

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review:

Peninsula Players' 'Nunsense' glistens

Popular show revisited in full force

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FISH CREEK, Wis.

Peninsula Players Theatre's production of "Nunsense" begins in the eye before a word is spoken or a song is sung from stage. Storytelling starts with the set+. The detailing tells of a quaint Catholic school gymnasium that's been busy over the years. As four nuns arrive and cheerily welcome visitors, the place is ready for something different – a quite goofy and festive fundraiser. The story will now *roll*.

Pause: Stepping back a bit for a view from today, Peninsula Players Theatre is capping its 80th season with a return to one of its popular shows of the past (1987, 1993)++. Performances of Dan Goggin's remarkable "Nunsense" continue through Oct. 18.

Back to the story: Dark humor pops, a bit like snotty kids flipping firecrackers into a crowd. *CRACK!* – The nuns are putting on the fundraiser in the wake of their cook knocking off 52 of their com-pray-triots with a batch of vichyssoise (soup) gone wrong. A previous fundraiser brought in enough money to bury them all, but the Reverend Mother bought a fancy TV set and four nuns remain unburied and stored away in the convent's freezer. *CRACK!* – The mission the Little Sisters of Hoboken was service to lepers, so there are references to, and a song about, parts of bodies falling off. Playing with such comic firecrackers – along with all the teasing of nun-dom – gives the show a sense of danger that audiences have dug over and over in numerous productions all over the land.

The Players version is a step up, a professional model. The performers know their way around singing, dancing and molding comedy with a live audience. They have as their director Karen Sheridan, a master of finesse with humorous material – and a gift for tossing firecrackers.

This cast has a way with lofting big notes – plus a threesome unloads a little blitz of tap dancing – that electrifies.

The performers embrace their characters – Liz Pazik as the leader with a mind to lead but still a bit of a flake, Cassie Slater as the wannabe leader with a grouse about not being No. 1, Christine Mild as a toughie forged in the heat of the street, Stephanie Wahl as a soul adrift from being brained by a falling crucifix and Ashley Lanyon as star-hearted ballerina whose dream is now pure dreaming. Side notes: Pazik played Sister Mary Amnesia in the 1987 Players edition. Mild is in another corner of her substantial skills, having last year starred as Patsy in the Players' "Always... Patsy Cline." Wahl is dance captain, keeping things crisp in the tap number that stops the show (literally; it leads into the intermission).



The cast of "Nunsense" at Peninsula Players includes from left Stephanie Wahl, Cassie Slater, Liz Pazik, Ashley Lanyon and Christine Mild.

Creative: Book, music, lyrics – Dan Goggin; director – Karen Sheridan; scenic designer – J Branson; music director – Valerie Maze; choreographer – Gregory A. Patterson; costume designer – Kyle Pingel; production stage manager – Alden Vasquez; properties designer – Jesse Gaffney; production manager – Sarah Burnham; scenic artist – Eileen Rozycki.

Cast: Sister Mary Regina, Reverend Mother – Liz Pazik; Sister Mary Hubert, Mistress of Novices – Cassie Slater; Sister Robert Ann – Christine Mild; Sister Mary Amnesia – Stephanie Wahl; Sister Mary Leo – Ashley Lanyon; Stage Manager – Matt Super.

Musicians: Conductor/keyboard – Valerie Maze; trumpet – Andy Anderson; alto sax/flute/alto flute – Pamela Johnson; drums/percussion – Bruce Newbern; keyboard2 – Kimberly Souther; bass – Paul Sowinski.

Time is a weird thing with this version of “Nunsense.” The program doesn’t note a time when the action takes place. It is somewhere in the present and past – at the same time. Background music as folks enter the theater is of the ’60s – “Moon River” and Frank Sinatra’s golden oldies and such. Banners in the set’s gymnasium call attention to athletic glories, some back to the early 1930s and one as recent as 2009. The gymnasium has a pay telephone; there’s no reference to a cell phone. The nuns are wearing traditional habits, and there is a reference to the outmoded style in the show as being kept in for “magic.” So – time in this production is a mush. Well, that’s entertainment. Little matter.

+ The set is a beaut. It looks the part. The floor has markings of a basketball court, with free-throw line and top of the circle, etc., with the fringes being wood flooring (faux). Windows are churchy gothic-arched. In the rear is a stage for the band, set up a few steps from the gym floor. The front of the stage is wainscoting, which, along with surrounding bricks (faux) is painted pea green. There’s a water fountain, a fire extinguisher, gym lockers, insets for small statues of saints, mesh coverings for ceiling lights and a banner for the school’s production of “Grease.” Posters are up – one of Elvis Presley in his swivel-hip heyday, one of Marilyn Monroe in a pinup pose, which Reverend Mother covers for modesty. Added up, the set is right on.

++ Here’s a perspective on “Nunsense” 2015 versus “Nunsense” 1987 at the Peninsula Players. In 1987, the production wouldn’t have had today’s sophisticated wireless headset sound system. The singing/speaking would have been au naturel, so to speak. The nuns in “Nunsense” can wander through the crowd, which they do twice, and be heard clearly and with balance throughout the theater. In 1987, there wouldn’t have been the depth of stage to comfortably create the rear stage for the band. In 1987, the theater floor would be crushed stone and the seating individual canvas director’s chairs. In short, Peninsula Players Theatre has been much better equipped since the entire theater and auditorium space was replaced in 2006.

RELATED EVENT: Post-show discussion Saturday, Sept. 19.

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.

Musical numbers/scenes

Act I

“Welcome” – Sister Mary Regina
 “Veni Creator Spiritus”/“Nunsense is Habit-Forming” – Company
 “Opening Remarks” – Sisters Mary Regina and Hubert
 “A Difficult Transition” – Company
 “The Quiz” – Sister Mary Amnesia
 “Benedicite” – Sister Mary Leo
 “The Biggest Ain’t the Best” – Sisters Hubert and Leo
 “Playing Second Fiddle” – Sister Robert Anne
 “Taking Responsibility” – Sister Mary Regina
 “So You Want to Be a Nun” – Sister Mary Amnesia
 “A Word from Reverend Mother” – Sister Mary Regina
 “Turn Up the Spotlight” – Sister Mary Regina
 “Lilacs Bring Back Memories” – Sisters Regina, Hubert, Leo and Amnesia
 “An Unexpected Discovery” – Sister Mary Regina
 “Tackle That Temptation with a Time Step” – Sister Hubert and Company

Act II

“Robert to the Rescue” – Sister Robert Anne
 “Growing Up Catholic” – Sister Robert Anne with Hubert, Leo and Amnesia
 “We’ve Got to Clean Out the Freezer” – Company
 “A Minor Catastrophe” – Company
 “Just a Coupl’a Sisters” – Sisters Regina and Hubert
 “Soup’s On (The Dying Nun Ballet)” – Sister Mary Leo with Robert Anne
 “Baking with the BVM” – Sisters Regina, Hubert and Amnesia
 “Playing Second Fiddle” (Reprise) – Sister Robert Anne
 “I Just Want to Be a Star” – Sister Robert Anne
 “The Drive-In” – Sisters Robert Anne, Amnesia and Leo
 “A Home Movie” – Company
 “I Could’ve Gone to Nashville” – Sister Mary Amnesia
 “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” – Sister Mary Regina and Company
 “Closing Remarks” – Sister Mary Regina and Company
 “Holier Than Thou” – Sister Mary Hubert and Company
 “Turn Up the Spotlight” (Reprise) – Company

Running time: Two hours, 15 minutes

Info: peninsulaplayers.com