

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: Players' 'Outside Mullingar' wonderful Play captures flavors of Irish storytelling

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FISH CREEK, Wis.

"Outside Mullingar" is an Irish romantic comedy. True – boiled down to three bones left on the skeleton, the play is an Irish romantic comedy. But importantly, the gist of this venture is storytelling. Good storytelling savors words – just the right words – and moments and pauses; it relishes nuance and tone and color and humor and pith and even sweet sorrow.

All sorts of expertise is on display in the production of "Outside Mullingar" that is taking place through Sept. 6 at Peninsula Players Theatre.

That starts with playwright John Patrick Shanley. His hallmarks – on stage, the Pulitzer-winning "Doubt" with its mysteries about truth and faith; on screen, the yearning "Moonstruck," in which Cher earned an Oscar. For "Outside Mullingar," Shanley is motivated. The play draws from family ties and an ear for his farming relatives' finessing of the language in Ireland. The first part of the play may well be a transcription-like presentation; then Shanley the playwright steps in to shape *his* story the way he wants it to make, ahem, an Irish romantic comedy.

Other expertise comes from the company, from the detailing of the creative folks who set the plate to the professionalism of the actors who offer up the delicious food for thought, enjoyment and comfort. This is a care-full presentation with director and Players artistic director Greg Vinkler, one of the care-fullest guys around, calling the shots.

Now, attention has to be paid because the words are delivered with an Irish brogue. The actors wear wireless headsets to add oomph to the voices (the Players use for this presentation.



Jay Whittaker and Maggie Kettering star in the Peninsula Players Theatre production of "Outside Mullingar."/>Peninsula Players Theatre.

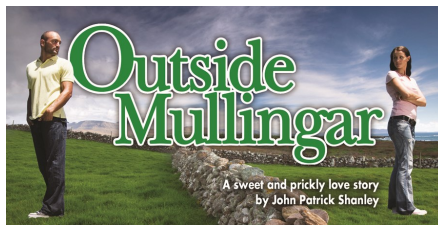
Creative: Playwright – John Patrick Shanley; director – Greg Vinkler; scenic designer – Jack Magaw; costume designer – Karin Simonson Kopischke; lighting designer – Emil Boulous; sound designer – Christopher Kriz; production stage manager – William Collins; properties designer – Jesse Gaffney; production manager – Sarah Burnham; scenic artist – Christine Bolles; general manager – Brian Kelsey

Cast: Anthony Reilly – Jay Whittaker; Rosemary Muldoon – Maggie Kettering; Tony Reilly – William J. Norris; Aoife Muldoon – Peggy Roeder

Running time: 95 minutes, no intermission

electronics sparingly), but even so, the brain has to be "on"

"Outside Mullingar" starts on the day of a funeral. Funerals tend to be dam bursts, and much gushes around the passing of Christopher Muldoon, whose farm abuts that of Tony Reilly save for a shank smack in the heart of the Reilly land. The play is about that piece of land – why it came to be and the consequences now of its existence. Along the way, the audience discovers tidbits, often with a bit of surprise.



In reviewing, there's a temptation to write about key happenings, but that would give things away and wreck the fun for future audiences. To avoid that and yet try to capture the flavor of "Outside Mullingar," I will rely on the opening paragraph of Shanley's bio (likely written by him) in the printed program:

"(He) is from the Bronx. He was thrown out of St. Helena's kindergarten. He was banned from St. Anthony's hot lunch program for life. He was expelled from Cardinal Spellman High School. He was placed on academic probation by New York University and instructed to appear before a tribunal if he wished to return. When asked why he had been treated in this way by all these institutions, he burst into tears and said he had no idea. Then he went into the United States Marine Corps. He did fine. He's still doing okay."

That style of phraseology and pacing is somewhat how the play starts in the well-worn Reilly family kitchen. Present and weighing mortality leavened with abundant humor are Tony Reilly (William J. Norris), a widower of three years; Aoife Muldoon (Peggy Roeder), the fresh widow; and Anthony Reilly (Jay Whittaker), the bachelor son who has been caring for his parents and the farm. Not present but spoken of is Rosemary Muldoon (Maggie Kettering), Aoife's single daughter, who is out having a smoke.



Key in Peninsula Players Theatre's production are, from left, William J. Norris, Jay Whittaker, director Greg Vinkler, Maggie Kettering and Peggy Roeder. / Peninsula Players Theatre

The old folks speak of the past and their dimming future, with Tony hidebound not to pass his land on to his son because Anthony, in his mind, essentially is not man enough. The younger folks (late 30s, early 40s) eventually become the focal point. The closing section of the play finds Whittaker and Kettering bringing nuance and tone and color and humor and pith and even sweet sorrow to life. This section takes time. Whittaker and Kettering take their time being the two solitary figures at a crossroad. All the while, seemingly little pieces from their lives come together and become clear. What happens is absolutely wonderful storytelling.

RELATED EVENT: Post-show discussion, Friday, Aug. 28; pre-show talk, 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 2, with Megan O'Meara of O'Meara's Irish House in Fish Creek discussing all things Irish

REST OF SEASON: "Nonsense" by Dan Goggin, Sept. 9-Oct. 18.

THE VENUE: The location is about atmosphere – tall cedars and pines and shoreline vistas along the bay of Green Bay. Driving along Peninsula Players Road and passing farms and trees, the thought may occur: "This theater is in an unusual place." The 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 80 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.

Because I review performances that range from amateur to professional, and because production budgets range tremendously, I no longer use star ratings. You may email me at warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com. Watch for my on-air segments on WFRV between 6 and 8 a.m. Sundays.