

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: Spoofing of Lofty Music Egos Rolls Through New Play at Players

Critic At Large WeAreGreenBay

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FISH CREEK, Wis. (WFRV) -

“Living on Love” is a lovely, funny time capsule with only two artifacts. Open the capsule in your imagination, and you take out a vinyl recording of a lustrous performance to relish as you thumb through the other item, a newsmagazine from 1957.

The magazine includes reference to such giant personages of the era as Leonard Bernstein, Maria Callas and Eleanor Roosevelt. Music and memories of greatness ripple through the play that is new to our region. All around is humor. All around.

The humor is expertly created (playwright Joe DiPietro) and expertly presented (Peninsula Players Theatre). The play and presentation, running to Sept. 2, have a not-so-hidden agenda: **Sit and enjoy, no strings attached.**



Raquel (Mary Ernster) surprises her husband Vito (Karl Hamilton) with his ghostwriter, Iris (Erica Stephan).

The story in 25 words: Two lofty stars of concert stages are just about spent out as they begin on memoirs with ghostwriters as faithful servants tend their fussiness.

Dressing up that bare bones a bit: The stars are at home in their luxurious Manhattan apartment. They move about and speak (and sing) grandly. Make that grandiosely because they are accustomed to the over-done, particularly when it comes to their status among the cirrus clouds of the orchestral and operatic worlds.

A joke is a husband (who must be called Maestro) and wife (who must be called Diva) are in competition as luminaries in their individual careers. The two bang their oversize egos continually. If competition comes from outside – Bernstein for him, Callas for her – it’s Katie bar the door and looks out for venom.



Photo caption: In a scene from Peninsula Players Theatre's production of "Living on Love," the Maestro (Karl Hamilton) and his ghostwriter Iris (Erica Stephan) have just walked in as Diva (Mary Ernster) has been re-enacting a scene from "La Boheme" with the assistance (unwittingly too much) of her ghostwriter Robert (Matt Crowle). (Len Villano photo)

Either way, this is fun to watch as portrayed with a kind of skewering glee by Mary Ernster as Raquel De Angelis (Diva) and Karl Hamilton as Vito De Angelis (Maestro).

Each is dressed in exuberant clothing of stardom, with Maestro's footwear the finest/radiant. Each hair of Diva is perfectly placed, and Maestro's mane is large and unruly – tamed once with a bit of morning-breakfast maple syrup (insert laugh).

Ernster's singing is a spoof yet not a spoof. She can really lift large and colorful operatic notes. Meantime, her character is a tease of overblown stardom, so the singing comes with a dusting of comedy.

The beauty of Joe DiPietro's play is it comes with appreciations. The gifts of Maestro and Diva are admired by their ghost writers. And Diva – when she finally comes down to Earth from fabricating things in her life – reveals what is at the true heart of opera. Nice. DiPietro also creates a vivid scene with the two servants near the end. Closing sequences are very, very sweet.

Director Linda Fortunato has a solid cast to collaborate with. They come with full toolboxes – musical stuff, comedy tweaks and character finesses included.



Photo caption: In a scene from Peninsula Players Theatre's production of "Living on Love," High-jinx ensues while the ghostwriters try to navigate the temperaments of a diva and her husband, a fiery world-famous conductor, while meeting their publisher's deadline. From left are actors Jason Richards, Matt Crowle, Erica Stephan, Mary Ernster and Karl Hamilton. (Len Villano photo)

Matt Crowle and Erica Stephan are part of the fray as staffers from the famed publisher Little, Brown. Both have aspirations that get going as part of their characters' exasperated dealings with Diva and Maestro, to whom truth is something you make up.

Also nimble are Jason Richards and Dan Klarer as the super-punctilious butlers, Bruce and Eric. Theirs is a tandem performance, with verbal cleverness and moments of song that are warm or colorful (notably when Richards lets rip).

Snow globes factor into the activities. The deal is, Diva and Maestro bring back gift snow globes for one another whenever they are on tour separately around the world. Each snow globe has a specific place in their apartment, and the globes are not allowed to be touched by visitors. Bruce and Eric let that be known with unctuous butlerian certainty. Joke: Well into the play, one such object has been picked up, and Bruce and Eric swoosh into the room to simultaneously and darkly say, "A globe has been moved." Not a joke: Long after a line has been said about the essence of snow globes to some people, the key words are lived out at the climax: "sudden magic."

Much is well, well played, Peninsula Players style.