

# The parallel worlds of 'Belgians'

**Key to the Door Weekly**

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*By Fred 'Doc' Heide*

Last Friday night I was chatting with a few of the 600 folks lined up to see “Belgians in Heaven”, back on the AFT stage for a record-breaking 9<sup>th</sup> season. Everybody I talked with had already been to the show.

This is fairly typical for “Belgians”, which has been on stage for half of the years since it premiered in 1984. So I started asking people why they were returning.

Several said they were bringing grandkids, relatives or friends who’d never seen it. Others reported that they loved the humor, the music, or the “heart” in the play. But the most interesting response was from a gentleman who said “Belgians” had among the best stories of any musical he’d ever seen.

“Belgians” is built around two fairly conventional story arcs, one involving a shy guy pursuing a woman and the other about two brothers learning to appreciate each other. Both arcs have obviously been explored extensively in the 2500-year history of theatre. What makes the story unique is that much of the action involves characters who are previous incarnations of themselves.

## **Reality and Reincarnation**

Before we go any further, let me clarify that “Belgians” was not designed to convince anybody that reincarnation is real. Instead, reincarnation was an original way to explore the show’s central point: those who most irritate us are those we are most called to love.

I worried right off the bat about reincarnation as the show’s centerpiece. A recent Pew Forum survey revealed that only 25% of Americans (and 11% of Evangelicals) believe in it. Substantially more of us believe in angels, creationism, or even flying

saucers. But this apparently hasn't stopped the show from earning a loyal, even fanatical audience.

It has, however, made the show a bit confusing. Two members of our artistic staff asked me recently to explain one of its essential plot points: how is it that the Leo we see in the show's first scene is described later as being only a "potential Leo"?

If you've never seen "Belgians", what I'm about to say will be incomprehensible. And if you have seen it, this point will still be baffling. But here goes nuthin'.

The show posits that one of its two central characters (the lazy farmer Leo) has been reincarnated multiple times and that a previous version of him (George) is refusing to return to Earth. But because Leo is already alive on Earth in the show's first scene, this doesn't make sense.

To get around this, the show goes to some length to differentiate time and eternity. Saint Peter explains that on Earth we experience time in a linear fashion, but that Heaven is beyond time. Time, he sings, is like an angel's dream, which is about as clear as he can get without devolving into an impenetrable discourse on quantum physics.

In doing background research for the show, I did indeed read a bunch of quantum physics. And what it says about the structure of reality is at least as preposterous as anything in "Belgians in Heaven".

### **Parallel Possibilities**

For one thing, it entertains the possibility of parallel universes. The Leo on Earth in the first scene is inhabiting the parallel universe in which the version of himself we see in Limbo has decided to return to Earth. Those of you who love this show might enjoy watching it next time with the idea that its first scene is actually taking place after the scene where George (Leo's pre-incarnate version) has decided to reincarnate.

The appeal of “Belgians” has something to do with how it combines Eastern philosophy (reincarnation) and Western philosophy (Christian saints and angels) into a sort of Northeastern Wisconsin philosophy. We help each other, love our beer, and dance ‘til our hinders are sore without ever quite figuring it all out.

It’s telling that the show’s most famous line is “I don’t know.” “Belgians” defies logic while simultaneously celebrating qualities that transcend it: love, brotherhood, ultimate meaning. You don’t have to figure it out to enjoy it. And that’s part of what makes it so enjoyable.

By the way, our fabulous annual “Creative Kids Day” is July 20. Contact the AFT Office for info.

See you under the stars.

AFT presents “Victory Farm” Monday and Thursdays at 8 PM, Wednesdays at 8:30 PM, and Saturday at 6 PM. “Belgians in Heaven” takes the stage Wednesdays at 6 PM and Fridays at 8 PM. “Cheeseheads: The Musical” performs Tuesdays at 8 PM and Saturdays at 8:30 PM. For information, call 920-854-6117 or visit [www.folkloretheatre.com](http://www.folkloretheatre.com).



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