

# Sean Grennan's "A Rock Sails By," a Comedy About Cosmic Questions, Gets World Premiere

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## Playwright Sean Grennan

A facts-only astrophysicist at life's crossroads is challenged to view a celestial phenomenon in a new way in the world premiere of **Sean Grennan's** new dramatic comedy *A Rock Sails By*, getting its world premiere by Wisconsin's **Peninsula Players** June 13-July 2, 2023. An unknown object of possible alien origin is making a close call with Earth, but Dr. Lynn Cummings is doubtful.

"She's at a tough point in her life," Grennan told me, "Dealing with grief, estrangement, infirmity, her own intellect and unusual abilities that are both a blessing and curse. She's asking questions *a bit*, but not really allowing herself to. There is longing in her but very little patience for magical thinking."

Peninsula Players artistic director [Linda Fortunato](#) directs *A Rock Sails By*, which the company bills this way: “Dr. Lynn Cummings, an astrophysicist, tries to bring science and faith into balance while grappling with personal questions, reconnecting with her daughter, and mourning the loss of her husband. When an unidentified object is discovered heading toward Earth, a less-than-reputable online magazine misquotes her, casting doubt on her credibility. The two-time Nobel Prize nominee and the ambitious journalist monitor the mysterious object. Dr. Cummings hopes to witness nothing remarkable and thus save her reputation, but there is no telling what she will discover beyond the stars.”

*A Rock Sails By* is the fourth play by Sean Grennan to make its world premiere at Peninsula Players Theatre in Door County, WI. *Making God Laugh*, *The Tin Woman* and *Now and Then* were his previous hits, which went on to have a wide life in regional theaters.



### **The grounds of Peninsula Players in bucolic Door County, WI.**

*A Rock Sails By* is part of “World Premiere Wisconsin,” a state-wide festival celebrating new plays and musicals from March 1-June 30, 2023. ([Learn more about Peninsula Players’ 2023 season here.](#))

The production team includes set designer Sarah Ross (also designed set for *Now and Then* and *The Tin Woman* and props for *Making God Laugh*); costume designer Kyle Pingel (former Pen Players costume shop manager, who worked on *The Tin Woman* and *Now and Then*); lighting designer Guy Rhodes; sound designer Joe Court; stage manager Kimberly McCann’ and assistant stage manager Kaitlin Kitzmiller.

The cast features Janet Ulrich Brooks (as Dr. Cummings), Rebecca Hurd (as Olive, her daughter), Travis Turner (as reporter Jason), Sadieh Rifai (in several roles) and Sean Fortunato (as Messenger).

(I'm excited to be part of Peninsula Players' heritage. The company produced the Midwest premiere of my play [Alabama Story](#) in 2016 before it went on to more than 40 productions around the country.)

I've interviewed [Sean Grennan](#) about his earlier works, [Now and Then](#) and [The Tin Woman](#). Before he hit the road to Fish Creek, WI, for *A Rock Sails By* rehearsals, I snagged Grennan — a Chicago native and former New Yorker who writes from his home in Pennsylvania — for a handful of questions about his new play.



**Janet Ulrich Brooks plays a doubting scientist in the world premiere of “A Rock Sails By.”**

**Take me to that first glimmer of the idea you had for *A Rocks Sails By*. What did you see first: a character, a conflict, a shooting star? What inspired this?**

**Sean Grennan:** In 2017 I read a news article about an odd object that was flying through our solar system. It had come from outside our galaxy, which was very unusual. I was interested enough to do some research and find whatever was written about it. There was, and is, disagreement in the scientific world about what it was or might be.

Since it was first spotted by a Hawaiian array, it was given a Polynesian name, “Oumuamua” [pronounced “oh MUA MUA”], which translates to “Scout or messenger from our distant past.” Now that doesn’t mean that it *is* a scout or messenger — that was just the name they gave it. But it did suggest things to me. I should also mention that it had an unusual shape, seemed to course-correct, seemed to be accelerating and decelerating, and seemed on a direct path towards Earth.

