

‘Lunenburg’ a ‘wonderfully satisfying’ mystery/comedy

By Rob Tukey, Special to the Sun Journal
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Lunenburg is a port town on the south shore of Nova Scotia. It is also the title of the fine play by Norm Foster (Canada's most produced playwright) making its U.S. premiere currently at The Public Theater in Lewiston.

Following the tragic death of her husband of four years, who was killed in a private plane crash en route to Newfoundland, Iris Oulette of Brunswick, Maine, is surprised to learn of her inheritance of a home in Lunenburg she never knew existed. Her husband's frequent trips to Lunenburg were somehow related to a shipbuilding business near there that had connections with his stateside business connection to Bath Iron Works.

Iris had believed that her husband had stayed in hotels during his sojourns to Lunenburg.

Still reeling from her loss, Iris makes her way to Lunenburg accompanied by her lifelong and divorced friend Natalie to survey her newly acquired real estate. She is anxious and troubled by the seeming secrecy with which her husband kept this property.

Iris comes to Lunenburg armed with questions and loaded for bear, but in due course finds, oddly enough, her answer rests with a squirrel.

Almost immediately upon Iris' arrival, next-door neighbor Charlie Butler shows up under a dog-eared pretense. It quickly becomes evident that Charlie holds the answers to many of Iris' as-yet unasked questions.

And we, the audience, even more abruptly suspect what Charlie is reluctant to disclose. This initiates interaction between the three protagonists that reveals more and more, with broad and sometimes dark humor. Running gags and sophisticated dialogue are an engaging blend and contrast as they reveal more about the deceased husband and the mysterious airplane passenger who suffered the same ill-fated end. To that end, the punchline ending is both a dog story and a squirrel story.

Iris, Natalie and Charlie are reminiscent of the best character creations of a Neil Simon or Billy Wilder play. They are complex, witty, interesting and, most importantly, entertaining individuals. The excellent comedic timing of the actors further enhances the clever and fast-paced dialogue. Under the fine direction of Janet Mitchko, the bright light of the three actors' strong talents and skills is refracted through a triangular prism of the personalities who inhabit this otherwise idyllic seaside bay.

Iris, played by Beth Hylton, is clearly distraught and devastated by the death of her husband, but later her composure ranges from anger to guilt, shame to mistrust, suspicion to compassion as the story plays out.



Torsten Hillhouse as Charlie and Heather Dilly as Natalie can't help but get to know each other despite the dark reason behind their meeting.

Such range in rapid succession is remarkable and convincing. And her graveside soliloquy, itself, is a wonderful blend of poignancy, humor and real closure to all her unsettled feelings.

Heather Dilly in the role of Natalie plays the character to humorous perfection. She is the best friend who can drive you nuts.

Flighty, easily distracted, impressionable, empathetic and ultimately completely loyal and devoted to her friend Iris, her irrepressible nature is prone to "foot in mouth" moments that are rollickingly condescending without intention.

Likewise, Torsten Hillhouse, as the easy-going neighbor Charlie, nails his character. Careless of his appearance, and a contradiction between his rural lifestyle and an occasional spark of savoir-faire, he is fervent in defense of his self-worth. He is more scamp than scoundrel, carefree rather than cavalier, and has more depth than he wishes to convey. At other times he delights in displaying that depth without genuinely flaunting it. Instantly likeable with a perpetual smile, he is the answer man, in possession of the information Iris seeks, while keeping the audience guessing as to his true motives.

"Lunenburg's" set design by Kit Mayer is charming and deliberately minimal, making it especially effective in creating the impression of an unpretentious but well built home. After all, illusion is the bugaboo that has Iris a bundle of nerves and uncertainty.

In fact, the façade of the house is merely the frame for the screen door as a spotlight feature. Arguments between Iris and Natalie frequently take place through the screen door — highlighting the kind of "best friend" friction that comes of knowing each other too well over the years. Rustic seats on the porch where all the action takes place are used to great effect as the characters shift from one to the other with ease and a natural attitude that reflects comfortability. They don't just "sit," they "occupy" the spaces with agency.

The costume design by Frederica Jepson Johnson is remarkable yet comforting in its simplicity. Casual attire is what is called for on a porch in Nova Scotia and that is what is delivered. The perfection in how it truly reflects the characters can be seen in Charlie's change from being the neighbor in work clothes, who drops by to introduce himself, to being Natalie's date for a tour of the town. One has to look closely to see that the jeans are now clean and a different shirt is the highlight of Charlie's nod to conformity.

That two never-seen people — the husband and his passenger in the plane — as well as an unseen dog and squirrel can bring these three individuals together in such a way as to reveal themselves in their many phases is unique and remarkable.

That we are uplifted as we watch them interact humorously, poignantly and deeply and bond in true friendship and harmony is a tribute to the actors, the direction, the playwright and, of course, the lovely port town of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia.

"Lunenburg" at The Public Theater is a thoroughly funny, entertaining and heart-warming production. It takes relatable characters, presents them with universally understandable circumstances and, in the hands of three fine actors, reveals fresh takes on familiar emotions. It is a wonderfully satisfying and enjoyable live theater experience.