

## Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: Beauty reigns in Peninsula Players musical 'The Bridges of Madison County'



**Steve Koehler and Cory Goodrich star in Peninsula Players Theatre's production of "The Bridges of Madison County" running from July 26—August 13, 2017.**

**FISH CREEK, Wis.** - Here's one vote for the effect of a show being enhanced by the location and locale of a theater.

"The Bridges of Madison County" just feels right in Peninsula Players Theatre in Door County, which thrives on its artistic atmosphere and natural ambiance.

During one moment on opening night Wednesday, dusk placed a soft hand on flower and garden displays outside the theater's rolled-up walls as a woman sang of the lure of a sentient man. Sensual sensibility reached beyond the stage.

It's a tricky deal – mastering the magnetic pull some humans feel in a flash without being overwrought and sappy. This show ain't your grandmother's pulp romance novel or gushy movie. This production looks, sounds and feels artistic.

There were some technical and human bumps along the way Wednesday, but the production is dominantly a thing of beauty. "The Bridges of Madison County" is the high-tone professional company in its stride.

"The Bridges of Madison County" started as a novel. A novel is a novel. "The Bridges of Madison County" was made into a film. A film is a film. "The Bridges of Madison County" now is a stage musical. Musical theater happens to be part of the fabric of American culture, and "The Bridges of Madison County" has at its control switches some prime contemporary talent – composer Jason Robert Brown and writer Marsha Norman. Together, they give "The Bridges of Madison County" shapes and shades that step beyond what a book and a film can bring.

In the story, two people are swept off their feet. Act II starts with them in bed. As the audience makes its way back to seats at the end of intermission, the characters are undressing on stage and climbing into said bed. Here's where the creators get clever. The implication is the characters' deed has been done, and now they will be reflective on all that means. But no, out comes a fiddler to start a toe-tapping tune that is joined by festive singing as if at a state fair. The woman's husband and teenage children are at the fair far away, while meantime she's been smitten by a visitor. In the next song, the visitor and she will sing the expected reflective song.

Francesca, a World War II war bride from Italy, and Robert, a National Geographic photographer, are swept off their feet by each other. It just happens. Robert has come to corn-thick Iowa to photograph seven covered bridges and comes to a farm to ask directions to the seventh, which he can't locate. Because directions are backroads-confusing, Francesca finds it simpler to ride along with Robert to the spot she directs him to. Francesca's family is in Indianapolis at a fair for four days.

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Magnetism between characters is a tricky affair on stage. It doesn't always happen; I've seen pros flop as Romeo and Juliet, for instance. Steve Koehler and Cory Goodrich have the essential spark (lighting bolts, allure, aura, charisma, the certain it) in their characterizations. They have the look and feel. His singing is strong, hers is given to sheer color.

Layered into the natural aura is the orchestra with live music. The music could be cello-driven reflectiveness, or a country music tune on the vagaries of love, or that fiddle-driven romp, or a couple of dead guys singing a gospel/spiritual song or memory songs of a wife now gone or a husband still present. Or the music can be a cappella; Jason Robert Brown sometimes puts instruments aside to let Robert open a sequence in voice only.

Director Elizabeth Margolius astutely works many fine points. Here is one: As Robert and Francesca sip brandy and reveal themselves, thoughts turn to Robert's former wife, Marian (Ashley Lanyon). Marian appears singing plaintively, as a figure from another time and place. Time slows in Robert's present as he reflects on Marian. Marian moves in real time; Robert ever so slowly raises his glass in his other time. This production has oh so much to it.

Karl Hamilton skillfully delves the facets of Francesca's husband, Karl. Through his words and songs, we learn Karl works too hard, is driven somewhat nuts by his smart and smarty kids (Katherine Duffy and Henry McGinniss), celebrates the vision of the radiant Italian girl who became his wife and in the end... well, you'll have to find out yourself.

Rengin Altay and James Rank tap into what makes Iowa farm neighbors neighbors. There's a bit of nosiness and a lot of care. Meantime, they speak of what make some couples couples.

The set gives impressions of the wood of covered bridges and farm barns and houses. The backdrop is of three horizontal, wall-like sections. In front of that is a series of slightly sloping walkways. Sometimes, pieces of covered bridge-like components are flown in – or elements that represent a wall. One “wall” rises from the floor. Ensemble members move in the bed and other set pieces – and they hand a piece of clothing, a scarf or earrings or other small items for a character to take on another look. Much is orchestrated in many ways – look, slight action, coordination – in this production.

Whatever the mention of “The Bridges of Madison County” brings to you, this incarnation is positively artful.

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**Creative:** From the Robert James Waller novel: book – Marsha Norman; music and lyrics – Jason Robert Brown; orchestrations – Jason Robert Brown; director – Elizabeth Margolius; music director – Valerie Maze; scenic designer – Jack Magaw; costume designer – Kärin Simonson Kopischke; lighting designer – Charles Cooper; properties designer – Jesse Gaffney; sound designer – Megan Henninger; stage manager – Richelle Harrington Calin; production manager – Cody Westgaard; scenic artist – Christine R.X. Bolles; artistic director – Greg Vinkler; managing director – Brian Kelsey

**Cast:** Robert – Steve Koehler; Francesca – Cory Goodrich; Bud – Karl Hamilton; Carolyn – Katherine Duffy; Michael – Henry McGinniss; Marge – Rengin Altay; Charlie – James Rank; Marian, Chiara, etc. – Ashley Lanyon; State Fair Singer – Elizabeth Haley; Paolo – Dan Klarer

**Orchestra:** Conductor/keyboard – Valerie Maze; keyboard 2 – Janet Anderson; fiddle, violin, mandolin, guitar – Lynn Gudmundsen; cello – Kim Souther; guitars – George Sawyn; bass – Craig McClelland; percussion – Bruce Newbern

**Running time:** Two hours, 25 minutes

**Remaining performances:** To Aug. 18: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 7:30 p.m. July 30 and Aug. 6; 4 p.m. Aug. 13

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

**NEXT:** “Lord Arthur Savile's Crime” by Constance Cox based on Oscar Wilde story, Aug. 16-Sept. 3.

**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, which have been extended to the south. 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 82 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.