I wrote about 30 pages and hit a wall. I don’t usually hit walls. I knew I wanted to talk about what the object might be, what it might mean to people, what it might cause them to think. However, at first, I didn’t know how to make it a human story. I considered who would be consulted on the appearance and quite naturally came to astrophysicist Dr. Lynn, our hero. But I

stayed stuck a long time. Until I tried “*one weird trick...*” I wrote a scene from the end of the show that I wanted to go toward and then that showed me what I had to do to get there.

**Did you know early on that this would be a faith vs. science story? That is, as a scientist, Dr. Cummings is an all-facts kind of person. Her daughter, Olive, whose interest is English lit, is more spiritual — poetry and fiction and possibility are more her thing.**

**Sean Grennan:** I didn’t know that. Not sure I do now. It’s something I wrestle with that just came out in the show. “You can’t hide in your writing.” But it does interrogate some of the bigger questions. Of course I made Olive, Dr. Lynn’s daughter, like her in tone enough to seem related but oppositional to her worldview so they’d have something to bump up against. I think I took this on because I’m asking those questions myself these days. What is it all about? What is it all?



**Erica Elam and Sean Fortunato in Peninsula Players’ “Now and Then” by Sean Grennan. (Photo by Len Villano)**

**The play has a supernatural element to it, a surprise, as does your relationship comedy *Now and Then*. Is this a departure from your early writing or were the seeds always there? That is, less the living room of *Making God Laugh* and more touching on the mystical.**

**Sean Grennan:** I think that is a newish thing for me. It sort of started with *Now and Then* and even the flashback reveal in *The Tin Woman*. In fact, I’ve written an even newer show after this

one that has more of that in it! I think it adds up in this show, I don't think it's a cheat but it is a different way to go.

**With each new play idea, do you purposely push form and ask, "What can I do differently?," or does it depend on the idea at hand?**

**Sean Grennan:** For me, with each new show I'm trying to go a little deeper, ask a little more. Someone smarter than me once said that "Writers are explaining the world to themselves." I think that's a lot of it. When I started writing I was content to just make people laugh all night and not be too challenging. I never wanted to hector the audience, and I still don't, however fashionable. But I think I'm always just trying to write something better, or at least different from the last show. Trying to be better each time is worthwhile I think but sometimes it pushes me into self-doubt.

As far as pushing form, I'm more willing to do that now than I was before. Maybe I'm more confident or something? I think if I make the ride interesting enough, and play by the rules I've established, I can get away with it.

**The play has the characteristic laughs and dry wit of past Sean Grennan plays, but it feels more ruminative than some of your other work. It's a look in the mirror about life's Big Questions. You stack the stakes deck with Dr. Cummings — the play touches on ideas about wellness, mortality, generation gap. What ideas or concerns or behaviors do you share with Dr. Cummings? Is this a play you could have written when you were a young man? Does age inform the play?**

**Sean Grennan:** It is probably more ruminative, as you say. The play touches on mortality largely because lately, I'm swimming in reminders. Friends are getting sick or passing. I'm physically wearing out. Fewer days ahead than behind so, I'm wondering about all of it. But I don't think I had it in me to write this show even ten years ago. It's not that I've gained any wisdom, I don't claim that at all. It's a focus thing. The further we get on, the better we can see the arc of our life. We see the things we've done, failed to do, plans that fell away, same stupid repeating mistakes, and also, the lifetime bonds we've formed, the good choices we made, the ones that proved to be truly, really important. *Now and Then* was somewhat about that. Maybe that's why I can write this show now.

As far as the humor in this show and others, I think I will always want to mix laughter with more dramatic moments. Partly because I can't help it but it's also a good technique. I think one enhances the other and gets us to catharsis.

**And having asked that, the play has a thematic link to your earlier Peninsula Players comedy *Now and Then*, which asks questions about life's path(s). How is *A Rock Sails By* similar to (or different from) a couple of other Sean Grennan works?**

**Sean Grennan:** It does have a link to *Now and Then* in a few ways. One of them is that when I wrote that, I was looking at and doing research on the nature of time itself. How it might be a

very different critter than we think it is. Some of that earlier research made it into *A Rock Sails By* because it fit.

A lot of it is about what's really important in life. Many of my characters don't get exactly what they think they want but might get something else. In [Making God Laugh](#) the newly grown children talk about what they're going to do in life, and not one of them gets there. However, they get other things that they come to value. Dr. Lynn in this show has lost a lot, and is looking at her own mortality, but she gets rewards too.



