

Peninsula Players' 'Lombardi' features strength at top

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Written by Warren Gerds of Green Bay Press Gazette

FISH CREEK — The beauty of “Lombardi” is an illusion. Playwright Eric Simonson takes the audience into the home of a mercurial legend to listen in on his day-to-day give-and-take with his droll wife. The you-are-there feel is cake to the icing of the public Vince Lombardi, the man millions know as a great football coach. Peninsula Players Theatre’s production brims with appeal.

In the fore is Neil Friedman, an acting veteran known for his forceful performances, as The Force of the Green Bay Packers, Vince Lombardi. The role is in Friedman’s comfort zone. He knows the part. He was the actor who worked with the creators in readings, the first stage of fitting words to a flesh-and-blood character.

Carmen Roman, another formidable performer, applies her strength to that of Marie Lombardi. Marie is just as much a piece of work – tipping, wise cracking, jabbing — as her incendiary husband.

Matthew Brumlow is engaging as fictional Look magazine writer Michael McCormack, who runs with his all-access opportunity to be a fly on the wall around Lombardi at work and home. Brumlow at his best: Mocking the voice of the great one.

Simonson packs much into the short time of the play, basically set in 1965. We get a glimpse of Lombardi’s unique relationship with his players, crafted well by Brandon Dahlquist (Paul Hornung), Donte Fitzgerald (Dave Robinson) and James Fletcher (Jim Taylor).

Moving set pieces represent the locker room, Lombardi’s home and a bar.

Costume designer Karin Simonson Kopischke visits the ’60s era in the personalities of Marie Lombardi’s dresses, one of which prompts a chuckle: Marie didn’t think turquoise was her color until convinced by a clerk at Prange’s.

Players artistic director Greg Vinkler is director. He earlier directed the razzmatazz musical “Chicago.” Now a look at the personal side of greatness. Both with skill. He’s versatile.

“Lombardi” is the type of play that generates extra touches. Some audience members come in Packers gear. The opening night audience at the Players included daughter Susan Lombardi (who autographed the bill of the cap of the man seated behind her), Golden Girl cheerleader Mary Jane van Duyse Sorgel and, unannounced, playwright Simonson and his family.

For the record, this is the play that ran successfully on Broadway with an entirely different cast and setup. The current production also is professional top to bottom. The actor playing Lombardi is solid. Solid.

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Vince Lombardi (Neil Friedman) makes a fateful telephone call to Green Bay in the presence of his wife, Marie (Carmen Roman), in the Peninsula Players Theatre production of 'Lombardi.' / Submitted

Peninsula Players Theatre: “Lombardi”:
Through Oct. 14: 7 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday,
except 4 p.m. Sept. 16, 23, Oct. 14 at Theatre-in-a-Garden, three miles south of Fish Creek.
Running time: 95 minutes. \$33-\$39.
(920) 868-3287. www.peninsulaplayers.com

★ ★ ★ ★ out of 4 stars