

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large:

Review: Players' Wilde comedy built on style 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime'



Lord Arthur (Matt Holzfeind) gets his palm read by cheiromantist Mr. Podgers (Dan Klarer).

FISH CREEK, Wis. - Some plays put on by Peninsula Players Theatre are meant to savor.

"Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" is a silly thing at the core – rooted in the aura of Oscar Wilde, the flamboyant wit who had a way with nipping at the British upper crust. The production is about look and style and ways with words and ways with finessing those words and satire and... taking time developing character and the story.

The story: The young Lord Arthur Savile is getting married. He's joyous. However, his future mother-in-law doesn't take to him, and she wants him to agree to partake in the latest rage in 1890s London – having his palm read for signs of misdeeds in his past and *future*. Lord Arthur's past is clear, but it seems there's murder in his future. Alarmed, Lord Arthur wants to get his deed done before his marriage so as to not bring shame to his wife somewhere in time ahead. So Lord Arthur calls on his faithful butler to help him get the deed done. They look to Lord Arthur's family for candidates for swift efficiency. The wedding is only a week off.

So there you have it – frivolity. The play is for fun.

Peninsula Players Theatre's production is dressed to the nines. Lord Arthur's house is the finest. Everything about it says elite – the scale, the furniture, the paintings and decorations, the layout. All the characters wear the most appropriate garb – Lord Arthur of clean, lean lines and his butler a crisp cut of butler suit and all the women in one after another ornate dress/gown that speaks money by wheelbarrow full.

While there's talk and action in the story going on, this is the type of production that draws the eye to myriad details in the set and what the players are wearing. The women's dresses are large and flowing, with vivid patterns; their hairstyles are piles of curls; their hats are of a flair that matches the rest of their look. A single scene is akin to a colorized photograph of 1890s London elegance, only the photo moves.

The author of this play, Constance Cox, dealt a lot in British TV productions built around high society, finery and the British class system. In this play, she had funsies, with Oscar Wilde providing the avenue. In ways, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" is a dress-up farce.

Creative: Playwright – Constance Cox, based on a story by Oscar Wilde; director – Greg Vinkler; scenic designer – Jack Magaw; costume designer – Rachel Lambert; properties designer – Pauline Oleksy, lighting designer – Stephen Roy White; sound designer – Christopher Kriz; wig designer – Kyle Pingle; stage manager – Alden Vasquez; production manager – Cody Westgaard; scenic artist – April Beiswenger; artistic director – Greg Vinkler; managing director – Brian Kelsey

Cast: Lord Arthur Savile – Matt Holzfeind; Baines, the butler – Karl Hamilton; Herr Winkelopf, an anarchist – Harter Clingman; Sybil Merton, Lord Arthur's fiancée – Emma Rosenthal; Lady Julia Merton, Sybil's mother – Rengin Altay; The Dean of Paddington, Arthur's uncle – Joe Foust; Lady Windermere, Arthur's aunt – Karen Janes Woditsch; Mr. Podgers, a cheiromantist – Dan Klarer; Nellie, the maid – Katherine Duffy; Policeman – Derek Foret

The players seem like extensions of the style of director Greg Vinkler, who has acted in numerous plays at the Players and elsewhere. That style includes nuance, care, timing, a sense of mischief, a dose of fussiness, a love of language, an appreciation (in this case) of Oscar Wilde and a consciousness of teaming.

Matt Holzfeind is buoyant as Lord Arthur. Holzfeind clicks as Lord Arthur bounces from one calamity to another (near ad infinitum), whether it's an errant explosive that didn't go off or the latest displeasure he has caused in his insistent future mother-in-law.

Karl Hamilton is a perfect match for these goings on as the butler Baines. Hamilton paints a picture of appropriateness, of manner, of duty... along with little secrets about a penchant for fine points in the Police Gazette.

Harter Clingman ignites action and antics as a dedicated anarchist, willing to assist in a multitude of ways to achieve murderous mayhem. Clingman makes the role comically explosive. Lots of stuff is tongue-in-cheek in the play, but the anarchist is out-front laughs.

Nifty moments pop with Emma Rosenthal as the somewhat gaga bride-to-be, Rengin Altay as her ice-mother, Dan Klarer as the shifty palm reader, Karen Janes Woditsch as a lofty aunt, Joe Foust as a warmly officious preacher/uncle, Penny Slusher as a trifling great-aunt and Katherine Duffy as the bubbly maid.

This and that:

+ Some moments are comedic artistry. A scene early on when Lord Arthur is hearing a revelation from the palmist is but one: Holzfeind and Klarer are akin to an oblivious mouse and a coniving cat with subtleties of expression and movement.

+ Marriage takes a lot of whacks. The uncle: "My dear Arthur, there is nothing cheerful about a wedding." The aunt: "You look uncommonly well for a man about to be married." The uncle, again: "It is your duty to get married. You can't go on living just for pleasure." And so on. The idea of marriage-as-a-bad-joke wears thin.

+ Very much of this play is teasing of the density of the privileged class. That is especially the case with Lord Arthur's take on murder: "I have no right to marry until the thing is done." In Lord Arthur's way of thinking, if he gets the murder over with quickly, he can live his married life with a clear conscience.

+ A recent comment to me underlined a need for a reminder. The comment was about seeing a Players production that the person thought was "nice, for amateurs." No, no, no, no no. Peninsula Players Theatre is a professional company. Productions are put together on site. The company has professional experience in widespread areas. There is a specificity to productions, a quality. While not everyone's cup of tea – what is? – "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" is pure Players comedic refinement.

Running time: 2½ hours

Remaining performances: To Sept. 3: Tuesdays to Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 7:30 p.m., with the closing performance Sept. 3 at 4 p.m.

Info: peninsulaplayers.com

RELATED EVENT: A pre-performance seminar will be held in conjunction with the play at 6:30 p.m. Friday, Aug. 18, in the theater with Christopher Chan speaking on Oscar Wilde.

NEXT: "Almost, Maine" by John Cariani, Sept. 6-Oct. 15.

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.

Contact me

at warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com. Watch for my on-air Critic at Large editions on WFRV-TV at 6:20 a.m. Sundays. My new books, "Three Miles Past Lost and in the Pickers" and "Nickolaus and Olive – a naïve opera (in words)," are available in Green Bay at Neville Public Museum, Bosse's and The Reader's Loft.