

## Review in Total Theatre Magazine, August 2013

### [Action Hero: Hoke's Bluff](#)

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Go wildcats! Make some noise! Let's get out there and win – whatever it takes. And to the tune of Party Rock Anthem, here comes a great big dancing bear – or maybe it's a lion or a tiger, anyway, something big and furry – the team mascot, HB. And a whole gaggle of cheerleaders wrapped up in one pom-pom waving female body. ('Give us an H, give us an O...') Everybody just have a good time! Raise your hands! Every day I'm shufflin...

Action Hero continue their theatrical exploration – nay, obsession – with American culture and mores in latest show *Hoke's Bluff*. As they put it, a quest 'to interrogate American mythmaking' (previous shows have investigated Western movies and daredevil stunt riders). This time, it's all about the big game.

The audience are seated in traverse, in grandstand seats facing the pitch or field or ice or whatever it might be for a football/baseball/hockey/ice hockey game. There is deliberate confusion – it's a game, that's all that matters. It's THE game, the one that *really* matters. The one that everything depends on.

Every cliché in the book is played out. The clean-cut boy sports hero who faces the toughest fight of his life. The chipper cheerleader girlfriend egging him on. The rivalry and sisterhood of the other cheerleaders. The team players, a Brotherhood of Men (no longer boys). The kind surrogate-father turned tough-cookie coach. The firm-but-fair umpire, whistle in hand, creating a semaphore of arm movements that only the initiated understand. Scores are announced breathlessly. Rules and regs we don't understand are cited. Decision stands! The colours of the red-and-yellow team strip reflected on ever sign and banner, in every piece of plastic furniture or drink can in sight.

But here's the really clever thing. *Hoke's Bluff* isn't yet another one of those postmodern ironic shows that show up and mock popular culture and populist conventions. Action Hero get right inside, just as easily as they get inside that big furry animal suit. They are not just pointing at the thing, they're doing the thing. And they bring us with them, as spectators, and as collaborators in the action.

And it's so easy to fit in: to cheer, to rabble-rouse, to look back into our coach's eyes, to worry about mainman Tyler Purdum when he's down on the ground surrounded by medics, or girl-next-door Connie Stevens when she's confessing her love or talking about getting a soda at Big Joe's Shakehouse. We've all been there – we've lived the sporting life vicariously through TV and film (from Horse Feathers to Wildcats to Remember the Titans and beyond). We've lived in small-town America, regardless of where we come from. We've seen *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Orange County*. We've read Anne Tyler and Alice Hoffman and Stewart O'Nan. Some of us are even old enough to remember Peyton Place. We know these characters as if they were our own brothers or sisters or fathers or sons. And it's all acted out so beautifully, so perfectly by the Action Hero duo (Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse) playing Tyler, Connie and just about everybody else, with guest performer/co-deviser Laura Dannequin as the constant rock that is the umpire. Other collaborators are co-writer Nick Walker and dramaturg Deborah Pearson, whose contributions have no doubt helped to make it the neatly scripted and dramaturgically tight ship that it is.

The key to the show's success is that it is all done with love. There's a beautiful duality in action: *Hoke's Bluff* is a double bluff that places both the company and its audience simultaneously on the inside and on the outside looking in. A very clever piece of theatre; a cracking night out.