

World Premiere Wisconsin

Peninsula Players, and Northern Sky

Mike Fischer, for World Premiere Wisconsin



So all my books, certainly this one, tries to create a memory of what was, and what is, and what can be. Basically, that's what it's all about.

Studs Terkel, Dec. 2003 Interview

Janet Ulrich Brooks in *A ROCK SAILS BY*.

At the top of **Sean Grennan's *A Rock Sails By*** – Peninsula Players Theatre's entry in WPW – we listen as a woman plays back a message which we'll soon come to see is an endlessly repeating loop.

Dr. Lynn Cummings may be an acclaimed and Nobel-nominated astrophysicist who derides anything she can't prove as so much mystical poppycock. But she's also grieving the sudden death two years earlier of her husband Tom; the message she's continually playing back is his final voice mail to her, left shortly before his fatal heart attack.

Throw in the diagnosis of early dementia that Lynn receives and one can understand why the terrific **Janet Ulrich Brooks** who embodies her is so angry, as she wonders whether her life has had a point. When you stick to the facts and don't believe in an afterlife, that question can be a stumper.

Thankfully for Lynn and despite her curmudgeonly exterior, she can be as much of a softie as Olive (**Rebecca Hurd**), the daughter she labels "sentimental." And while Lynn doesn't believe that a mysterious object hurtling toward earth is more than a rock sailing by, she cops to wishing it could be more.

"What a comfort that would be!," she says at one point, admitting how "hard" it is to think we're all alone – while noting that we'll never again be with the dearly departed who we've loved and lost.

Is it dementia-induced wish fulfillment that thereafter brings Lynn a Messenger (**Sean Fortunato**) as that "rock" makes a pitstop? Or are we witnessing a close encounter between her and the great beyond – what that messenger alternately refers to as an opened window and a cracked door – allowing her to reach out and briefly talk with her beloved Tom?



Sean Forunato and Janet Ulrich Brooks in *A ROCK SAILS BY*.

To his credit, Grennan doesn't try to answer that question, and director **Linda Fortunato's** designers have similarly let the mystery be.

Joe Court's arresting sound design plays up the whooshing and disorienting sounds Lynn occasionally hears. Are they announcing an incoming vehicle from outer space? Symptoms of dementia, as the sound inside reaches deafening levels? Or both?

Sarah Ross' scenic design features various abstract geometric shapes suggesting Stonehenge and spaceships – our reach toward the beyond in time past and time future – in which the very concept of time implodes. Two of Ross' structures spell out A.D. – Anno Domini – backward, thereby emphasizing the futility of measuring time in relation to God.

How, then, are we to make sense of what Grennan described to me a few weeks ago as the “day pass” that is a human life? How does our time matter, and what should we do with it? How do we orient and measure ourselves as the sands slip through the hourglass?

Underscoring what's suggested by Ross' design, Fortunato's *Messenger* answers by channeling the T.S. Eliot of the *Four Quartets*, with a vision in which “time past and time future/What might have been and what has been/Point to one end, which is always present.”

As translated, by the *Messenger*: “Time is not moving on. Time is always happening,” connecting us to what was and what will be, while ensuring that those who've left us are still

here and that we ourselves live on even after we're gone, all connected through a present that simultaneously looks backward and forward.

How we remember – and how we'll be remembered – depends on living fully within the present and making the most of it, so that we might better appreciate how every moment is filled with intimations of immortality, connecting us to a world beyond ourselves.

During an engaging talkback, Brooks noted how “healing” this play had been for her, as someone who'd lost her father to dementia and who is herself closer to the end than the beginning.

As an I, and as was most of the audience watching alongside me. I'd like to think this funny, beautiful, and courageous play meant as much to them as it does to me.

Yes: *A Rock Sails By* goes to some dark places that we'd like to pretend don't exist.

But even in death it also resoundingly champions the meaning of life, lifting one's spirits much as it buoys Lynn herself. In the same breath in which she admits how little she knows – tacitly owning how scary this is – Lynn also exclaims with wonder that she nevertheless has hope, giving her reason to live.