

# Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: *Premiere Captivating at Peninsula Players of Door County*

FISH CREEK, Wis. (WFRV) -

A kind of elegance graces Peninsula Players Theatre's production of "Now and Then," which premiered Tuesday night.

The presentation, the performers and the playwriting skillfully create illusions. The in-the-moment aura of live theater is spellbinding in this little/big story.

This is playwright Sean Grennan's third play to premiere at the highly respected professional theater. For the third time, his director is Tom Mula, who has a knack for operating on thoughtful wavelengths of plays that especially search and wonder.

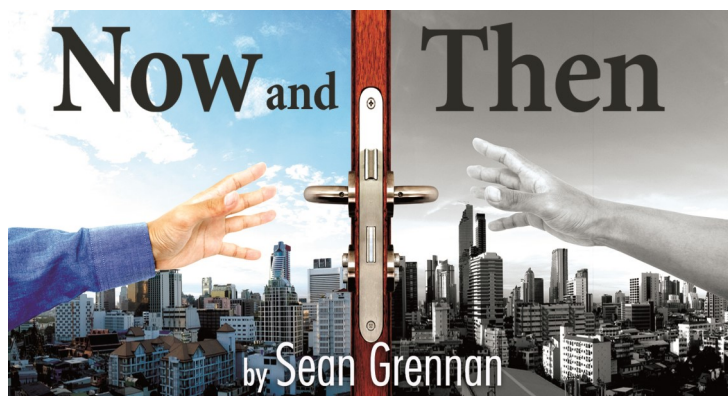
If this is sounding mystical, the cause is "Now and Then." It looks real as it starts in a pub in 1981. The characters are realistic with their byplay. But time is... ah, there's the mystique. Time is and is not what it seems.

Time is a device, a tool, a bauble for Grennan to tinker with. I gotta tell ya, he's pretty darn good at the tinkering.

"Now and Then" is one of those plays that handcuffs reviewers. Describe too much in the story, and spoilers pop up. Ask a question or two, and the wheels on the wagon could start to wobble. This is the main thing about Tuesday night at "Now and Then": The thing had luster, with the audience suspended in what the characters were saying in a space masterfully created for them to say it – and tell us something about life, living, hopes, dreams, time and the heart.

Action takes place in Mulligan's Irish pub, located in an unnamed urban city, though a Cubs banner gives a large hint. At the start, a barkeep is going through the final cleaning up of the night. He indulges in playing a video game when an old gent arrives. Soon, barkeep's girlfriend arrives after her shift at the all-day-breakfast restaurant down the block. The older man wants to tell the two something. He offers them money to listen. Eventually, the stakes get to \$1,000 each.

This can be told: The barkeep, Jamie, has a master's degree in music, and he has a desire to play piano as an elite player. The girlfriend, Abby, started college but set it aside to care for her ailing father and has a desire to return to studying English. The old gent knows the bar but has been away for 30 or so years, has taught music and really wants to share his



## ***Creative:***

*Playwright – Sean Grennan; director – Tom Mula; scenic designer – Sarah E. Ross; costume designer – Rachel Lambert; lighting designer – Stephen Roy White; properties designer – Pauline Oleksy; sound designer – Mike Tutaj; scenic artist – Eileen Rozycki; stage manager – Richelle Harrington Calin; production manager – Cody Westgaard; artistic director – Greg Vinkler; managing director – Brian Kelsey*

***Cast (order of appearance):*** Jamie – Sean Fortunato; Man – Greg Vinkler; Abby – Erica Elam; Woman – Barbara Robertson

***Running time:*** Two hours, 15 minutes

***Remaining performances:*** To July 1: Tuesdays-Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 7:30 p.m. except July 1 at 4 p.m.

***Info:*** [peninsulaplayers.com](http://peninsulaplayers.com)

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**RELATED EVENTS:** Grennan will host a pre-show seminar at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, June 14, in the theater prior to the performance. Grennan will also participate in a post-show discussion Friday, June 15, along with the creative team and cast.

**NEXT:** "Miss Holmes" by Christopher M. Walsh, July 4-22.

The play is little in that it involves only four characters and takes place in one place. It is big in where it goes in exploring how lives are or can be lived.

That Grennan's play is in the hands of the Peninsula Players heightens its effect.

The set IS that pub, balky jukebox, essential dartboard, Irishy mystique, bar-ish décor, Cubs banner and all.

The actors are finely tuned, their characters finessed to a T. Performing a premiere in front of a rapt audience, these folks were on Tuesday. Detailing is all around in the performances of Sean Fortunato as Jamie, Greg Vinkler as Man, Erica Elam as Abby and Barbara Robertson as Woman.

Among small touches, Erica Elam answers a question: How can the nervous energy level of a young woman be portrayed? Answer: As she sits on a barstool, she has body motion that speaks to that element of her character.

There are many, many more touches throughout the play in which Grennan has gone into the souls of four people and looks at what time and desire does and did and continues to do. This is a play of soul-searching.

#### **This and that:**

+This is the start of the 83<sup>rd</sup> season for Peninsula Players Theatre. It has lasted longer than your iPhone ever will.

+ As is tradition on season-opening night, a little talk started the evening. Artistic director Greg Vinkler was busy being in the play, so managing director Brian Kelsey offered welcomes, etc. Of note, he said this about the play that was about to start: "It's not typical of summer theater to see new work done, so it's a risky move." (Peninsula Players has a growing list of plays it brought to the stage for the first time that have gone on to success elsewhere).

+ Kelsey noted there are 60 people in the company, "so it's a big company." A couple of perspectives: To a large degree, that's 60 salaries and 60 beds. Sounds like a big deal to me. And it's all for an art.

**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*

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