

REVIEW

'Opus' play hits the right notes

Peninsula Players Theatre has opened its season with Michael Hollinger's wonderful play, "Opus."

The main premise concerns a classical string quartet whose mere existence seems to be unraveling. They have been together a long time, probably too long, and over the years the players have become complacent and acerbic.

At the play's outset, we find they fired off one of its members, Dorian, who has become increasingly difficult to work with. Dorian is very eccentric but understands the essence of music more than his fellow players. He may be a nut but he is a visionary who digs beneath the notes instead of just playing them.

After he is ejected, a young woman, Grace, shows up and auditions for them. She is offered the job but cannot decide between playing with the string ensemble or joining a symphony orchestra. She decides to join the quartet. Even though the players are misfits, she takes the challenge.

At first she seems to be bewildered. There is a moment when the players argue incessantly and Grace literally hides behind her viola. Their behavior bewilders her. Unexpectedly,

MARTY
LASH
DOOR COUNTY



they are invited to play for the president the United States (someone they clearly don't like) at a nationally televised concert. This is their chance to have exposure well beyond the concert stage. They relish the opportunity.

They start to practice the unassuming "Pachelbel Canon" since they were asked to play it. One of the quartet's members, Elliott, finds the music too simple and boring. Taking a quantum leap, he says they should play "the 131." This means he wants them take on Beethoven 14th string quartet, also known as Opus 131.

Even though this is a fictional play, I was astonished this work was mentioned as a possibility. It was a curious choice. Given their state of chaos how could they take on one of the most difficult, challenging and remarkable string works ever written? It's no accident after hearing it the great composer Franz Schubert said ... "After this what is there left to write?" Another great

JUST THE FACTS

"Opus" by Michael Hollinger runs at 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and 4 p.m. Sunday at Peninsula Players Theatre, 4351 Peninsula Players Road, Fish Creek. Tickets are \$39-\$33 and \$3 off for students under 17. For tickets or information, call (920) 868-3287 or go to www.peninsulaplayers.com.

composer, Robert Schumann, said, "It seems to me the grandeur of which no words can express. It's on the extreme boundary of all that has hitherto been attained by the human heart and imagination."

They struggle through its seven movements. The players seem to be overwhelmed and increasingly agitated as they rehearse it. Could the piece be more than they can handle? Will they embarrass themselves?

Lurking in the background is Dorian. He keeps appearing in flashbacks and the present. He seeks to remind the players how inadequate or uninspired they are. He eventually gets to Grace, whom he likes more than the other, crusty players. Grace is able to understand Dorian's message. His pres-

ence makes her stronger. The play also has sub-themes that deal with one member having cancer and failed relationships.

I find that this play to be much more than the trials and tribulations of a string quartet. It's about how people can or cannot work together. That's its real message. The musician's job is to work together in order to create inspired art. In many ways they fail or have a very hard time achieving greatness. The televised concert is a success, but that moment is incidental and fleeting. Ultimately, their egos and self-indulgence get in the way.

Hollinger is asking us to consider how we function. Do we work with others to achieve common goals or are we too wrapped up in ourselves to get ahead in a meaningful way? In this play Grace and Dorian have the answers.

"Opus" is a must-see for those who not only like classical music but enjoy a compelling, absorbing play that is superbly performed.

Marty Lash is a member of the North American Music Critics Association and American Theater Critics Association and a former contributing editor and classical music reviewer for the Illinois Entertainer. He can be reached at mrl19956@yahoo.com.