

## Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: Players' premiere play instantly grabs 'The Actuary'



***The World Premiere of "The Actuary," Steven Peterson's romantic comedy-drama on stage June 13-July 2, 2017. Romance, marriage, family - told in reverse! From left Matt Holzfeind, Erica Elam, Greg Vinkler, Judy Blue, Kyle Hatley and Emma Rosenthal.***

**FISH CREEK, Wis** - It's not your problem, but reviewing the world premiere production of "The Actuary" is quickly problematic. A few minutes in comes a bombshell. To write what happens here would spoil things for future audiences seeing the clever play by Steven Peterson at Peninsula Players Theatre.

The theater is getting on – starting its 82<sup>nd</sup> season – but "The Actuary" puts freshness into its step. Performances continue to July 2 at the newly expanded Theatre in a Garden.

The play's initial scene is an intimate baby shower. Six people are present. The event – and everything in the story that follows – explodes with the revelation in what the catalytic character calls a "baby shower bombshell." It is a bombshell. It is, it is, it is.

Now, to write around it:

Peninsula Players Theatre artistic director Greg Vinkler chose this play for the professional company. He performs as the catalytic character, Ed Brooks, an actuary. It becomes clear why Vinkler chose the play. It suits his acting wheelhouse – smart character, yet one who has to wrestle with dilemmas and can be funny, fallible and wise, too.

There's a scene in the play in which Vinkler pauses oh so slightly. When he says something in a response to a situation, what's said is barely a word. And then a very large laugh erupts. What has happened is masterful acting. Pure knowledge of timing and posture and vocal expression – an illusion of a reality realized. Performance artistry. (And it's gone in a flash). The role of Ed Brooks has many points of entry for Vinkler to deal with the rollercoasters of being a kind and loving father and kind and loving husband when matters are out of the hands of being kind and loving.

In scenic concept, this production is brilliant. Time factors big in the story. From the "baby shower bombshell," time backs up. Ed, as he tells the story to the audience, revisits situations that took place days, weeks and months – and notably, nine months – prior to the bombshell scene. Ed was not present at all the situations, but he tells the audience he was told of them. Time is telling in the production in a mighty visual way: The entire stage area is the guts of a clock. Sweeping around the proscenium are gears, notches, wheels, dials and hands. Even the stage floor looks like the interior base of a clock with support elements. These clock are mechanisms; they are representations of time, period. Whether Steven Peterson wrote the look into the play or the minds at Peninsula Players Theatre came up with it, the idea is phenomenal.

There is more. The performance space is divided into half. On one side of the stage, half of the back wall of the "clock" lifts, and thrust into view are a living room, rec room, bedroom and such. When the scene ends, the "room" disappears behind the "clock" wall. Meantime, on the other half of the stage, other scene changes take place similarly as a dining room, a tavern, a restaurant are thrust forward and then pulled back.

And then there is the custom-made front seat with the steering wheel of a purple Cadillac that's driven by Ed's wife, Avon-lady-like Barb (Judy Blue). It's a great visual prop.

The actors are fired up by the world premiere aura, and director Kevin Christopher Fox finesses them. Along with Greg Vinkler and Judy Blue as the established, rock-solid (mostly) parents, others are Erica Elam as their vulnerable, pregnancy-hormone-driven daughter, Tabitha; Matt Holzfeind as her egotistical, smart-as-a-whip husband, Lyle; Emma Rosenthal as the young couple's social-conscious bridesmaid, Avery; and Kyle Hatley as her live-in boyfriend and the young couple's best man, Richard.

Many neat acting turns are turned in.

Steven Peterson's play is filled with knowledge of actuary stuff – the meticulousness of Ed and his definitive way of thinking, though Ed is made human, too. Ed teases himself, saying such things as, "Being boring has its advantages." The play is also filled with modernism. The couples thrive on being with the latest thing in electronics – leaving in the dust the parents (who essentially don't care). The modernism extends to futurism. Lyle and Richard are in a business together – a risky, dynamic and high-capital-hungry thing. They have come up with an electronic, cell-phone-like device that details a person's background and life story by the simple act of facial recognition. The way things go these days with who'd-a-thunk technical advances, the playwright's concoction doesn't seem that far-fetched. Steven Peterson's play is very much now.

Now, Steven Peterson doesn't treat "now" people nicely. The four young characters have well-developed shallowness, smart as they are. A prize, lofty line comes from Avery: "We see things others can't."

And, now, about the crucial happening in the play: It is less believable upon close consideration than the face-recognition thingie. In real life, Ed would have reacted far differently than what happens in the play. Of course, if Ed reacted in a real way, there wouldn't be "The Actuary."

By the way, just about the time the thought arrives, "Why is this play called 'The Actuary'?" – an explanation is made as Ed says lines such as these: "Being an actuary is about time – what happens to people over time."

Again time.

"The Actuary" is about more than the "baby shower bombshell." Fused in is another story that's a lasting part of being human, and its beautiful in its way – and beautifully played.

**Creative:** *Playwright – Steven Peterson; director – Kevin Christopher Fox; scenic design – Sara E. Ross; costume design – Rachel Lambert; lighting design – Stephen Roy White; sound design – Chris Kriz; properties – Wendy A. Huber; stage manager – Richelle Harrington Calin; production manager – Cody Westgaard; scenic artist – April Beiswenger; artistic director – Greg Vinkler; general manager – Brian Kelsey*

**Cast:** *Ed – Greg Vinkler; Barb – Judy Blue; Tabitha – Erica Elam; Lyle – Matt Holzfeind; Richard – Kyle Hatley; Avery – Emma Rosenthal*

**Running time:** *One hour, 55 minutes*

**Remaining performances:** *Through July 2 – 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 7:30 p.m. June 18, 25; 4 p.m. July 2*

**Info:** *peninsulaplayers.com*

**NEXT:** "Peter and the Starcatcher" by Rick Elice with music by Wayne Barker, July 5-23.

**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.