWO

That's what I'm *saying*.

HENRY ONE

(Nostalgic)

Sometimes I'd go to her house and spend the night. And she'd give me things.

HENRY TWO

She'd give me toys . . .

HENRY ONE

One time she gave me a colored Slinky.

HENRY TWO

But mainly she gave me attention.

HENRY ONE

Attention that I couldn't always get from other sources. Beautiful, sweet lady.

HENRY TWO

I mean, she had her quirks, as we all do.

HENRY ONE

Favorite all-time entertainer was Sammy Davis, Jr.--which I didn't really understand, but I went with it.

HENRY TWO does a quick and not too impressive tap dance.

HENRY ONE

I had some great times with her . . .

HENRY TWO

And then she was gone.

EMMA

She got old and died, Henry.

HENRY ONE

I know, Emma.

HENRY TWO

Now--another example. There's my buddy Mooch up there.
(Points at the board)

Remember Mooch?

EMMA

(Sardonic)

How could I forget him?

HENRY ONE

Met him in the eighth grade. He'd bring contact explosive to school and put it on the teacher's chair.

HENRY TWO

She'd sit down, and *bang!*

Both HENRYs guffaw.

EMMA

Henry, last I checked, Mooch is still living.

HENRY ONE

We got older, we'd go out drinking together.

HENRY TWO

Chasing women, raising hell.

HENRY ONE

He'd always have a shot and a beer, a shot and a beer.

HENRY TWO

It was one helluva formula.

HENRY ONE

The man could put 'em away.

HENRY TWO

Then all the alcohol finally put *him* away.

EMMA

Henry, Mooch is still around, remember?

HENRY ONE

As I remember, Emma, Mooch is in a nursing home.

HENRY TWO

Can't even wiggle a finger.

HENRY ONE

Just sprawls there in bed the way he used to after a night on the town.

EMMA

(Sincerely)

It's a wonder he held up as long as he did.

HENRY ONE

I miss him, you know?

HENRY TWO

We had some wonderful, stupid times together.

EMMA

You can go to the nursing home and visit him whenever you like.

HENRY ONE

Well, yes and no. I can't *communicate* with him anymore.

HENRY TWO

I can't *relate* to him.

HENRY ONE

For all intents and purposes, he's gone from my life.

HENRY TWO

He's outta here.

EMMA

Henry--

HENRY ONE

One more example. Our own son.

HENRY TWO

Robbie.

(Gestures at the board)

EMMA

Oh, come on, Henry. Robbie is perfectly fine. He lives right down the street. You just spoke to him this morning.

HENRY ONE

Not the young version.

EMMA

(Baffled)

The young version . . .

HENRY ONE

That guy down the street is a grown man. He pays taxes.

HENRY TWO

He smokes cigarettes. Menthol, but still.

HENRY ONE

I'm talking about Robbie when he was five, six, seven years old.

HENRY TWO

Remember him?

HENRY ONE

(Chuckles)

He'd go out in the backyard and dig holes. *Deep* holes.

HENRY TWO

Like he was part gopher.

HENRY ONE

Didn't even have a shovel. I dunno how he did it.

HENRY TWO

Used to cut his own hair, too. He'd grab some scissors and butcher himself.

HENRY ONE

Looked like he'd been attacked by locusts.

EMMA

Henry--

HENRY ONE

One time I found him in the backyard at the bottom of a giant hole, chopping his hair.

HENRY TWO

Unbelievable.

HENRY ONE

I miss that little guy, you know?

HENRY TWO

He was full of mischief, but I enjoyed every minute I spent with him.

EMMA

Henry, Robbie grew up.

(Pause)

Most people do that, or haven't you noticed?

HENRY ONE

I miss that little kid.

HENRY TWO

He went and disappeared on me.

EMMA

(Shakes her head)

This is silly. You're talking about *life*--about the way things *are*.

HENRY ONE

I know what I'm talking about.

EMMA

Sometimes I wonder.

(Pause)

People grow up, they move on, they get sick, they die. That's how it is.

HENRY ONE

Doesn't mean I have to like it.

EMMA

Nobody said you did. But that's how the game is played.

(Turns to go)

HENRY TWO

Some game!

HENRY ONE

Say, where you going?

EMMA

(Wry)

Think maybe I'll visit Robbie, see if I can get him to start digging holes and cutting his own hair again.

HENRY ONE

When you coming back?

EMMA

I dunno.

HENRY TWO

You *are* coming back? . . .

EMMA

What do *you* think?

(Exits)

The two HENRYs stare after her, the first in exasperation, the second wistfully.

HENRY ONE

Not much philosophy about that woman.

HENRY TWO

No, not much.

HENRY ONE

Wonder if I should put her name on the board . . .

HENRY TWO

She'll be back.

HENRY ONE

Sure?

HENRY TWO

I *guess* she'll be back.

(Pause)

Guess I'll be back, too.

HENRY ONE

(Startled)

Where the hell are *you* going?

With her. HENRY TWO

Why? HENRY ONE

For one thing, I'm married to her. HENRY TWO

Well, so am I. But I'm staying here. HENRY ONE

Do what you have to. HENRY TWO
(Starts to leave)

Man, you can't leave! HENRY ONE

Why not? HENRY TWO

We belong together. Don't we? HENRY ONE

Do we? HENRY TWO

I'm no good without you. HENRY ONE

You're not much good *with* me. HENRY TWO
(Mildly)
(Exits)

Rattled, HENRY ONE stands still for a moment.

Yes sir, I'm seeing a pattern here. HENRY ONE
(Approaches the board and uncaps his
magic marker)

A very definite pattern.
(Prepares to write something, then stops
himself. Abruptly disgusted, he recaps

the magic marker and flings it down)
I've been seeing this pattern for a *while*.
(Goes to the desk and clears it roughly,
knocking items to the floor)

And I don't like it.

I don't like it a bit!

(Sits on the desk, facing the audience)

He turns and lies face-up on the desk, his head to stage right. Folding his hands on his midsection, he assumes the look of one in a casket.

Gradually the lights dim and then black out.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Like a lot of us, I've recently noticed that I'm not quite as young as I used to be. I've noticed, too, that some of the people who were once part of my life are no longer around. In most cases, I miss them. These thoughts and feelings are what sparked the play.*

*Writers who've influenced me, here and elsewhere, are too numerous to list. I might mention that I appreciate David Mamet for his dark humor and his catchy dialog. And the device of having different versions of the same character on stage simultaneously may've come from Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Greg Jenkins is the author of four books, including the critical study *Stanley Kubrick and the Art of Adaptation* and the novel *A Face in the Sky*. He's published roughly 60 short stories, which have appeared in journals ranging from *Weirdbook* and *Cafe Irreal* to *Prairie Schooner* and *Mensa Bulletin*. He has also had eight plays produced.