

# Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: Pithy 'Alabama Story' opens in Door County

## Peninsula Players Theatre

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A state senator (Greg Vinkler) and a librarian (Carmen Roman) are genial on the surface a scene from the Peninsula Players Theatre production of "Alabama Story." / Len Villano / Peninsula Players Theatre

FISH CREEK, Wis.

A fly fisherman casts toward a trout in a Southern stream. The fisherman continues tossing here and there, probing, tempting. He's an expert. The trout is an expert at being a trout, knowing her environment, knowing what is safe and what is not. Knowing when to be suspicious and wary. The fisherman casts his fly in his perfect spot, and the trout rises... Does she take the bait or bump and run?

Such is a key scene in the "Alabama Story," a drama not about fishing but about books – the sanctity of books against expert challenges and risks.

Peninsula Players Theatre is in a cause mode in taking on Kenneth Jones' multilayered play in its Midwest premiere. Performances opened Wednesday night at the professional theater and continue to Sept. 4.

It's a bookish play – in a good way. A librarian is a hero.

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**Creative:** *Playwright – Kenneth Jones; director – Brendon Fox; scenic designer – Jack Magaw; lighting designer – Emil Boulous; costume designer – Karin Simonson Kopischke; properties designer – Pauline Oleksy; scenic artist – April Beiswenger; wig designer – Kyle Pingel; stage manager – William Collins; sound designer – Christopher Kriz; production manager – Laura Eilers; Players artistic director – Greg Vinkler; Players general manager – Brian Kelsey*

**Cast** (in order of appearance): Garth Williams, etc. – James Leaming; Lilly Whitfield – Katherine Keberlein; Joshua Moore – Byron Glenn Willis; Senator E. W. Higgins – Greg Vinkler; Emily Wheelock Reed – Carmen Roman; Thomas Franklin – Harter Clingman

**Running time:** Two hours, 35 minutes

**Remaining performances:** 8 p.m. Aug. 18-20, 23-27, 30-Sept. 3; 7:30 p.m. Aug. 21, 28; 4 p.m. Sept. 4

**Info:** [peninsulaplayers.com](http://peninsulaplayers.com)

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The scene above pits two actors who are experts at such situations of pith, Greg Vinkler and Carmen Roman. This time, they are having at it over a book, "The Rabbits' Wedding." The book by Garth Williams is designed for children ages 3 to 7. It's about a black rabbit and a white rabbit. It's a real book. "Alabama Story" re-opens incidents that happened around it in 1959 Montgomery, Alabama, and adds theatrical dressings.

To be sure, some elements in the play are flashpoints. Vinkler plays a state senator who is a hidebound segregationist. Senator E.W. Higgins reads "black rabbit" and "white rabbit" and sees his dictates of ways of life being violated. Other flashpoints burst in situations between a black man and a white woman who were childhood friends, and now they are seen as adults – furtive and nervous in public conversations because, basically, this is not allowed. One flashpoint is visual – a bench that is innocent unto itself until a person leaves and takes her coat with her, revealing what's painted on the back slats: WHITE ONLY.

Much keys on the situation of Emily Wheelock Reed, who is essentially the head librarian for the state of Alabama who on paper decides what books go on public shelves. When a segregationist weekly newspaper gets wind that "The Rabbits' Wedding" is available, Sen. Higgins comes into play wanting answers; his committee controls the library budget (etc.), so Emily Reed is placed on the stand, so to speak.

The Reed-Higgins blow by blow is somewhat on an intellectual level. On the everyday life side is the relationship between Joshua Moore (Byron Glenn Willis), son of black servants, and Lilly Whitfield (Katherine Keberlein), whose family is the served. They are introduced when they meet on the street after many years. Eventually, a flashback reveals what their childhood was about. The characters serve as symbols in a bigger picture: She is in denial, and he says, "How can you forget?" On the practical side, I had trouble tuning in on the dialects of Willis and Keberlein's characters at first.

Another character is Thomas Franklin (Harter Clingman), who is Emily Reed's efficient and helpful assistant. A scene emerges in Act II between the two that slows progress and raises a mystery that seems not to be answered.

Arcing over all is the Garth Williams character, with James Leaming not only playing the genial Williams but appearing, as if from vapors through quick changes, as various folks and even objects in everyday life. Playwright Jones' imagination is especially fertile in the creation of Williams, etc. Leaming seems to get a kick out of being not only the eloquent Williams explaining his intentions of "The Rabbits' Wedding" at the start of Act II but a street vendor, the sound of a static-filled radio and a doddering lawmaker of late-arriving wisdom, among his etc.'s. Vinker, who chose to do "Alabama Story" in first place as company artistic director, gets his juices flowing playing the complexities of the segregationist mindset. He's at his prime when the senator gets the rug pulled in an unexpected way.

Roman suits the ramrod Emily Reed well. Reed/Roman's eloquence rises in a scene of an interview with a local newspaperman (another of the etc.'s of James Leaming).

There's craft in Brendon Fox's direction, the period clothing and scenic concept. Bookcases dominate the basic aura – some 10 shelves high! – with some scenes requiring imagination as the shelves become a park fence that's closed with a lock and chain.

Books, books, books. That's the crux of this play. What's in books. The power of books. The influence of books. Individual relationships of books. The tipping points in books. Books as being admirable, being misunderstood, being wonderful, being mean and cruel, being important, being sweet and innocent, being essential, etc. I could just about detect from the stage the comforting fragrance of well-worn books in the aisles of a library and the crackling newness of fresh pages and print upon opening a new release in a bookstore. Ahhhhh.

**NEXT:** "The 39 Steps," Sept. 7-Oct. 16.

**THE VENUE:** The location of Peninsula Players Theatre's Theatre in a Garden is about atmosphere – tall cedars and pines and shoreline vistas along the bay of Green Bay. Flowers and other decorative foliage grace footpaths that weave through the grounds. Driving along Peninsula Players Road and passing farms and trees, the thought may occur: "This theater is in an unusual place." The 621-seat theater house features Door County limestone in its interior décor. When the weather is friendly, the wooden 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 81 years, the theater building is of 2006 vintage. The playhouse and theater were built on the site of the previous structure, which got wobbly with age. 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.

Contact me at [warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com](mailto:warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com). Watch for my on-air Critic at Large editions on WFRV at 6:20 a.m. Sundays.