

Review: Restless souls try to find their bearings 'Outside Mullingar'

By Mike Fischer, Special to the *Journal Sentinel*

<http://www.jsonline.com/entertainment/arts/restless-souls-try-to-find-their-bearings-outside-mullingar-b99562727z1-322682111.html>

Fish Creek — The title of John Patrick Shanley's "Outside Mullingar" — the moving, well-crafted and lyrical play now being staged by Peninsula Players Theatre under Greg Vinkler's direction — literally refers to the rural Irish location outside the town of Mullingar where the action unfolds.

But Shanley's title also refers to the play's two middle-aged misfits: 42-year-old Anthony Reilly (Jay Whittaker) and 36-year-old Rosemary Muldoon (Maggie Kettering), living on adjoining farms and both single. Neither one fits snugly within the Ireland where they live — a theme that's established almost as soon as the lights come up on the kitchen in the house where Anthony lives with his ailing father, Tony (a crotchety William J. Norris).



Jay Whittaker and Maggie Kettering talk things over in Peninsula Players' "Outside Mullingar." Photo By Bruce Mielke

It's December 2008. It's raining. The Irish economy has collapsed. And the Reillys have just returned from the funeral for Rosemary's father, Chris. Recalling the long-ago funeral for Chris' infant son — also named Chris — Tony jokes that Chris Muldoon has died twice.

It's mordantly funny, in a play that features plenty of black Irish humor. But it also illustrates Tony's conviction — shared with Rosemary's mother (a grief-stricken Peggy Roeder) — that one is born to bury and be buried, dying into and out of life. No wonder Anthony indicts his father's generation for having "killed this country with your negativity."

Although dreaming of flight abroad, Anthony has stayed put, fulfilling his prescribed role as dutiful son by helping Tony work the farm. It therefore doesn't do much for Anthony's mood when Tony contemplates leaving the farm to Anthony's American cousin, on the hunch that this distant relative will work the farm with more joy.

"Some of us don't have joy," the shattered Anthony responds, even as he insists that he loves the land — while adding that he's a better farmer than his father ever was.

Ostensibly, Anthony is miserable because he was rejected decades earlier by the woman he loved.

But as the play progresses, it becomes clear that Anthony's sorrow goes still deeper: This tender and sensitive soul is miserable and lonely because he's convinced he's much too different to ever fit in or be loved. Intense and restless, Whittaker's Anthony flits about, searching for a place where he might feel at home. He doesn't really want to fly away. He just wants to land.

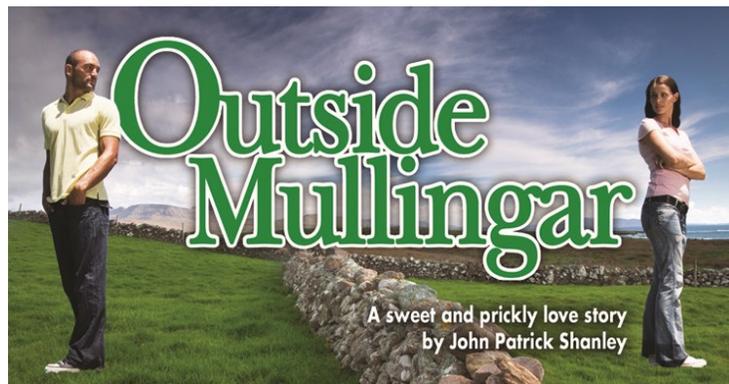
Rosemary is determined to help him; she's been feeding a flame for Anthony since she was a girl, even if he's spent too much time flying in self-defeating circles to notice. And while she has some issues of her own — her mother insists she's mad — figuring out how she feels about Anthony isn't one of them.

Figuring out what to do about her love — or summoning the courage to express it — is another matter. The course of true love never does run smoothly in Shanley's plays, and "Mullingar" is no exception. I won't tell you how things turn out, but I can say that there's enough smoldering passion in Kettering's Rosemary to start a five-alarm fire.

There's also clearly enough chemistry between Kettering and Whittaker to make one root hard for such a roaring inferno — while making one laugh as well as cry that this duo is wasting precious time apart that should be spent together. Odds are they'll both always be outsiders — whether in Mullingar or elsewhere. But that doesn't mean they can't come in out of the cold.

IF YOU GO

"Outside Mullingar" continues through Sept. 6 at Peninsula Players Theatre, 4351 Peninsula Players Road, Fish Creek. Visit www.peninsulaplayers.com/



TAKEAWAYS

The march of time: True to how loudly time ticks when it's running out, we're aware of it throughout "Mullingar." That renders all the more important how a production of Shanley's play — which has no intermission — is paced. Vinkler does an excellent job with pacing here; his cast members regularly insert an extra beat — or two, or even three — in conversations.

Doing so increases the tension — and the almost unbearable sense of longing — in exchanges between Kettering's Rosemary and Whittaker's Anthony. But the sound of all this added silence is loudest in a magnificent scene between Anthony and his dying father.

As Norris' Tony finally tries to say all that he's spent a lifetime leaving unsaid — and as Whittaker's Anthony struggles in turn to listen and respond — one grasps all these two never talked about, as well as the waste in their lives and ours because we don't take the time and muster the courage to express how we feel.

Shanley's poetic voice: Shanley is a gifted, poetic writer. Here's a small taste of what awaits you if you see this play. The speaker is Anthony, giving biblical voice to his pantheistic love for the land:

"There's the green fields, and the animals living off them. And over that there's us, living off the animals. And over that there's that which tends to us and lives off us. Whatever that is, it holds me here."

A good man: In his introduction to the published version of "Mullingar," Shanley describes his first visit with his Irish relatives in 1993, when he, like Anthony, was 42. He describes an Irish cousin — also named Anthony and about his age — as a "strange mixture of calm and storm."

Whittaker achieves the same precarious balance, conveying a sensitive, sometimes wild-eyed dreamer who at the same time can look fit to explode, with all that he deeply feels but cannot express. It's a marvelous portrait of an old but troubled soul.

A strong woman: Good as Whittaker is, it's Kettering who is the straw that stirs the drink in this play; as Rosemary, she must be.

So yes: Whittaker makes us understand why the right woman could fall in love with the quirky Anthony. But it's Kettering who must channel a character with both the sensitivity to understand Anthony and the formidable strength to stand up to and for him — even when he won't stand up for himself. Kettering consistently delivers, on both fronts.

Giving them their props: Scenic designer Jack Magaw gives us a meticulously detailed rendition of the Reillys' cluttered Irish kitchen — which will later become the Muldoon's lighter and airier kitchen.

While one must credit Magaw and lighting designer Emil Boulons for facilitating this transformation, attention must also be paid to properties designer Jesse Gaffney, who has rearranged or outright changed tables, chairs, china and wall hangings to suggest a room that's cleaner, less crowded and less angular. What results is a rounder and more promising world, less burdened by history's squared-off and linear grudges and divisions.