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## 'Now and Then' at Actors' Playhouse Full of Life Lessons, Humor and Humanity

Tuesday, September 6, 2022



Stephen Trovillion, Kristian Bikic, and Mallory Newbrough appear in a scene from "Now and Then" at Actors' Playhouse at the Miracle Theatre, Coral Gables. (Photo by Alberto Romeu)

*By Aaron Krause, Theater Critic*

One of the pleasures of watching films directed by M. Night Shyamalan ("The Sixth Sense," "Signs," "Unbreakable") is knowing that something mysterious is happening beneath the action. Certainly, you watch with high anticipation as Shyamalan slowly but surely peels back layers until he reveals the secret at the end.

Playwright Sean Grennan does something similar with his mysterious, touching, and funny comedy-drama, "Now and Then." Yet, you do not have to wait until the plays conclusion to learn its plot twist.

Actors' Playhouse at the Miracle Theatre is giving Grennan's intriguing, insightful, poignant play, which is full of humor and humanity, a credible production through Sunday, Sept. 11.

Rest assured, this review will not reveal the secret behind "Now and Then." Therefore, read without concern. And, a word of advice, please, do not spoil it for others after you have seen the play.

The piece is one of several plays by Grennan that Actors' Playhouse has mounted. Unsurprisingly, theater companies worldwide have produced Grennan's work. The versatile theater artist displays flashes of the late, great playwright Neil Simon with his ability to write with humor and poignancy about identifiable characters in touching and relatable situations.

Chances are, you will be able to relate to "Now and Then" on some level. After all, the play, set in 1981 and 2016 in an unnamed city, is about love, the choices we make, the people who make those choices

with us, and the potential consequences of making them. Undoubtedly, most of us, at some point, have arrived at a fork in the road, forcing us to consider whether we should take one path or another.



Mallory Newbrough is Abby and Kristian Bikic is Jamie in Actors' Playhouse's production of "Now and Then." (Photo by Alberto Romeu)

In "Now and Then," young couple Jamie and Abby face such a situation. Namely, they have decisions to make about their future together and their individual dreams.

One evening, Jamie is about to close for the night the Irish bar he operates. Suddenly, an older man enters. He is desperate to speak with Jamie and Abby. As a matter of fact, the customer offers the pair \$2,000 just to sit and have a drink with him. Right away, the couple have decisions to make. Do they take the money? Do they dismiss the gentleman as a possible con man? What are the consequences of making either choice?

During the lead-up to the secret's revelation, Grennan, without giving away too much, includes details that heighten the mystery behind the older gentleman. His wife (Laura Turnbull as Woman) enters later, and there is something strange about her, too.

Just as the playwright does not give away too much before spilling the secret, director David Arisco and his quartet of fine performers keep the suspense high while letting the play unfold bit by bit until the reveal. True, the suspense lessens after that point. However, the plays charm, humor, and poignancy keep it interesting and moving throughout.

Under Arisco's smart direction, the tone is laid back and casual at the beginning, but the production grows credibly more tense as it progresses. Also, under Arisco's guidance, heartfelt emotions come across believably. And just as Grennan does with his play, the director finds the right balance between humor and pathos.



In "Now and Then," two characters are known only as Man (Stephen Trovillion) and Woman (Laura Turnbull). (Photo by Alberto Romeu)

As the young couple, Kristian Bikic (Jamie) and Mallory Newbrough (Abby) act believably playful toward each other, suggesting a familiarity between the pair.

Meanwhile, Stephen Trovillion and Laura Turnbull convincingly bicker as the older, long-married couple. You get the sense that they are so used to each other that they annoy the heck out of each other. However, it is clear that deep down, they love each other.

The talented cast offers mostly impressive individual performances, although Trovillion's character is not believably desperate in the beginning. Otherwise, Trovillion believably portrays a character who is well-spoken and intent on accomplishing his objective.

Opposite Trovillion, Turnbull is convincingly commanding and coarse toward her husband. And to her credit, Turnbull's character mellows when she needs to.

As Jamie, Bikic lends his character a modest, yet ambitious quality that makes him likable. Through Bikic's performance, you never doubt Jamie's sincerity, his work ethic, or his love for Abby.

As Abby, Newbrough exudes charm, humor, and a playfulness that all the actors, as their characters, convey during at least one point in the production. The playfulness adds to the piece's light, laidback tone, especially in the beginning.



Jamie (Kristian Bikic), Man (Stephen Trovillion), and Abby (Mallory Newbrough) make a deal in "Now and Then." (Photo by Alberto Romeu)

As their characters, Bikic and Newbrough act as surprised as many of us likely will be once we learn the secret.

The performers, wearing Ellis Tillman's character-defining costumes, act on scenic designer Gene Seyffer's appealing and wide, realistic set with period details. Thanks to Seyffer's work, the Irish bar, the plays sole setting, looks inviting, with brown and green as the dominant colors. One of the walls curves at different points. Symbolically, this can suggest life, which does not always proceed in a straight, simple, and smooth manner. Rather, there are curves, bumps, detours, and choices we must make along life's sometimes rocky, curving road.

Eric Nelson's lighting is realistic. Also, to his credit, Nelson tones down the lights during romantic scenes and moments of remembrance. Red lighting briefly flashes during parts of the production, perhaps pointing to clues about the mystery.

It is no mystery why "Now and Then," as well as other plays by Grennan, have remained popular worldwide. With their heart, humanity, and humor, they take us on a satisfying emotional ride, during which we meet relatable characters. In the process, we may learn something about ourselves.

#### MORE INFORMATION

Actors' Playhouse's production of "Now and Then" continues through Sunday, Sept.11 at the Miracle Theatre, 280 Miracle Mile in Coral Gables. Performances are at 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays 3 p.m. Sundays. For tickets, go to [tickets.actorsplayhouse.org](https://tickets.actorsplayhouse.org)

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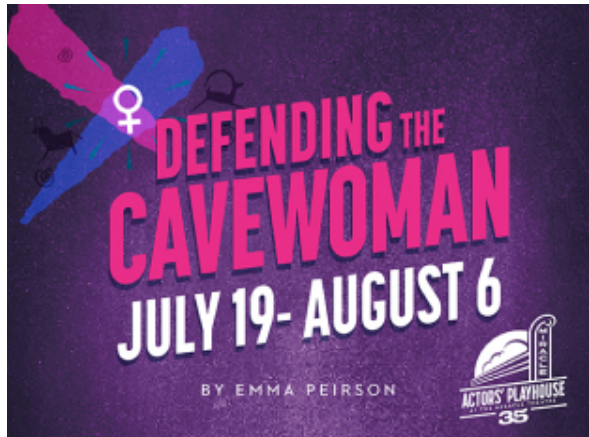
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