



Barry Heins, left, and Don Fischer in *Nice Fish*  
Photo by Ed Krieger

## Poet and Performer Collaborate to Stunning Effect on *Nice Fish*

DEBORAH KLUGMAN | FEBRUARY 21, 2018 | 6:31AM

"Think of the prose poem as the box, perhaps the lunch box Dad brought home at night," writes down-to-earth poet Louis Jenkins in the program notes to *Nice Fish*, a unique (and to my mind

brilliant) collaborative work by Jenkins and renowned performer Mark Rylance.

Although it has characters, a panoramic setting and multiple themes, *Nice Fish* is not your typical play. Instead, it's a series of prose poems, written by Jenkins, then fashioned by Rylance (and a theatrical ensemble) into an encounter between two middle-aged men out fishing on a frozen Minnesota lake in the dead of winter. Rylance, a longtime fan of Jenkins' poetry (he famously recited one of Jenkins' poems in lieu of an acceptance speech when he won a Tony in 2008), developed *Nice Fish* theatrically (with a creative ensemble) before assuming one of the major roles in the New York premiere in February 2016. Here in Los Angeles, it's staged by Interact Theatre Company under the co-direction of Rob Brownstein and Anita Khanzadian, in a production that's technically stunning and dramatically and comically engaging.

The play is structured as a series of brief scenes that transpire on Evan Bartoletti's impressive set — a glacial landscape fronting an icy blue backdrop with a chilly distant horizon that has you shivering before the story even begins. On a fishing outing are old friends Erik (Don Fischer)

and Ron (Barry Heins). Though he has yet to catch anything, Erik is a serious would-be fisherman, whereas the goofy Ron is pretty much there just keeping him company, and unwittingly sabotages Erik's efforts with beer cans tossed down the fishing hole and loud music that scares away the fish. Though the latter circumstance does cause Erik to raise his voice once, he's mostly forgiving of his clownish pal, who listens attentively to his various speculations just as he attends patiently to Ron's own.

These ruminations may be as prosaic as Erik's search for a missing watch or as comic as spending a heartwarming evening with long-lost Swedish relatives who turn out to be not his relatives at all. Or they may be sad and deep, spurred by a fleeting childhood memory that conjures up the evanescence of life. The less reflective Ron tends to reminisce about women he's known and foods he used to eat as a kid — a bologna sandwich chomped down on in the middle to make a round hole through which one can peer — but he too touches on existential themes with descriptions of well-tended empty places, a metaphor for cherished memories and broken hearts.

Eventually, other characters show up — a fishing and game inspector (Tamika Simpkins) whose demands for proper documentation are side-splittingly Kafkaesque, and crotchety old-timer Wayne (Rick Friesen), accompanied by his granddaughter (Kristen Egermeier), each with their two cents about the universe. (Wayne's admonishment to a piece of fish bait to do what's expected of it is a comic highlight.) There are puppets (by Stevie Anne Nemazee), including a wistful lady puppet of whom Ron becomes enamored, and a brightly lit neon palm tree (props by Eric Babb) that eventually appears on the middle of the lake.

While a few pieces border the overly whimsical, they are outnumbered by the clever or poignant or ironic ones that draw you in. Jenkins' point is that the meaning of life can be uncovered in the commonplace — which turns out not to be so commonplace after all. Bartoletti's *mise-en-scène*, enhanced with Carol Doehring's artful lighting and Martin Carillo's superb sound design (howling wolves and winds!), furnishes the poems with a dazzling framework, invoking nature at its most beautiful and terrifying.

Among the ensemble, Friesen is outstanding as an obstreperous elderly fisherman. Fischer's

flawlessly understated performance is the production's anchor, while as the gawky Ron, Heins furnishes an apt and funny foil



Rick Friesen, left, and Don Fischer in *Nice Fish*  
Photo by Ed Krieger



though his character might be more fully developed.

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