**Joel Hatch and Kristine Thatcher in world premiere of “The Tin Woman” at Peninsula Players.**

**You have a gift for writing indelible women.**

**Sean Grennan:** I seem to be drawn to writing tough, verbal, funny women. Maybe because I married one? (The lovely Kathy Santen.) Joy in [The Tin Woman](#) has a similar take on the world as Dr. Lynn does in *A Rock Sails By*, even though they're pretty far apart in other ways. Anyone who played [the role of] Woman in [Now and Then](#) would be great for Dr. Lynn. Woman is of a certain age but, more, she's of a certain mindset. Like a lot of us around this age, she is way over being nice or “going along to get along.” I think it's why a lot of people seem to get crankier as they age. Life has taken her on and left some scars which has caused her to grow blunt. The days are running down and it's time to just get to the damn point! It's not that she's hardened exactly, or emotionally numb, it's that she has a colder eye now and sees the foolishness. She sees that which can slow us, hamstringing us, keeps us longing and away from true happiness...and might end up written on our gravestone if we don't act smarter, better, more clearly.

I think I like writing women's roles more because the women I've known (just my opinion!) are more available emotionally and can easily marry that to their intellect. More eloquent even when emotional. Most men, not so much. Also because, as a group, I've always thought more of

women. Not that there haven't been tremendous men in my life and not that I haven't met some awful women but, I'm saying as a group, I like them more.

**What sort of research went into writing *A Rock Sails By*? Your main character is an astrophysicist. Do you secretly have a PhD in astrophysics?**

**Sean Grennan:** I do! Gold Medal class of aught five! No, I can barely count my change. But I can research. I wrote industrial shows for many years and had to quickly, if superficially, learn businesses and innovations and write about them with a bit of authority. I didn't really understand things and the knowledge drifted off quickly but it was a good skill to have.

**What was the biggest challenge of writing *A Rock Sails By*?**

**Sean Grennan:** I think it was trying to get the audience to care about these folks, see themselves up there even though they might be very different people with very different life experiences. And then to hope that they buy into the end of the show. There are a few smarty pants ideas lightly tossed out here but I hope that boils away at the end. I don't think I'm covering really new ground here. The questions that this show raises are somewhat universal but we actively don't think about them so that we can get dressed and get the oil changed. I suppose I want the audience to walk out from the show considering some of those questions that they already had themselves, walking in. Just maybe pushed to front-of-mind. I don't write tragedies, or maybe not yet. I always want to leave some hope in the bottom of the box. I think this does.



**Erin Noel Grennan in the Peninsula Players premiere of "The Tin Woman."**

**When you start a new play, how aware of the economics of producing are you? That is, did you know early on that this would be a five-actor play, which is more easily producible than a 15-actor play?**

**Sean Grennan:** You have to think of that, a bit. But I like more intimate shows anyway so it's fine. Early on in my career I was a book writer for two large musicals, 25-28 actors. Those were so fun but just very different animals. Even Broadway musicals are getting smaller these days. Maybe we want more intimate stories? But this one feels like the right size. There is a multi-player in this show — one actor playing several parts. It's a challenge to find a great chameleon to do that but it's also fun. I can also see casting those other parts separately if you want a bigger cast, taking the cast from five to nine.

**Take me back to your first association with Peninsula Players in Door County, Wisconsin. Actor? Writer? Pen Players has a long association with Chicago talent. Lots of great Chicago theater people have worked up there in northern Wisconsin.**

**Sean Grennan:** I'm from Chicago so I've been aware of Peninsula Players for a long time. They're really a very respected institution. Sadly, it had never clicked for me to work there as an actor while I was still in Chicago. However, some years later, after Kathy and I moved to New York City as she pursued a long Broadway career, I transitioned more fully to writer and wrote *Making God Laugh*. Greg Vinkler was kind enough to attend a staged reading of it in New York, gave me some great notes, brought in the excellent Tom Mula as director, and committed shortly after that. (Tom and I have done three shows together at Pen Players.) It seemed to go well so that sort of opened the door to have them look at other pieces. A few years later, they did *The Tin Woman* and I even got to tread the boards as an actor in shows after that in *And Then There Were None* and *The Mystery of Irma Vep*. So, sorry, guys but the rule is "Once a Player..."

