

'Tin Woman' tickles funny bone, reaches the heart

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From left Carol Kuykendall and Erin Noel Grennan in "The Tin Woman" at Peninsula Players through July 6.

The loss of a loved one is always a tough topic to discuss and seeing a play about it probably isn't on everyone's bucket list but the Peninsula Players Theatre's season opener, the world premiere of "The Tin Woman," is full of laughter and light even in the darkest moments.

It opens with Joy (Erin Noel Grennan), a woman who has just received a heart transplant. Her dry sense of humor throws off the nurse, played by Carol Kuykendall, whose parting words to Joy are "Go on, live your life," but Joy's not sure how to do that. Returning to her empty apartment, Joy finds herself wondering about the man who donated his heart to her.

Upstage we see the family of Jack, the donor (Matt Holzfeind). Jack is just an observer in nearly every scene, and yet his presence adds so much to the story as we see his mother, Alice (Kristine Thatcher), trying to hold the family together after the loss. Jack's father, Hank (Joel Hatch), refuses to talk about it, and Jack's sister, Sammy (Erika Elam), can't stop talking about it.



From left Joel Hatch and Kristine Thatcher in "The Tin Woman" at Peninsula Players through July 6.

Amid all of the tension in the family, playwright Sean Grennan is a master of finding humor in the painful moments, as when we see Hank and Alice sitting side by side at Jack's grave site and Hank breaks the tension, complaining about the temperature of the stone bench. Or, later in the show, when Sammy sobs on Joy's shoulder with her pure excitement of meeting her and Joy turns and admires the lamp.

Although Erin Noel Grennan proves her comic timing in her dry delivery, she shines even brighter in Joy's most painful of moments as she struggles, trying to figure out why she received the heart, breaking down and saying, "I was good to go."

Joy, with the encouragement of her friend Darla, decides to get in touch with the family of Jack by writing a letter to the donor agency. One of Thatcher's best moments as Alice comes when she shares her response to Joy's letter with the audience. Thatcher's performance strikes a nice balance between trying to stay strong for her family and just barely hanging on, which we see in her more vulnerable moments.

Elam, who plays Jack's sister, also shows her fragile side. We first meet her when she is sitting downstage talking to her preschool students about a flower and breaks down, only to come back with another one of playwright Grennan's perfectly placed moments of humor as she tells the children to clap because nothing's ever gone, "it only changes."

And while Hank can't seem to get over the death of his son, Hatch brilliantly delivers his humorous moments, as he reminds his daughter to remember the word "privacy" as she talks about how excited she is to write about the family tragedy on her blog.

The first few scenes are told in beautiful, almost dream-like vignettes, planting a scene for us to wonder about for later. The set design is elegant and almost ethereal with a simplicity that lends itself to the script.

And while there are a few clichés in places that might call for more character driven dialogue, for the most part Grennan's script depicts an honest portrayal of what life is like after a loved one is gone while giving us the delight of seeing what happens when someone unexpected arrives, sharing a bit of what we lost.



From left Kristine Thatcher, Erica Elam and Erin Noel Grennan in "The Tin Woman" at Peninsula Players through July 6.