

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: 'George Washington's Teeth' played for grins in Door County

By Warren Gerds, Contact me at warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com Posted: Sep 5, 2019 / 08:11 AM CDT / Updated: Sep 5, 2019 / 11:41 AM CDT

FISH CREEK, Wis. (WFRV)

Small towns and small-town museums and museum folks can have a certain aura – a quest to be important.

The quest borders on desperation in New Bunion, a New England dot on the map where George Washington stayed for two nights.

Miss Bunion – Hester – whose family line goes back to before that, will say it was three nights.

Three vs. two gives New Bunion an extra ounce of importance. And who's to quibble over that? Somebody with a fact or two, that's who.

Silliness ensues in the case of "George Washington's Teeth," a comedy play with some serious reminders that opened Wednesday night to start a fall run at Peninsula Players Theatre. The cap to the professional company's 84th season continues to Oct. 20.



When Jess (Emma Rosenthal, in black) arrives, the New Bunion Historical Society is never the same. She is surrounded by, from left, Edie (Penny Slusher), Ann (Katherine Kleberlein) and Hester (Carmen Roman) in a scene from "George Washington's Teeth" presented by Peninsula Players Theatre. (Len Villano)

Playwright Mark St. Germain laces his story with a lot of teasing. Along the way, he pulls out the rug in the way the public television series "Finding Your Roots" does in exploration of genealogy and DNA among celebrities: "Surprise! You should pay more attention to Black History Month."

The story starts with a meeting of the remaining adamant members of the New Bunion Historical Society Museum. The three women wrestle with a case of the uglies for the museum: Unpaid bills, lack of attendance, falling membership and the mayor's pronouncement that the museum will be kicked out of its current home and be moved to the basement of a rest home.

"We are not moving to Geezer Gardens!" Hester loudly insists.

There seems no way out... until in walks Jess.

Jess looks like Halloween of the hoof: Long black hair, black lipstick and eye shadow, black combat boots, tattoos up and down her arms, with the only thing missing the numbers under her chin from a police mugshot.



Ora Jones, Carmen Roman and Penny Slusher

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Turns out, the reason Jess is attending the meeting is community service time. But she has fresh ideas.

So off the story goes, indeed finding its way to George Washington's teeth – the Founder of Our Country's infamous dentures.

There is fun to be had along the way in the character's personalities and the way Mark St. Germain pokes fun, though in a need to create excitement action takes place offstage in an imagined re-creation of a skirmish between the British and Colonists by re-enactors.



Director Greg Vinkler and his skilled cast finesse the brush strokes of the characters, sometimes with swaths of broad comedy and sometimes with fine lines of special touches, as with timing and reaction. Carmen Roman (Hester) applies a send-up of town nobility, always right, always insistent.

Penny Slusher (Edie) gets to be goofy when excitement causes Edie to nod off, when she pursues love life and when it becomes necessary to hide George Washington's teeth where dentures go. Katherine Keberlein (Ann) gets to be a fashion-plate trophy wife whose façade gives way to depth,

Emma Rosenthal (Jess) leaps into an out-there personality that sets the straight-laced museum women on their ear and fires up the story. Ora Jones (Louisa) gets to be a brushed-aside townie now empowered and holding the corner of the rug that will be tugged for "Surprise!"

This and that:

- The set is filled with the stuff of a small-town museum. The moose-antler chair is an eye catcher. The place also has a Victrola, swords, portraits of heroic/famous townsmen and lots of silver in a glass display case.

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- The stage does feel empty when action takes place off stage and no actors are in sight. – Not all the actors are listed. The mayor, a radio announcer and a festival emcee are heard by voice.

- A teasing element arises when items are admired as being significant and hallowed. Held reverently is a clear box holding a single hair from the head of John Adams. Many more items are adored – a pig hairball among the most bizarre. Mark St. Germain is having fun at museum folks' expense.

- Mark St. Germain's joking in one case is debatable – politicized (?) when it comes to the rejection of a make-believe Christmas card from the White House that Edie has sent herself for the sake of rejecting it.

- Mark St. Germain also makes statements by way of Louisa. The statements have to do with insulated societies of small towns with myopia to diversity. In New Bunion, the history-minded museum folks do not know in which month Black History Month falls.

- The frenetic finale assures the goal is to leave 'em laughing. Characters charge around the stage in outrageous getups – as Ben Franklin, as the Liberty Bell, etc. – to again assure victory for the Colonists. It's a kind of rousing, off-the-wall, patriotic thingie.



Joy erupts in the fictional New Bunion Historical Society Museum in a scene from "George Washington's Teeth" presented by Peninsula Players Theatre. (Len Villano)

Creative: Playwright – Mark St. Germain; director – Greg Vinkler; costume designer – Kyle R. Pingel; lighting designer – Charles Cooper; scenic designer – J Branson; properties designer – Emily Hartig; sound designer – Christopher Kriz; stage manager – Richelle Harrington Calin; production manager – Cody Westgaard; scenic artist – Steph Charaska; artistic director – Greg Vinkler; managing director – Brian Kelsey

