

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: **Review: Comedy bristles in Players' 'Lend Me a Tenor'**

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FISH CREEK, Wis. (WFRV) – The biggest joke of “Lend Me a Tenor” is a wannabe operatic singer can get in make-up and costume and look exactly like a real-deal superstar and, from listening to a four-hour opera in rehearsal, get up on stage and replace the indisposed superstar and carry the performance – and nobody knows the difference.

In the hands of a master of farce, Ken Ludwig, this is delightfully comical. Add the honed skills of the Peninsula Players Theatre company, this is a rollicking happening.

“Lend Me a Tenor” is the third production of the 80th summer for the Players. Performances continue to Aug. 16.

One neat-o scene: The superstar gives the wannabe a quick lesson. Through a kind of osmosis, the passion and skill of the superstar reach into the body and soul of the wannabe and the two sing a lustrous aria together. Sean Fortunato of the Players plays the superstar. Matt Holzfeind plays the wannabe. The two performers do sing the impassioned aria in flesh and blood. They make the superstar and wannabe seem real. It’s a brilliant scene. It’s difficult to pull off, but it is pulled off. And it helps drive all kinds of goodies that follow.

A neat-o exchange of lines, among many: Meeting are the male producer of *the* operatic event of 1934 in Cleveland and the big-bankroll top lady of the opera guild. She, wearing silver lamé from top to bottom: “How do I look?” He: “Like the Chrysler Building.”

The neat-o finish, the hallmark of this show: In a few minutes, the whole show is repeated in a hilarious blur of scampering and trysting and door slamming. To that point, there are 53 door slams (I counted), and now many of them are repeated.

Everything takes place in the connecting rooms of a hotel that’s the best that Cleveland has to offer. The rooms have six doors altogether, with one being a swinging door to a kitchen (so potentially there could have been more door slams). In these rooms, the world runs amok surrounding the production of “Otello.”

The superstar, Tito Merelli, nicknamed “Il Stupendo,” arrives with his volatile, dramatic, wanting wife in toe. Maggie Kettering plays Maria Merelli with the intensity of a Klieg light – delightfully/dynamically so. Much between Tito and Maria is over the top – the insults, the apologies. Tito is under the weather, and it’s decided he needs sleep before that evening’s performance. Tito is reluctant, but he eventually listens to Maria’s advice and takes pills – twice her recommended dosage. And then, Tito is dosed



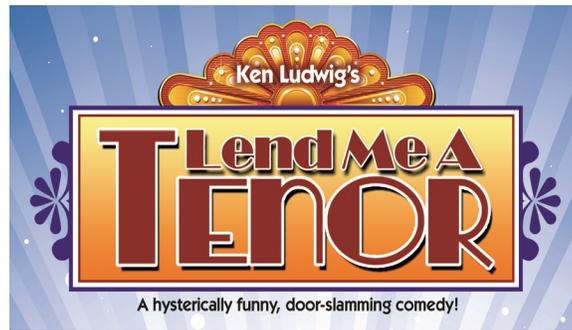
PHOTO: Sean Fortunato, left, plays an opera superstar and Matt Holzfeind is a wannabe in the starring roles of the Peninsula Players Theatre production of “Lend Me a Tenor.”
Peninsula Players Theatre photo

Creative: Playwright – Ken Ludwig; director – Linda Fortunato; scenic designer – Jack Magaw; costume designer – Rachel Lambert; lighting designer – Emil Boulous; production stage manager – William Collins; properties designer – Meredith Miller; sound design – Christopher Kriz; production manager – Sarah Burnham; scenic artist – Christine Bolles; vocal coach – Matt Deitchman.

Cast: Max – Matt Holzfeind; Tito Merelli – Sean Fortunato; Saunders – Tim Monsion; Maria Merelli – Maggie Kettering; Maggie – Ashley Lanyon; Julia – Peggy Roeder; Diana – Katherine Keberlein; Bellhop – Joe Foust.

Running time: Two hours, seven minutes

Info: www.peninsulaplayers.com (920) 868-3287



some more by the well-meaning wannabe, Max, through wine and more medication. In quick order, Tito and Max do their phenomenal aria, and Tito is so overwhelmed by what he's imbibed/been slipped that he flops into a bed and looks dead – and is taken as so. To avoid calamity, Max dresses as Tito.

The producer/impresario, Saunders, encourages the switch. He says the lines that apply to any farce, romp, commedia dell'arte or bag of silliness that's come down through the ages for an evening rich with laughs: "From here on, it's clear sailing. Absolutely nothing can go wrong."

Young women are on hand. Maggie is the daughter of the impresario and the love light of Max, though he has yet to fully kindle her flame – or, as she wishes, make bells ring. Diana is a budding opera singer, playing the female lead in "Otello," who has set her sights on the Metropolitan Opera and beyond and aims to have Tito validate her ticket by whatever means. By the way, the opera guild lady, Julia, wouldn't mind some finessing by Tito, too. So there you have it – sex, drugs and rock 'n' rollin' opera. Tito and lookalike Max have a grand ol' time. The ga-ga stardom thing extends to the bellhop, a wannabe opera star himself.

Much about the production has a rhythm, developed with skill by director Linda Fortunato and the company.

Casting challenge: Find two male actors who can message comedy (verbal, physical and of precise timing) and sing in the operatic style. After you find one, the second one must be of similar height so the Tito/Max mix-ups make sense not only to the characters in the play but seem reasonable to the viewers in the audience. The challenge is met in Matt Holzfeind (who's in the vast majority of scenes as Max) and Sean Fortunato (who embodies the star flair as Tito).

"Lend Me a Tenor" arrived in the late 1980s. Done so well by the Peninsula Players, it is a thing of comedic beauty.

RELATED EVENTS: Backstage tours, 2 p.m. Sundays, Aug. 2, 9, 23, 30. Info: (920) 868-3287; preshow seminar, 6:30 p.m. Aug. 13 with Peninsula Music Festival sopranos Kathy Pyeatt and Danielle Buonaiuto.

REST OF SEASON: "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 side walls are rolled open to the outside. For cool fall nights, the theater floor is equipped with 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 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. Watch for my on-air segments on WFRV between 6 and 8 a.m. Sundays.