

## Public Theatre's 'Now and Then' blends romance, comedy and possible do-overs 'perfectly'

Jon Bolduc – special to the Sun Journal

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LEWISTON — Combining romance, comedy and time travel, The Public Theatre's production of "Now and Then" by Sean Grennan offers laughter, love and a thought-provoking question all tethered by a poignant, emotional core.

The play opens on a quiet night in a Reagan-era Chicago bar. The set is wonderfully rendered, with astounding attention to detail.

The set looks like someone plucked a bar out of downtown Chicago — complete with a working Galaga video game — and transported it to Lewiston, Maine.

We meet the young Jamie, an aspiring musician with imposter syndrome who is on the cusp of quite a few big decisions. Keep trying to make it as a pianist, perfecting his craft? Get married and put his dreams on the back burner? Both? And with that, the audience glimpses one of the central questions posed by the play, using humor, heartbreak, and grace: What happens to our dreams when we set them aside?

Jamie, propelled convincingly by Dylan S. Wallach, is an endearing mix of goofy and skepticism, evolving into the grounding point of the narrative.

His girlfriend of two years, Abby, is expertly handled by Allison Altman, who plays her with youth and energy, leaning fully into the hard questions.

The Man, who talks his way into the bar for a drink well after closing, is played with a sense of overeager energy by Mitch Poulos, which creates both anxiety and a spark of intrigue that makes Jamie — and the audience — take notice. There's mystery, money exchanges hands, and the narrative begins in earnest.

The concept of a time travel story seems like it could veer into science fiction, and, for a split second, it does. (Just enough to keep the sci fi nerds in the audience — myself included — assuaged.) But this story quickly pivots from the "how" did the time travel happen back to the humanity at this play's core.

By the end of the first act, as the Man ruminates on the flow of time, and the tempering and fading of hopes and dreams, the audience gets its first big reveal: I will not spoil it, but again, time travel.

And just as Jamie, Abby, and the Man process what it means to consider changing the past to "fix" the present, a new and critical perspective ends the scene. Bursting through the door of the bar, and bursting through the door of the narrative, Linda Marie Larson enters the fray bringing hilarious, well-honed timing, righteous anger, and more heart to fuel the second act.

Under the direction of Mark Routhier, the play's many elements — drama, humor, romance, and even time travel — blend perfectly.

Similarly, though each character presents as an individual with their own hopes, dreams, and motivations, by the end of the story, with its ever-witty dialogue, the characters become a tight ensemble, blending and bantering as if they are truly a singular family unit.

Late in the play, the Man quips that life consists of "moments. That's all we get." The statement addresses one of the central questions the play posits: Is it better to live a hard life where you sacrifice and put your dreams on a shelf, or a life where you follow your dreams but constantly feel like something is missing?

The play's answer is — like life and everything encompassing this messy journey — "sometimes." And sometimes both. And sometimes neither. And sometimes everything all at once. And with that, the emotional core of "Now and Then" feels earned.

If you're looking for an unconventional romance with an intriguing, thought-provoking premise, done well with humor and heart, consider coming to see "Now and Then."



*Dylan S. Wallach as Jamie, Allison Altman as Abby and Mitch Poulos as the Man discuss the future in a scene from "Now and Then"*