

Great Barrington Public Theatre, Great Barrington, MA
Off Peak, by Brenda Withers. Directed by James Warwick.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“Not wise, but too well.”

When two former lovers meet on a train seventeen years after they broke up and the train stalls, leaving them stranded and alone it is the perfect setup for a romantic comedy, a rom-com. When the two exes are played by Kevin O’Rourke and Peggy Pharr Wilson the rom-com is just perfectly cast. However, “Off Peak” is a definitive Non-Rom-Com. These two people have some serious business between them that needs straightening out. For 82 minutes they work their ways through what went wrong with them and they end their time together with only a vague hope for a future together. Brenda Withers’ play is extremely well-written; her characters are deeply well defined. That we learn very little about what went wrong with them is just right. After all, they know and that’s what really matters here. We experience their reunion and that’s enough.



Peggy Pharr Wilson, Kevin O’Rourke; Photo: GBPT/Kat Humes

He is her stalker. He wouldn’t - and doesn’t - admit to that but he is. She knows it and she calls him on it. He talks in no uncertain terms about his dead mother and her influence on him;

she neither cares or at least says so. His reaction is awkward; she makes him uncomfortable.

They are a pair of misfits who clearly care about one another and if that isn't a situation, nothing is.



Peggy Pharr Wilson;
Photo: GBPT/Kat Humes

Peggy Pharr Wilson plays a romantic figure locked inside a rigidly statuesque Queen of Commoners. She teaches Italian and lives with a Portuguese-American who cooks for her. She loves music but wears earphones that block out all sound. She wears a new coat that closely resembles the one she wore seventeen years before. She carries half a panini in her purse. But this is a woman of depth who harbors secrets and personal passions. She can be kind and fair but also be fierce, play rough and mangle a man's soul if she chooses. Wilson is wonderful in this fully fleshed-out character. She adds a physical dynamic only hinted at in the script. Her Sarita is a person any of us would recognize then realize we don't know who she really is. It is a truly brilliant performance by a master-actress.

played by Kevin O'Rourke, an actor who all too often has been cast in secondary roles. Here he has the lead in a play that allows him to exhibit his skill at interpreting the misery of a man lost somewhere in his own head. He stammers, falters, makes strong personal gestures of affection and affliction. He utters inanities as though they were obviously well meant. When he woos Sarita, Martin exhibits all the losses a man of a certain age may display without realizing what he's doing. O'Rourke uses sincerity here to exhibit love, but that love is never really obvious to Wilson's Sarita or to us. Martin is a man who hides behind the words he uses. The actor on stage takes on the actor inside of his character and is much more successful at it than the man he plays manages to be. This is such a complex person that it is a thrill to watch O'Rourke play him.

Martin, the man not-in-her-life, is



Kevin O'Rourke; Photo: GBPT/Kat Humes

Director James Warwick has moved his two players in and out of intimacy expressed vocally and physically and created the personal comedy of mis-direction. Neither Sarita or Martin can be very comfortable in the situation Martin has created and Warwick uses that to keep both people on their feet, even when they're sitting down. Their closeness is obvious in their dialogue



Peggy Pharr Wilson, Kevin O'Rourke; Photo: GBPT/Kat Humes

and their difficulties are made manifest in their movement. Both clearly crave a reunited closeness but neither can bear to be the one to show it. Warwick used this abject frustration to good advantage throughout the play and the result is a most effective drawing in of the audience. He has made it impossible for us to ignore either character for even a minute.

Sasha Schwartz's set is so very right. Both characters use the rows of seats to great advantage. Lara Dubin's lighting design works wonderfully for the play and both designers have clearly been on the Metro North train at least twice. The costumes by George Veale visually define Martin and Sarita. Excellent sound design work by Jacob Fisch make the train as alive as either of the people on stage and the voice of the conductor, an unseen Jim Frangione, defines all we ever need to know about the operation of this particular train line.

This is a most unusual experience. It is a play, not a sit-com. It is a very good play but as frustrating an experience as could be had. It's a love it or hate it piece for all the same reasons. Go see it and make up your own mind about it. You can tell me about it later.

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Off Peak plays in the McConnell Theater, Bard College at Simon's Rock, 84 Alford Road, Great Barrington, MA through July 23rd. For information and tickets go to their booking site at GBPTboxoffice@gmail.com or call 413-372-1980..