

REVIEW: SPIRITED 'GUYS ON ICE' OFFERS A WARM RETREAT

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By Amy Jacobus

I attend dance concerts over football games, I prefer wine to beer, and if I'm going to sit around for a few hours, I'd rather read than fish.

But I do understand the importance of a cozy pair of long johns and a heavy duty snowsuit.

This deeply ingrained Midwestern appreciation of winter garb is the only mutual interest I share with the characters in Riverside Theatre's latest production of "Guys on Ice: An Ice Fishing Musical Comedy," which opened last night and runs through Feb. 22. Luckily, in order to enjoy the performance, there's no need to understand the appeal of a bucket of bait and a shanty on ice — anyone can relate to the desire for a decent hobby and a friendly retreat.

Beer-guzzling cheeseheads Marvin and Lloyd, played by Ron Clark and John Watkins, spend their day on a frozen Wisconsin lake, eagerly anticipating their shot at fifteen minutes of fame. Cubby, host of a local cable television fishing show, is expected to arrive at any moment, and the guys are ready to give the camera crew a close look at their good sides.

To pass the time, the clueless but kindhearted fishermen tell terrible jokes, play a game of Go Fish and cautiously avoid any weighty topics of conversation. The audience is invited to join in on the wintry mayhem as well. Ernie de Moocher, played by Kris Hartsgrove, conducts a half-time quiz show at intermission and awards prizes donated by Fin & Feather to the first audience members to raise their hands, say "okey doke" and answer silly Wisconsin trivia questions. Later in the show, Ernie grates nerves with his looney charm as he goes to town on a red kazoo.

And true to musical comedy form, all of these activities are frequently interrupted by rather ridiculous bouts of song and dance.

With lyrics like "I was born with a pole in my hand and a whole lotta hope in my heart," endless fishing analogies and a chorus of sea creature hand puppets bursting through the wall, the sheer absurdity of the musical numbers keeps the audience chuckling. But it's "Ode to a Snowmobile Suit" that emerges as the highlight of the evening. The musical tribute to insulated, waterproof outerwear not only showcases Fred Alley's knack for penning comedic lyrics but also displays Watkins' surprisingly adept shimmying skills and Clark's ability to pivot with gusto. (Although jazz hands seem out of place in a shack decorated with an impressive array of Green Bay Packers memorabilia and littered with crushed Leininkugel cans, choreographer Erika Christiansen deserves recognition for pulling spirited, hilarious movement from the obviously less-than-graceful actors.) Even amid the booty-shaking and cutesy kicks, the audience realizes that these characters are regular Joes. The target audience of Bud commercials and Sarah Palin. Run of the mill schmucks you can sympathize with.

You can relate to these men's common dilemmas although you may not wholeheartedly agree with what they deem most valuable. News of a deadly snowblower accident provides pause but doesn't inspire them to completely reevaluate life's precious gifts. Marv and Lloyd ponder an icy heaven where every day is Packer Sunday and Jesus bears a remarkable resemblance to Brett Favre, a vision of couch potato bliss that could very well constitute my own version of hell. Work, love, life, death — to Marv and Lloyd it all relates to fishing in some way. Without rod, bait and bobber, nothing makes sense, and as the day winds to an end, the guys feel the firm tug of a few epiphanies on their lines.

Opening night's pacing was a bit clumsy — awkward pauses in dialogue, presumably employed to provide time for audience laughter, created stilted conversations and detracted from a deeper sense of camaraderie between the old fishing buddies. It also might help to kick a few songs out of the show with a sturdy winter boot. But the everyday charisma of the characters and the constant streaming of clever, sometimes bawdy fish metaphors make "Guys on Ice" a pleasant reprieve from Iowa's own blustery cold. I may not seek pleasure in lagers, pigskin or marine life, but I do enjoy a warm and hearty laugh.