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Review: ‘A Rock Sails By’ a heaven-sent world premiere at Peninsula Players in Door County

Unidentified celestial object inspires piercing play by Illinois native Sean Grennan

By REGINA BELT-DANIELS June 21, 2023 at 2:46 pm CDT



In the cast of "A Rock Sails By" are Rebecca Hurd (from left) as Olive, Travis Turner as Jason, and Janet Ulrich Brooks as Dr. Lynn Cummings. (Len Villano)

I'll be perfectly honest. I'm a big fan of Sean Grennan, an Illinois native. Besides being extremely personable, he is an extraordinarily gifted playwright. Grennan's ability to craft words that make you laugh, sigh or cry is undeniable. Three of his plays, "Making God Laugh," "The Tin Woman" and "Now and Then," have had world premieres at Door County's Peninsula Players in Wisconsin. On June 13, Artistic Director Linda Fortunato welcomed the audience to his fourth world premiere, "A Rock Sails By." And what a stellar production!

In 2017, Grennan heard an NPR report about an unusually shaped unidentified object that the University of Hawaii's Pan-STARRS1 telescope and NASA's Hubble telescope were tracking. Startled scientists were baffled by its odd shape, appearance and changing speeds. The size of a football field with pancake-like flatness – coupled with the emission of gas that could be categorized as exhaust or thrust – it started an international scientific debate. Fortunately for us, it left our solar system in December 2022, but not Grennan's memory (it is no longer traceable by earthly telescopes).

Yet, the world premiere of "A Rock Sails By" almost didn't happen; after writing 30 pages of the play, Grennan hit the proverbial wall. He said it was Fortunato asking if he had anything "new" that gave him the focus and push he needed, and he finished in 10 days by writing a scene starting from the end of the play.

"Then that showed me what I had to do to get there," he said.

Grennan's characteristic wit and his trademark gift of believable characters in humorous and human moments are evident in "A Rock Sails By."

Fortunato is a superb director, and has cast the five-actor ensemble well; that small number establishes the intimacy and mindfulness needed by the play's characters. The scenic design by Sarah Ross is clean, simple and utilitarian; its spaceship-colored set pieces fly, turn and are arranged to reflect academia and home life – skillfully maneuvered by stage managers Kimberly Ann McCann and Kaitlin Kitzmiller and production coordinator Paul Cook. Both Guy Rhodes' lighting and Joe Court's sound design complement the set, and scenic artist Rain Foiles created one of my favorite visuals, when the flats match the sash of the Messenger in Act Two. Kyle Pingel's costumes are just what you'd expect: modern and character appropriate.

Each of the five actors is more than capable of defining their characters, and Grennan has given each one dialogue that contains honest and modern references (from Etsy to Google to "Star Wars"), entertaining humorous comments ("Wow! You're doing math with a pencil – it's like Colonial Williamsburg"), and the heartbreak of life experiences ("I just want to know: What is the point?").



Janet Ulrich Brooks (from left) and Sadieh Rifai appear in "A Rock Sails By." (Len Villano)

As Dr. Lynn Cummings, Chicago actress Janet Ulrich Brooks is brilliant. So tailor-made is the role, I can't imagine anyone else in the part. She's the verbal, acerbic, emotive, posturizing, no-nonsense astrophysicist diagnosed with early dementia at the same time an object is headed toward the Earth (which she dismisses as a "big nothing rock"). She's been nominated twice for a Nobel Prize and also has hyperthymesia – "a blessing and a curse" of incredible and rare memory recall. Brooks conveys grief, passion, career consumption and the distance between herself and her daughter with clear strength. She gets to deliver some incredible lines with credibility, and her chemistry with each of the ensemble members is natural and appropriate. Brooks is an intoxicating and riveting actress.

Travis Turner as Jason the reporter ("who writes on paper") is a charmer. His editor has given him wide berth in his treatment of Cummings: "1,200 words is in-depth these days. We need the clicks – do whatever you want." Turner makes a sincere transition between acts, and establishes a communal bond with Cummings. He is an earnest and likable actor.

Rebecca Hurd is Olive, Cummings' 30-year-old daughter, supposedly in town to interview for a fellowship for her English literature doctorate. Her character comes to life and better definition in Act Two. Hurd has an openness and strong innocence that illustrate she and her mom have more in common than either is willing to admit. Hurd and Turner are the realistic yin and yang of Cummings' life.

Sean Fortunato is mesmerizing as the Messenger. He doesn't make his unexpected appearance until Act Two, and provides both comedic relief and a dramatic reminder of the gravity of the moment and Cummings' situation. Fortunato and Brooks make you feel; he imparts a lovely sensitivity and reminder that we are not alone. Fortunato's intensity is incandescent, his timing is fresh and nuanced. And, he now holds the distinctive honor of appearing in three of Grennan's premieres.

Sadieh Rifai admirably portrays several characters (Hailey, a doctor, Jason's editor and the university chancellor). She gets the award for quick costume changes and the ability to create believable, different characters.

With this ensemble, I didn't see any acting going on – I just saw the characters – characters the responsive audience cared about and believed.

The H.L. Mencken quote: "Here, indeed, are all the elements ... clear thinking, a sense of character, the dramatic instinct ... the adept putting together of words – words charming and slyly significant, words arranged ..." applies to Grennan's "A Rock Sails By." This play is his best to date and his deepest. So, make the drive north to the country's oldest professional resident summer theater, Peninsula Players, to see this production. "Where the sun sets, the curtain rises, and the stars shine."

• *Regina Belt-Daniels*, a retired Reading Recovery and special education teacher, loves to act, direct and travel with her husband. She can be found onstage, backstage, in the audience, serving on theater boards, and writing theater reviews somewhere on any given day.