**Does it feel like "home"?**

**Sean Grennan:** I do feel a little like it's a home for me although you never want to assume anything. This is my fourth show up there and I've been so knocked out by the level of work they do in every area. Really great people who care a lot and are beyond talented. And the audiences are generous but sharp as a tack so you can't throw a fastball by them!

**We collect various "homes" as writers over the years, don't we?**

**Sean Grennan:** As a writer, having a "home" is a great thing, but, like everything about this business, really tenuous. I had a bit of a "home" in Kansas City for many years working at The American Heartland Theatre with artistic director Paul Hough. Paul turned into a great friend and excellent mentor. I learned a *ton* there as I acted in four shows and wrote three musicals and three plays for them. That kind of opportunity never happens! I would not be a writer now if not for that time and Paul. Unfortunately, AHT closed shop (not my fault!) and I was out on the corner, hawking shows again.

My association with Pen Players since then has been great for me. They've encouraged me to go new places and try new things and have been so supportive. Even though I can be pretty funny



when I want to, they seem to appreciate the more serious notes even more. That was a departure for me and was the most nerve wracking the first time I watched it in front of an audience. When you write a comedy and they're laughing, you think, "Whew, that's good!" When it's more serious, you have no idea what's going on till the end of the show.



**Peninsula Players artistic director Linda Fortunato.**

**What's your participation in the world premiere production? Are you a rewriter in rehearsals?**

**Sean Grennan:** I will be "on site" at rehearsals all or most days. I always want to answer any questions or make any changes fast for the actors and director. It's sort of like fitting clothing on folks. Linda Fortunato is the director, and though she's directed shows of mine before, never a brand-new piece like this. But I've seen her work and knew things were in great hands. We've known each other a long time and have wanted to do this and it's finally working out! We've had several excellent production meetings and I can't wait to get in the rehearsal room with her and all the folks.

Two perhaps interesting things: 1) I had *not* finished *A Rock Sails By* about a year or so ago when she got in touch to ask if I had anything new. (This never happens!) It focused my mind and I sat down and finished it in about ten days! 2) Linda's husband Sean Fortunato, holds the dubious honor of being in three of my world premieres having also done *Making God Laugh* and *Now and Then*. Now he must bear the scarlet letter "G"! Seriously, Sean is absolutely the goods.

**What development did Pen Players give *A Rock Sails By*?**

**Sean Grennan:** Peninsula Players gave me a Zoom reading and a live reading of the show for an audience, the latter as a part of their "Winter Reading Series." Linda and I have also talked over a *lot* of stuff and she's given me some great notes. We have the kind of relationship where we can collegially/casually talk over even the smallest thing at any time which is really what you want in a collaboration. Always a lot of mutual respect here. I know the actors will have things

for me as well and I'll try to either act on them or explain what I was thinking about. The most common things that come up are always around clarity, overwriting, and/or making sure that some odd phrase or action doesn't pull the audience's eye away from what we're all saying. Audiences pick up on everything! It's like playing in front of a room full of detectives. So, we have to tell it in a unified, clear way. As you know, theatre is a very collaborative art form. We're *all* telling the story. All the oars have to be pulling in the same direction.



**Greg Vinkler and Barbara Robertson in the Pen Players world premiere of Sean Grennan's "Now and Then." (Photo by Len Villano)**

**Even before the world premiere, you already have future bookings for the play — and a publisher!**

**Sean Grennan:** I do have more productions coming up which is a first for me before there's even a premiere. Never happens. Actors Playhouse in Miami, Florida; Theatre Harrisburg in Pennsylvania; and Lake Country Playhouse in Wisconsin have all committed for 2024. A couple other places are circling the field as well. These are all theaters that have done other shows of mine and asked to see it even though it wasn't quite done. All of them know that I'm refining it with the Peninsula Players production. It's already being published by [Playscripts](#), the publisher of most of my other shows.

I'm just delighted that people are responding well to the show. God, I hope that continues! In my mind, I took some chances that could have crashed and burned. More than forty years into this work, I'm glad to still be at the table. It's a pretty great table.