

Cast, nuanced writing keep Peninsula Players'

'Tin Woman' compelling

By Mike Fischer, Special to the Journal Sentinel - Tap Milwaukee

<http://www.jsonline.com/entertainment/arts/cast-nuanced-writing-keep-peninsula-players-tin-woman-compelling-b99296580z1-264240141.html>
posted June 23, 2014 9:20 a.m.

Fish Creek — A miserable old man sits in a chair at center stage, opening his thermos and pouring coffee as though it's a chore, before gulping it down rather than savoring its taste. A 30-something woman wakes up in a hospital bed at stage right, only to pump herself full of morphine so that she can forget she's still alive.

That's how things begin in Sean Grennan's "The Tin Woman," a heart-warming comedy — yes, you read that correctly — receiving its world premiere at [Peninsula Players Theatre](#) in Door County. But there will be tears accompanying the laughter, as we watch the loved ones surrounding these two wounded, flatlining souls try to quicken their pulse.

The married, 62-year-old Hank (Joel Hatch) has just lost Jack, his 36-year-old son, in a car accident. Joy (Erin Noel Grennan) is a single, 30-something graphic designer who is still ticking because Jack's heart now thumps within her.

Movingly embodied by actor Matt Holzfeind, Jack himself is a silent but very material presence, coursing and circulating between and among them as a palpable reminder that something of him beats on, could they but open their eyes and see.

But for the longest time, they can't. Darla (Carol Kuykendall), Joy's spirited friend, fails to rouse Joy from the depressing certainty that her game-changing experience proved she wasn't worth saving. Alice (Kristine Thatcher), Hank's wryly stoic wife, is losing hope that her angry and closed-off husband will ever move on.

You just know that Hank and Joy will meet, and one is initially inclined to share Hank's howl of protest against what he characterizes as a "made-for-TV movie."

But as Hank's line suggests, Grennan himself knows very well that his script risks coming off as cloying, even if he overdoes making us aware that he's aware by presenting us with Sammy (Erica Elam), Hank and Alice's weepy and sentimental daughter. It's a defensive move, anxiously underscoring the distinction between Sammy's maudlin crying jags and Grennan's heartfelt story.

Aided by Grennan's otherwise more nuanced writing, director Tom Mula and this solid cast don't need such extra help in making a compelling case for that story; they present realistic portraits of how ordinary people — in a play that reminded me at times of "Ordinary People" — cope with grief and depression.

Hank could have been a caricature of an angry old man; instead, Hatch lets us see the hurt and confusion of a father coming to grips with how little he knew his son — and how much he loved him. Erin Noel Grennan gives us Joy's funny and wisecracking shell — and the soft-bodied vulnerabilities and insecurities of the lonely woman it hides. And Thatcher's Alice — so Midwestern, in her seemingly even-keeled reserve — is just this side of curdling with bitter disappointment.

Sarah E. Ross' set design — in which house-shaped scrims simultaneously cover and reveal upstage interiors — beautifully captures these characters' transparent efforts to hide the telltale language of the hearts housed within their tottering frames. And when the walls that divide these characters finally come down, we fully understand why the tin woman is named Joy.

IF YOU GO

"The Tin Woman" continues through July 6 at Peninsula Players Theatre, 4351 Peninsula Players Road, Fish Creek. For tickets and directions, peninsulaplayers.com.



Kristine Thatcher (from left), Erica Elam, Erin Noel Grennan and Joel Hatch appear in a scene from "The Tin Woman," getting its world premiere at Peninsula Players Theatre in Door County. Photo by Bruce Mielke