

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large:

Players' 'Saloon' explores rugged Old West

By: Warren Gerds Updated: June 12, 2013 as posted on http://wearegreenbay.com/1fulltext-criticatlarge?nxd_id=201772

FISH CREEK, Wis., (WFRV) - Any thought of the Old West being romantic is erased in the engaging "Saloon" (4 stars out of 5), a drama that Tuesday, June 11, opened the 78th season of Peninsula Players Theatre.

The play tells of four cowboys at the end of a cattle drive in 1871 Kansas. It's been a tough haul over hundreds of miles with losses in the herd, and rustlers to watch out for. Now, the cowboys and herd have reached their destination on a railroad. As they await the sale of the cattle, and they settle in at a saloon operated by a solitary woman.

One woman operating a tavern in the remote west... Hmm, this is a case where you suspend disbelief for the sake of seeing the kind of solid theatricality the professional Players company delivers.

At the end of the opening-night performance, Players artistic director Greg Vinkler told the audience the play has been dear to him since he performed in it 34 years ago. Vinkler then introduced playwright Terry Twyman in the audience, and Twyman was applauded appreciatively.

"Saloon" offers grist for actors. Layered into the story is an examination of leadership and how there is a difference between a man saying he is a leader and truly being one. "Saloon" also takes the audience to a time, place and circumstance it otherwise could not experience. And there's something about the feel of worn leather that's appealing.



Greg Vinkler and Harter Clingman in Terry Twyman's "Saloon" on stage at Peninsula Players.

Excellence is found in the performances and direction (by Tom Mula), the authentic aura of the cowboy and woman's wear (by costume designer Pamela J. Rehberg) and the economical set (by scenic designer Jack Magaw) that represents a forlorn Western saloon with an upstairs bedroom. The story is told in a flashback by young Caney Fork, a green cowboy played by Players newcomer Harter Clingman. The audience finds out why his friend Murphy is dead and what happened at the cattle trail camp at Crosstie, Kansas. Poured into the 2-hour play are thoughts on God, the wide open spaces and assorted codes.

Sean Fortunato plays Red Sterling, the boss who needs direction in more ways than one. Greg Vinkler is the wily Ottawa Watson, who wishes to impart his wisdom and experience. Joe Foust is Nathan Foley, a former Confederate soldier who still is fighting the Civil War six years after the bloodshed has ended. Callie Johnson is Katy, the amiable, thoughtful, young saloonkeeper who is friendly to Caney for a price. Neil Friedman is Charles T. Fuller, a calculating cattle buyer.

Much surrounds Nathan's circumstance. He has been bitten by a fox. Nathan casually tosses off his wound as needing only 100 stitches, but it turns out no number of stitches will do. Vivid scenes unfold - Ottawa and Caney under the starry heavens, Caney and Katy in Katy's bedroom, Nathan in a faceoff with guns with Charles Fuller, Nathan excitedly hearing a dime novel read by Red and Nathan weighing his future.

"Saloon" fits in with how the Players troupe opens its seasons. The plays tend to be explorations for the troupe's actors, tend to display real-deal acting, tend to be a bit off the beaten path and tend to be enriching for theater-minded playgoers.

THE VENUE: Set in an atmospheric spot on the Door County shoreline of the bay of Green Bay, the 621-seat Peninsula Players Theatre features wood and limestone in its interior dcor. When weather is friendly, the side walls are open to the outside. (Bug spray is provided). When needed, wood slats are rolled down to keep out the elements. The floor is concrete, and seats are standard theater seats. This is mentioned because until 2005, the chairs were canvas, and the floor was gravel. "Quaint" has been replaced by "up to date" in descriptions of the theater. For much of the season, playgoers gather on the shore to catch the sunset. Many arrive early and bring a picnic meal to eat in a wooded setting. "The Peninsula Players experience is what takes place on the entire grounds," managing director Brian Kelsey told the audience on opening night.

AHEAD: "Saloon" continues to June 30. The rest of the season is Joe Foust's "Once a Ponzi Time" (world premiere), July 3-21; Stephen Sondheim-James Lapine's "Sunday in the Park with George," July 24-Aug. 11; Ken Ludwig's "The Game Afoot," Aug. 14-Sept. 1, and Tom Dudzick's "Miracle on South Division Street," Sept. 4-Oct. 20. Information is at www.peninsulaplayers.com.

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