

## March of Time Drives 'Pavilion'

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Anybody who has attended a high school reunion already has a pretty good grasp of playwright Craig Wright's theme in "The Pavilion," which is that time marches on -- inexorably, often unkindly and in only one direction. Or, regardless of what Thomas Wolfe had to say, you may be able to go home again; you probably just won't look as good as you used to.

Port City Playhouse is continuing its run of intimate, intense dramas with "The Pavilion," a lyrical play that weaves elements of fantasy and comedy into its darker themes.

Unevenly directed by Chuck Whalen, a cast of three brings to life 18 characters of the fictional Pine City (Minn.) High School Class of 1982, plus one supernatural Narrator, attending a 20th year reunion at a lakeside pavilion.

Chuck Dluhy, one of the area's most versatile character actors, plays 16 of those roles, as well as the Narrator, in a dizzying swirl of transformations between male and female roles. He superbly negotiates his way through such characterizations as a sour old lady, a police chief, the town pothead and others who gossip, comment and philosophize their way throughout the evening.

Dluhy is a one-man Greek chorus and while having him play all the roles is primarily a theatrical gimmick that keeps the attention focused on one main couple, played by Andrew S. Greenleaf and Barbara Raffaele, Dluhy's performance is one of the primary charms of this production.

Still, his portrayal of the Narrator, a role often compared to the Stage Manager in "Our Town," is a bit problematic. Garishly lit and with a hard-edged veneer, he seems more like a caffeinated version of Rod Serling than an avuncular, mystical presence as he races through a history of the universe to take us to that specific moment in time on a Minnesota lakefront or comments on humanity's foibles.

Greenleaf and Raffaele are Peter and Kari, lovers in senior year who last saw each other on graduation night. Kari was pregnant but Peter, under family pressure to go to college, abandoned her and never returned to his hometown. What followed for Kari were an abortion, a loveless, childless marriage and a barren life in Pine City.

Peter, who has hopped from one unsatisfying relationship to another, has come to the reunion full of remorse for being such a cad and hoping to repair the relationship and maybe begin a new life (or is it return to the old life?) with the embittered Kari.

Kari is rather cold to Peter, a reaction that veers into hostility in Raffaele's portrayal, and nothing melts the frost from her heart, not even Peter singing her an old love song. Peter argues that there must be room in her heart for forgiveness, but she spends the first act denouncing him with such declarations as, "Because of you, the universe is ruined forever!"

Something must happen during intermission, however, because Raffaele's characterization of Kari is substantially different in Act Two, a transformation that actor and director have not traversed clearly onstage. She's still not receptive to Peter's pleading for a second chance, but her personality is much less rigid.

The playwright could certainly have written the role more clearly, but it seems that it should still be possible to evolve the character smoothly. As for Peter, Greenleaf credibly ratchets up the character's desperation to fix everything, believing that romantic gestures can wash away the pain of the past that Kari has dragged with her into the present.

Whalen and Joe Schubert's set design is elegant and stark, with just a few hints of the old pavilion, which is to be burned to the ground immediately after the reunion as part of a redevelopment project, underscoring Wright's theme that nothing is forever.