



Kenilworth Weekly News – 1 September 2011

**Finest flavours linger in Kenilworth theatre production**

On Golden Pond, Talisman Theatre, Kenilworth. On until Saturday September 3.

THE Talisman's On Golden Pond is a banquet for the soul.

As Norman Thayer Junior (John Fenner) and his wife Ethel (Ann Richards) sail into their golden years, his increasing forgetfulness and the distance between them and their only child Chelsea (Michelle Williams) provides the meat of this wonderfully funny and subtle drama. They spend each summer at their primitive but charming Dacha on 'Golden Pond' in Maine where he fishes, reads and hides his warm tenderness behind a wall of witticisms and wisecracks, polished by years as Professor of English at Pennsylvania University; increasingly consumed by ideas of death. She dreams, watches the bugs and the loons, makes cookies, gardens, picks fruit, and jollies him along. After eight years of silence, Chelsea visits with her new beau, dentist Bill Ray (Ross Woodward) and his son Billy (Elliot Relton Williams) – troubled, 14, and just as demanding as Norman in his way – but they hit it off and his presence in the house breathes life and new purpose into Norman. They fish, talk, and learn so much from each other.

But it's the interplay of Norman and Ethel that single this out as a complete hit – their relationship is charming and an object lesson in how to grow old – with the emphasis on the 'grow'.

Debut direction from David Draper draws out the irony and humour – not forgetting the wonderful set which drew applause of its own. Thank you, Talisman - the flavours lingered on the tongue like the finest meal.

Jane Howard

**On Golden Pond** ★★★★★ (Reproduced by kind permission of Elephant Jam ©)

by Ernest Thompson; dir David Draper

Talisman Theatre, Kenilworth

29 August – 3 September 2011

Ethel (Ann Richards) and Norman (John Fenner) are an elderly couple who spend every summer in their holiday home on the banks of the eponymous lake in New England and the five scenes occur neatly, one a month, from their arrival in May to their departure in September. During the summer they are visited by their daughter Chelsea (Michelle Williams) and her new fiancé, Bill (Ross Woodward), along with Bill's 14-year-old son, Billy (Elliot Relton Williams). The old couple are persuaded to look after Billy while Chelsea and Bill go to Europe. They are also visited by Charlie (Geoff Brooke-Taylor), the lake postman and Chelsea's childhood friend and admirer.

Norman and Ethel have nicely contrasting attitudes to their aging. Admittedly he is suffering from failing memory and strength and has a heart complaint, while she is in pretty good health. But he seems angry at himself and fate for his failing health and directs his still-sharp wit to pick on those around him. Yet Ethel, who accepts the ageing as 'better than the alternative', knows how to handle Norman and there is a very clear and deep love between the two. Chelsea, on the other hand, has never felt close to her father because of his biting manner and resents the fact.

Norman finds that Billy can give as good as he gets and isn't intimidated by Norman's manner. A strong bond develops between the two; Norman finding a reinvigoration in it and Billy finding a growing self-esteem. Seeing this bond, one she feels deprived of herself, adds to Chelsea's resentment on her return, but it does spur her into seeking and finding a peace and understanding with her father.

All of this comes across very well, largely due to powerful performances from old hands John Fenner and Ann Richards. John handles a complex part with apparent ease, skilfully balancing the cantankerous with the sensitive and Ann's Ethel clearly intends to get as much out of life as she can. The other performances were all agreeable, particularly Elliot Relton Williams seeming at ease playing young Billy and showing future promise. And Ross Woodward successfully made an intriguing character of Bill with very little stage time.

There were a couple of problems with staging, however. I felt that more physical contact between some of the characters was needed, especially between Ethel and the daughter she has not seen for some time. A bigger problem was that too much was played 'out' to the audience. A good example is the song and dance from Chelsea's childhood, re-enacted by Chelsea and Ethel towards the audience and with their backs to Charlie, the only other person in the room. Given his long association, he would naturally want to feel part of this reminiscence. Overall, though, the strength of the play and the performances allow us to not be too distracted by these drawbacks and the end result is very moving and enjoyable.





