

'Outside Mullingar' almost as good as a trip to Ireland

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If traveling to Ireland is on your bucket list but you can't afford the ticket price, try purchasing a ticket to the Wisconsin premiere of "Outside Mullingar," now playing at Peninsula Players Theatre, and you may have some idea what it feels like to spend some time in Ireland.

Written by John Patrick Shanley, "Outside Mullingar" takes a look into the lives of two families in Mullingar, Ireland, the Reillys and the Muldoons, who are in the midst of passing away and passing on important things like land.

Shanley has an incredible knack for writing about family with an honest, perfectly timed comedic hand. Most well-known for his 1987 screenplay "Moonstruck" that won him both a Writers Guild Award and an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, Shanley allows us to laugh at the things we fear the most: love, death and happiness, using witty quips and unpredictable one-liners that are perfectly placed and laugh out loud funny.



And it's no different in "Outside Mullingar," with the opening scene taking place as we meet the main character, Anthony Reilly (Jay Whittaker), who's returning home with his father after attending the funeral of their neighbor. It's clear the relationship between father and son has been strained since the passing of Anthony's mother a few years earlier simply by the state of the room, which looks as though it's been a while since a broom has met the floor, and dishes are cluttering up the sink.

The deceased's widow, Aoife Muldoon (Peggy Roeder), stops in to say hello and we understand almost immediately that these people have been neighbors for decades. Any tension is cut when Anthony's father Tony (William J. Norris) tells Aoife, "When the husband goes, the wife follows him. You'll be dead in a year." She very calmly agrees, noting "it might be even less than that."

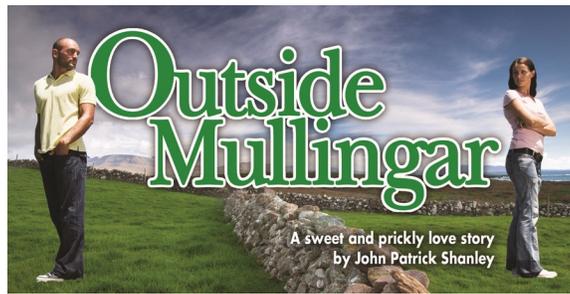
The two of them go on, thick as thieves, talking about their family, farms and life itself. Aoife has moments of breaking down in mid-conversation over her recently deceased husband that are so real and genuine, you feel as though you're sitting at the kitchen table with her.

Shanley is also brilliant at peppering in interesting details, like Aoife's aversion to drinking out of anything made of glass because, as she put it, "glass tastes like teeth." It's a delight when he weaves the reason for her fear of glass into the story later.

She also lets Anthony know that her adult daughter Rosemary (Maggie Kettering) doesn't like him because he pushed her. When Anthony tells Aoife he doesn't know what she's talking about, she reminds him that he pushed Rosemary 30 years ago when she was 6 – Another interesting detail that comes back later and is tied into a connection regarding the land between their two houses.

As stubborn as he is Irish, Tony Reilly tells Aoife that he refuses to pass on his farm to his son because, he said, Anthony doesn't "Stand on the land and draw strength from it." Instead he's decided to sell the farm to a cousin in America. Aoife tries to talk him out of this decision and he refuses.

Although we only see Roeder and Norris together in the first scene, the banter between the two of them rings true and comes so natural – another credit to Shanley and his ability to create true-to-life characters and bring in their culture and background ever so effortlessly, whether these Irish neighbors from Mullingar or a large Italian family in Brooklyn ("Moonstruck").



Anthony in the meantime goes outside to find Rosemary and see if she really hates him. Rosemary is as equally strong-willed as she is stubborn, and Anthony seems to buzz around her like a honeybee. It's clear there's been a lot unspoken between the two neighbors over the years, and the delight of "Outside Mullingar" is waiting for it to be said.

The play paints that picture of how ridiculous people can be when happiness is standing right in front of them, or in this case, across the yard, and people can think of every reason why they shouldn't allow themselves to embrace it.

The play is dialogue-heavy but there's rarely a moment when Shanley loses us – what with his lyrical Irish storytelling that comes from a place he knows well, having been born of an Irish immigrant and raised in the Irish-Italian working class sector of the Bronx, N.Y.

Directed by Peninsula Players Artistic Director Greg Vinkler, "Outside Mullingar" offers a peek into the lives of these two families while giving audiences the gift of examining our own fears and allowing us to laugh at them.

"Outside Mullingar" can be seen now through Sept. 6 at Peninsula Players Theatre, 4351 Peninsula Players Road, Fish Creek. Show times are 8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturdays and 7:30 p.m. Sundays. The show is 90 minutes with no intermission. Individual ticket prices are \$36 to \$42; discounts are available for season tickets and groups. For tickets or more information, call (920) 868-3287 or go to www.peninsulaplayers.com