

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large:

Review: Peninsula Players' 'Tin Woman' has heart, indeed

FISH CREEK, Wis. (WFRV) – Why is the play called “The Tin Woman”?

Think “The Wizard of Oz.” The Tin Man. He only wants a heart.

In “The Tin Woman,” the character of Joy needed a heart and has received a heart. Now her much-debated desire to meet the family of her donor sweeps her and the audience into profound territory, at times with humor a hair trigger away.

Playwright Sean Grennan knows how to write, knows where he’s going and knows how to get the characters and the audience there. “The Tin Woman” is a solid play, and Peninsula Players Theatre sets it up wonderfully in its finely crafted world-premiere production. Performances continue through July 6. Info: www.peninsulaplayers.com.

“The Tin Woman” explores the baggage that could come with receiving a heart, for a woman in her mid-30s in the case of Joy: What now do I do with the rest of my life to make this new life worthy?

The play’s back story is fascinating, too. Take one established playwright, Sean Grennan, whose output includes another Players world premiere, “Making God Laugh.” Add an acting sister, Erin Noel Grennan, who comes across a real-life story, which she suggests it to her brother, who writes the play in which she portrays the title role. Also add a director, Tom Mula, and an actress, Kristine Thatcher, who have written plays, who take care to give this beauty its due, along with everybody else in the Players’ production.

The play is a lot about Joy, whose life changes in unexpected ways following her gift. The play also is a lot about her donor’s family – mother, father, sister – but especially the father. In a theatrical device, the donor, Jack, also in his mid-30s, is woven into all scenes in mostly wordless ways; he observes.

Action moves smoothly as scenes unfold – as scrim rise and fall – on a hospital room, Joy’s apartment, the home of the donor’s parents, a café, the cemetery where Jack is buried and a car (imaginary).

A powerhouse scene takes place in the car. Alice, the mother (Kristine Thatcher), lets it all hang out with the father, Hank (Joel Hatch). It’s as incendiary, meaningful and prescient a scene as can be found on any stage.

Side note: Hank dresses neatly, specifically. He wants his world neat and specific – to his specifications. Costuming helps define Hank – and Joy when she’s feeling dumpy, and her friend, Darla (Carol Kuykendall), whose clothes are as bright, flashy and out-there as her glib remarks.

Sean Grennan’s script is a setup for acting with soul. Erin Noel Grennan pours in passion. Joel Hatch adds a hard edge, Kristine Thatcher a kaleidoscope of feelings, Erica Elam a sister’s high-strung emotions for her brother, Matt Holzfeind a portrait of what’s running through Jack’s thoughts scene to scene and Carol Kuykendall a comical all-business tone in her moments as the Joy’s nurse and life-savoring flair as the friend. Director Tom Mula has quite the palette to work with in script and actors, and the final painting is much to be admired (5 stars out of 5).

The audience has to buy into Jack as a presence. A tough sell? Perhaps for some people. But this is theater, which takes us, by imagination and sometimes imaginary characters, where we otherwise would not go or get to go – like into the lives of a heart transplant donor and the donor’s family. The play is loaded with questions, answers, dilemmas and paradoxes – the stuff of humanity. Nearby is humor forged of fire, like the remark of the mother about the father’s reaction to Joy coming their home for a visit: “I wouldn’t say he agreed. I told him, and he stared at me.”

You may email me at warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com. Watch for my on-air features on WFRV between 6 and 8 a.m. Sundays. <http://www.wearegreenbay.com/1fulltext-news/d/story/critic-at-large/30867/wLSS40QnX0qVj8XLijAhyQ>



PHOTO: Kristine Thatcher, from left, Erica Elam, Erin Noel Grennan and Joel Hatch are featured in the Peninsula Players Theatre world premiere production of Sean Grennan’s “The Tin Woman.” *Peninsula Players photo* 5 of 5 Stars

Creative: Playwright – Sean Grennan; director – Tom Mula; scenic designer – Sarah E. Ross; costume designer – Pamela J. Rehberg; lighting designer; Stephen Roy White; sound designer – Nick Keenan; production stage manager – Deya Friedman; properties designer – Amanda Herrmann; production manager – Sarah Burnham.
Cast: Joy – Erin Noel Grennan; Nurse/Darla – Carol Kuykendall; Hank – Joel Hatch; Jack – Matt Holzfeind; Alice – Kristine Thatcher; Sammy – Erica Elam.

TWO RELATED EVENTS: One: Post-show discussion with the playwright, cast and creative team **Thursday, June 19**. (Two: Speakers from The Second Chance for Life Foundation at 6:30 p.m. **Thursday, June 26**. Joel and Sue Heckman and Ken and Fran McIntosh join playwright Sean Grennan in the seminar. The Heckmans are recipients of heart transplants, and the McIntoshes were their caregivers during recovery.

REST OF SEASON: “And Then There Were None” by Agatha Christie, July 9-27; “The Mystery of Irma Vep – A Penny Dreadful” by Charles Ludlam, July 30-Aug. 17; “Butler” by Richard Strand, Aug. 20-31; “Always... Patsy Cline” by Ted Swindley, Sept. 3-Oct. 19.

THE VENUE: The location is about atmosphere – tall cedars and pines and shoreline vistas. The modern Continues through July 6; Info: www.peninsulaplayers.com.

621-seat Peninsula Players Theatre features Door County limestone in its interior décor. When the weather is friendly, the wood 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 79 years, the theater building is of 2006 vintage. The playhouse and theater were built on the site of the previous structure. 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.