

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: 'Ghost the Musical' loaded with impact in Door County

By Warren Gerds, Contact me at warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com. Posted: Aug 1, 2019 / 09:02 AM CDT

FISH CREEK, Wis. (WFRV)

A murder scene in a movie is one thing.
A murder scene on stage is another.

In the former, there is a separation – a viewing of an image. An elsewhere.

In the latter, the illusion is a sharing of space – a viewing in an immediate presence. A here and now. You still know it's fake – it is theater – but the aura is flesh-and-blood real.

That is one of the impacts of "Ghost the Musical," which Peninsula Players Theatre is playing for the next three weeks in a sturdy, stirring production.

It's not giving anything away that there is a murder. The show has "ghost" in the title, after all.

Another impact is subtle. Take any of a number of news stories – one in particular in Wisconsin and Missouri at present – and what loved ones are feeling is portrayed achingly in this show. It's a hunger for a touch, now gone.

That hungering for a touch is in a song that is fused into this story three times. Each time that "Unchained Melody" is presented, its effectiveness grows. The first time, it is offered in a style meant to separate it from the classic version, which features a booming, soaring voice.

The next two times "Unchained Melody" visits in "Ghost the Musical," the meanings are even more tender, more heart-wrenching. The effect is called musical theater, which can take existing material and step it up to whole other levels.

Peninsula Players Theatre is particularly good at stepping things up with "Ghost the Musical" in look. The stage work and costuming have special flairs. Sound is another matter. The house is not acoustically nifty, and the sound system is perhaps not Grade A+. Plus, amplification of the leading players' singing is "hot," as in loud... too loud. The intensity of some contemporary vocals is warped.

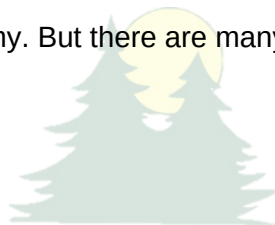
Another impact is the show is it is funny as all get out. While a lot of danger is lurking the action, laughs roll. A simple line, "tens and twenties," brought a roar of laughter on opening night Wednesday. The comedy centers on one character, who kicks fascination in the story into the stratosphere.

The story, in 25 words: A young couple savors budding joy until the man is murdered, yet he lingers to save his endangered love with the help of a medium.

Put that way, the show sounds kind of crummy. But there are many interesting nuances around that skeleton description.



*Will Skip and Ashley Lanyon,
Photos by Len Villano*





Will Skrip, Christie Coran, Camille Robinson, Eben K Logan and Alexis J Roston as Oda Mae Brown.

Molly is on her way to success as an artist who is gaining attention in New York City. Sam, her live-in partner, has a solid foothold in the financial world. The two move into a loft, just as lofts are becoming the thing. They are cutting edge and quite bonded, though Molly is waiting for Sam to tell her the three most important words among couples the world over. Mostly, Molly and Sam are cozy with what they have going, best friend Carl and all.

Ashley Lanyon (Molly) and Will Skrip (Sam) grab hold of their characters and give them depth and body. They shape a loving, caring couple beautifully, which makes the murder all the more stunning and its aftermath poignant. Ashley Lanyon's songs delve a mourning soul. Will Skrip's songs are filled with forcefulness of frustration – and the yearning in "Unchained Melody."

After Sam's murder, everything depends on the suspension of disbelief – the ghost stuff. There is even a song that Molly sings about suspending her disbelief when things happen between her and Sam through a medium – a fortune teller – Sam has happened upon (don't ask why). The ghost of Sam can see the fortune teller, Oda Mae, but she can only hear him. Up to Sam, Oda Mae has been faking it that she has "the gift" of connecting with the dead.

Oda Mae and the live wire who plays her, Alexis J Roston, don't steal the show, but they sure put a lot of spark into it. Alexis J Roston can turn on the bluesy/gospel/R&B heat with a limber voice – sometimes with a backup duo or trio. She also crackles in comedy as Oda Mae escapes trouble time and again. Part of the opening night standing ovation from an almost filled theater was for her.

Director Linda Fortunato and her creative collaborators put this thing together extremely well. There are smart theatrical touches all around.

The audience first views the set cloaked by a kind of gauze, giving an otherworldly feeling. As the first notes of the orchestra play, the covering falls and is pulled off stage. The music at first is that of strings, setting a warmly melancholy tone.

The set is a two-level, beamed, bare-brick (faux) loft, including a loft-ish "industrial-strength dining set" that's kidded about. With drops and lighting and audience imagination, the set becomes other places – sometimes in another world, sometimes on the streets of New York. With lighting and sound effects, Sam sometimes transforms through doors. With lighting and sound effects, a subway train races by.



Costuming reaches the heights with Oda Mae, who is something of a fashion plate each time she appears. That starts with a kind of technicolor dreamcoat as a splashy fortune teller and later includes a natty suit a best-dressed woman would wear when trying to con a banker. Lots of visual pop.

Weaving through are city people, worker people, criminal people and ghost people met by Molly, Sam and Carl (crisply played by Jeffrey Todd Parrott). Actors play multiple roles, among the notables Estaban Andres Cruz as an armed and dangerous tough, Denzel Tsopnang as an angered and frustrated ghost who teaches Sam some tricks of the trade and Lee Palmer as a ghost waiting for the arrival of his wife so they can move on who Sam is the first to meet upon his death.



Will Skrip, Alexis J Roston and Denzel Tsopnang. Photo by Len Villano

"I'm not ready!" Sam protests to that ghost. "Who's ready?" the ghost responds. "Nobody's ready." Those few lines are quick hitters.

Time was, musicals were the softest part of the Peninsula Players Theatre varied season schedule. That shifted when the stage house was rebuilt and brought up to full theatrical standards. "Ghost The Musical" has the mustard that so many Players productions have.



Creative: Based on the 1990 film written by Bruce Joel Rubin: book and lyrics – Bruce Joel Rubin; music and lyrics – Dave Stewart, Glenn Ballard; director and choreographer – Linda Fortunato; music director – Valerie Maze; costume designer – Karin Simonson Kopischke; lighting designer – Guy Rhodes; scenic designer – Jeffrey D. Kmiec; properties designer – Wendy A. Huber; sound designer – Barry G. Funderberg; fight choreography – Joe Foust; stage manager – Richelle Harrington Calin; assistant stage manager – Kaitlin Kitzmiller; production manager – Cody Westgaard; scenic artist – Eileen Rozycki; managing director – Brian Kelsey; artistic director – Greg Vinkler

Cast (in order of appearance):

Molly Jensen – Ashley Lanyon

Sam Wheat – Will Skrip

Carl Bruner – Jeffrey Todd Parrott

Willie Lopez, Ensemble – Estaban Andres Cruz

Hospital Ghost, Detective, Orlando Jones, Ensemble – Lee Palmer

Subway Ghost, Minister, Lionel Ferguson – Denzel Tsopnang

Mrs. Santiago, Officer Wallace, Ensemble – Christie Coran

Clara, Bank Officer, Ensemble – Eben K Logan

Louise, Susan, Ortisha Jones, Ensemble – Camille Robinson

Oda Mae – Alexis J Roston

Musicians: Conductor/keyboards – Valerie Maze; keyboards 2 – Janet Anderson; violin – Lynn Gudmundsen; cello – Michael Dewhirst; guitar – George Sawyn; bass – Craig McClelland; drums/percussion – Bruce Newbern

Running time: Two hours, 15 minutes

Remaining performances: To Aug. 18: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 7:30 p.m. Sundays, except 4 p.m. Aug. 18