

Playwright Sean Grennan's creative streak going strong

Fourth world premiere to launch in June

By REGINA BELT-DANIELS May 11, 2023 at 3:29 pm CDT



Sean Grennan is about to see his fourth world-premiere production be staged by Peninsula Players. (Photo provided by Sean Grennan)

It has been said playwright Sean Grennan's talents lie in his uncanny ability to create identifiable, lovable characters in humorous but very human moments. As an audience member at many of his works, and having directed his "Married Alive!" musical, I unequivocally declare it true. And in an interview, Grennan himself turns out to be humorous and very human.

Originally from Oak Park, Illinois, Grennan is also an actor – a veteran of numerous Chicago area musicals and plays: everything from “Merrily We Roll Along” to “The Taming of the Shrew” (Sondheim and Shakespeare – not bad – the two fathers of theater). Grennan has graced the stages of the Goodman, Steppenwolf, Chicago Shakespeare Theater and Drury Lane, to mention a few. He’s done TV and movies, with “The Untouchables,” “Rudy” and “Law & Order: SVU” on his resume. Grennan is a proud member of AEA, SAG-AFTRA and the Dramatists Guild. He believes he’s in “the right chair now” with his playwriting. Yet, while not in a hurry to get back into acting, he wouldn’t turn anything down. After last appearing on stage in 2014, in a two-person, 14-character, quick-costume-switch play, “The Mystery of Irma Vep,” Grennan says he’d rather give actors their words, than have to remember words himself. The structure of playwriting is “in his DNA.”

Sean Grennan is about to see his fourth world-premiere production be staged by Peninsula Players. (Photo provided by Sean Grennan)

It was Grennan’s New York-based sister Erin, a former actress with Peninsula Players in Door County, Wisconsin, who was instrumental in bringing his work to the attention of now-retired Peninsula Players Artistic Director Greg Vinkler. Grennan had written several musicals and plays for Kansas City’s now-defunct American Heartland Theatre; one of those plays was “Making God Laugh.” Initially rejected by Heartland because of that company’s preference for light comedies, “Making God Laugh” was workshopped in New York with Rondi Reed in the role of the mother. Vinkler liked the play so much he slotted it for the opening production at Peninsula Players.

In our conversation, Grennan continually revealed humility and gratitude. His seventh play, “A Rock Sails By,” will have its world premiere at Peninsula Players on June 13. This is the fourth world premiere at Peninsula Players for Grennan (previous premieres include “Making God Laugh,” “The Tin Woman” and “Now and Then”).

“We have a pretty terrific cast, design team and director, so if the show tanks, it’s absolutely my fault,” he said with telltale wit.

Directed by current Peninsula Players Artistic Director Linda Fortunato, “A Rock Sails By” is based on a true event, and is part of the inaugural World Premiere Wisconsin series. As Grennan describes this work: In 2017, a bus-sized, unusually shaped asteroid “took a hard left past the moon and fell into our gravity, taking a beeline toward Earth.” The asteroid interested him, but he wanted to make a human story with a natural character out of the event; this resulted in the tale of misquoted astrophysicist Lynn Cummings, who tries to bring science, faith, reconnection with her daughter and the loss of her husband into balance. The character Cummings is a Nobel Prize nominee; she also has to deal with an ambitious “clickbait journalist” throughout the show. Grennan said he wrote the play’s end before the middle, so he “could see where he was going.” The playwright plans on attending rehearsals before the premiere’s opening.

I asked him if it is difficult to attend rehearsals of one of his plays; it is his baby, after all. Grennan said that by being in the room, he gets to listen to the actors and fix things. He readily acknowledges that sometimes “actors know the shows better than the playwrights do.” Grennan

states without hesitation that he loves working with directors and actors; he loves “sharing the play’s voice.” It is not uncommon for Grennan to rewrite four to five pages of a scene as he did for his play “Now and Then,” or make 30 to 40 line changes in order to be more concise: “I’m a little windy.” However, he generally won’t speak up until break, and he likes to “fit the clothes on the actors.”

He’s not slowing down when it comes to projects. Grennan currently is working on his sixth musical, reuniting with his former musical writing partner Leah Okimoto. It’s early in the process, and they’re taking their time. The show is based on Okimoto’s life, and Grennan will write the book and lyrics; she’ll do the music. The “hunger” to write a musical again came after plans to develop his popular play “The Tin Woman” into a musical fell through.

Grennan dreams of continuing like playwright Horton Foote, who was still writing into his 90s. He cites a favorite quote from Foote: “Writers explain the world to themselves.” In Grennan’s case, I have to disagree; he has done a marvelous job of explaining the world to us, and I hope his one-of-a-kind voice rings out for years to come.

• *Regina Belt-Daniels is exceedingly fortunate to be attending the world premiere of “A Rock Sails By.” A summer evening at an outdoor stage on the shores of Green Bay beckons all theater lovers.*