

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: New Peninsula Players comedy extraordinary

Warren Gerds, Critic At Large (<http://www.wearegreenbay.com/news/>)

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PHOTO: In Peninsula Players Theatre's production of "A Real Lulu," Greg Vinkler, right, portrays the new governor of Vermont and Sean Fortunato plays his top aide. *Bruce Mielke photo*

FISH CREEK, Wis. (WFRV) – Seven minutes. The audience of "A Real Lulu" hears that a live TV interview will happen in seven minutes in a governor's office. What takes place in that slice of time is the crux of the story. From there comes a launch toward destiny for the remarkable comedy by Paul Slade Smith. Mr. Smith deserves to go to Washington – and all around our nation – with this inspirational satire.



Paul Slade Smith

Peninsula Players Theatre gave "A Real Lulu" its world premiere performance Tuesday night. Performances continue through July 5. Info: www.peninsulaplayers.com (<http://www.peninsulaplayers.com/>).

Creative: Playwright – Paul Slade Smith; director – Tom Mula; scenic designer – Sarah E. Ross; costume designer – Pamela J. Rehberg; lighting designer – Stephen Roy White; sound designer – Megan B. Henninger; production stage manager – Deya S. Friedman; properties designer – Jim Lichon; production manager – Sarah Burnham; scenic artist – Rebecca Beaudoin.

Cast: Ned Newley – Greg Vinkler; Dave Riley – Sean Fortunato; Louise Peaks – Erin Noel Grennan; Arthur Vance – Brad Armacost; Paige – Katherine Keberlein; Amy Summerfield – Linda Fortunato; A.C. – Neil Friedman.

The professional theater – the capstone of all theater in this region – is starting its 80th season with this production. Players artistic director Greg Vinkler not only plays "A Real Lulu" as a trump card, he plays the catalytic role of the new governor of Vermont. Around this quivering mass of protoplasm everything swirls and whirls like a propeller gone akimbo.

The play is about politics and government. That sounds like yawn material, but Smith nimbly maneuvers the topics toward a blend of comedy, farce and satire about what America is seeing today in public office. The beauty is, after Smith lets blood in the pointed satire, he delivers care – rays of brightness about democracy.

Spoilers abound in this play. There are many, many surprises. Even explaining the title would spoil the fun for future audiences.

The setup: Larry Clark (unseen except for his large photo portrait) has been swept out of office as governor of Vermont for sleeping with the runner up of a beauty pageant. Gone with him for being complicit in the cover up is his whole staff. Remaining are the lieutenant governor, Ned Newley (Greg Vinkler), and his chief of staff, Dave Riley (Sean Fortunato).

First main joke: Newley is not a public animal. He's a drone who knows his job well and relishes doing it in the background. Newley's swearing in (not seen) is five minutes of pure panic attack. He is a disaster in public.

Second main joke: Brought in to help with the basics is a temporary secretary, Louise Peaks (Erin Noel Grennan). Louise is cheerful and confident. She also can't get names straight, doesn't know how to operate a telephone system and makes her job title sound like she is assistant governor. That's just for starters.

Soon part of the action are a pollster (Katherine Keberlein) and a political Mr. Fixit (Brad Armacost). They calculate the best way for Newley to not be immediately drummed out of office for his surface incompetence is to promptly make a TV appearance. It's arranged that the Channel 3 political reporter (Linda Fortunato) and her cameraman (Neil Friedman) will be on hand.

Everything happens rapid fire.

The governor's office is wonderfully rendered. Along with looking gubernatorial, six paintings dress each side of the stage and include a scene of gathering maple sap (for Vermont maple syrup, which is almost as good as Wisconsin's), a mountain view and historical images such as a Revolutionary War soldier and a Vermont hero (Ethan Allen?)

The cast is excellent all around. Every character is finely wrought. Certain things Vinkler and Grennan add are amazing. A few instances: Vinkler is a masterful mumbler; Grennan sends up platitudes like pop-pop-pop little fireworks.

In "A Real Lulu," Smith is witty and clever and smart. He's mean, too, about such things as TV reporting and political punditry – though not undeserved, considering what the American public sees on today's landscape. Anyway, they're fair game for satire.

"A Real Lulu" is the second Smith play the Players troupe has premiered. The first was "Unnecessary Farce" in 2007. Smith also has acted in the Players company. At present, Smith is performing on Broadway in "Finding Neverland." Smith flew in from New York to be in the audience for the premiere of "A Real Lulu."

The evening opened with the traditional brief marks to recognize a new season. Managing director Brian Kelsey pointed with pride to the more than 500 shows, more than 600 interns and audiences in the hundreds of thousands who have been part of the "world-class theater." Then "A Real Lulu" director Tom Mula said a remarkable thing, that he will die happy knowing that he was the original director for "A Real Lulu." And then what happened proved such a strong statement. Out rolled the play that Mula's keen skills helped fashion, a highly developed production of a great American play.

(By bizarre coincidence, the car ahead of mine leaving the parking lot after the play bore a license plate from Washington, D.C. with the slogan, "Taxation Without Representation" – which is not a joke.)

REST OF SEASON: "Dial M for Murder" by Frederick Knott, July 8-26; "Lend Me a Tenor" by Ken Ludwig, July 29-Aug. 16; "Outside Mullingar" by John Patrick Shanley, Aug. 19-Sept. 6; "Nonsense" by Dan Goggin, Sept. 9-Oct. 18.

THE VENUE: The location is about atmosphere – tall cedars and pines and shoreline vistas along the bay of Green Bay. The 621-seat Peninsula Players Theatre features Door County limestone in its interior décor. When the weather is friendly, the wood slats of the side walls are rolled open to the outside. For cool fall nights, the theater floor is equipped with radiant heating for comfort. While the company dates back 80 years, the theater building is of 2006 vintage. The playhouse and theater were built on the site of the previous structure. The location on the shores of Green Bay provides playgoers with pre-show picnicking and viewing the sunset. Here's a theatrical rarity: The Players' website provides sunset times.

Because I review performances that range from amateur to professional, and because production budgets range tremendously, I no longer use star ratings. You may email me at warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com (<mailto:warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com>). Watch for my on-air segments on WFRV between 6 and 8 a.m. Sundays.

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