

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large:

Review: 'Chapatti' charming storytelling – plus

Peninsula Players Theatre

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FISH CREEK, Wis. - At its core, "Chapatti" is storytelling. It is storytelling the Irish way – elaborate, with detail and nuance. Laughter and tears are an eyelash away from one another. Factor in Peninsula Players Theatre, and it is storytelling with care-filled arts and crafts and the finest kind of acting.

The emotional pool of "Chapatti" is running through July 3 at the Peninsula Players' Theatre in a Garden. The professional production has excellence written all over it.

I did not weep on opening night Tuesday. But I sure felt like it. A lot. "Chapatti" has that kind of grip.

Playwright Christian O'Reilly sets his story in Dublin, Ireland. His characters are a man, Dan, who has a dog, Chapatti, and a woman, Betty, who has 19 cats. Dan and Betty live alone. The love of Dan's life has died. Betty cares for an elderly woman, who berates Betty for being a frump. Betty's cats are her comfort.

What takes place in the story transpires smoothly. Actors Greg Vinkler and Penny Slusher wear their roles comfortably – finessed in collaboration with director Tom Mula, who has a touch with plays that delve the human soul. Of note, Vinkler is artistic director of Peninsula Players Theatre – thus the choice of "Chapatti" to open the Players' 81st season and the decision to act in it were his – and Slusher originated the role of Betty in the play's American premiere in Chicago.

The structure of the play has the actors speaking individually to the audience – the characters telling their story – and then playing out scenes with other characters that are colored by the descriptions of Dan and Betty and sometimes depicted in voice and manner by Dan and Betty (Vinkler and Slusher). The voices are all of an Irish origin.

This being a two-person play, of course you know that Dan and Betty are going to cross paths, perhaps even get together.

If you don't like spoilers in reviews, stop now and know that "Chapatti" is a wonderfully engaging play and the Players' production is right on.



Penny Slusher and Greg Vinkler, actors in the play "Chapatti," pose on the grounds of Peninsula Players Theatre in Door County. Peninsula Players Theatre

Creative: Playwright – Christian O'Reilly; director – Tom Mula; scenic design – Sarah E. Ross; costume design – Karin Simonson Kopischke; lighting design – Stephen Roy White; sound design – Cecil Averett; properties – Kristen Nuhn; scenic artist – April Beiswenger; stage manager – Richelle Harrington Calin; production manager – Laura Eilers

Cast: Dan – Greg Vinkler; Betty – Penny Slusher (pictured above)

Running time: One hour, 40 minutes with no intermission

Remaining performances: 8 p.m. June 15-18, 21-25, 28-July 2; 7:30 p.m. June 19, 26, 4 p.m. July 3

Info: [peninsula players.com](http://peninsulaplayers.com)



I like to analyze, and “Chapatti” has much to analyze. The set is intriguing. In the rear of the stage are two hanging backdrops that are views of shoulder-to-shoulder, two-story residences presented in perspectives that suggest a street. In the foreground are two chairs, a table and a breakfront that are part of Betty’s life on one side of the stage and a chair and a bed – which rolls in and out of scenes as if it has a mind of its own (theater magic) – that are part of Dan’s life on the other side. That’s the easy part of the set. Hanging over the stage to the audience’s left is a single window frame. Hanging over the stage to the right are 15 rectangular shapes of like size of the window and with the interior surfaces akin swirls of dried mud. The hangings are the hard part of the set. They are there for a reason. Parts of sets aren’t casually added just to fill space, particularly in a professional production. There is an interpretation to be had. Mine has to do with the word “hang.” Dan has been preparing to leave, noting to people that he is not coming back. He is trying to find a home for Chapatti, his soul companion (tears well here). Dan is willing to leave his piano for the landlord. He has packed his few other worldly



Greg Vinkler and Penny Slusher in “Chapatti” at Peninsula Players Theatre.

goods and placed them on his bed. Dan has stolen a clothes line. He has flipped it over a beam (imagined) and stands on a chair. Holy cow! The scene hits like a hammer. Betty has come to like the guy and is at his door, and there Dan stands, telling himself, “Step.” Talk about powerhouse storytelling and theater.

Much more happens in the play; the scene is nowhere near the climax. The life stories of Dan and Betty fill out, with the dog and abundant cats fueling engaging scenarios. Be assured that there is an explanation for how the dog has come to his name.

NEXT: Agatha Christie’s “The Hollow,” July 6-24

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.

You may email me at warren.qerds@wearegreenbay.com. Watch for my on-air Critic at Large editions on WFRV between 6 and 7:30 a.m. Sundays.