

# Taking in an unusual, thrilling experience

**Key to the Door Weekly**

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*By Fred 'Doc' Heide*

There's a long tradition of playwrights appearing in their own plays. Shakespeare, Moliere, and Noel Coward all spring to mind. This practice goes back to Thespis, the first actor in the Western world and the reason we call actors "thespians".

According to Wikipedia, Thespis also invented theatrical touring, which means he was probably the first actor to complain he couldn't find anyplace open after a show to get a gyro sandwich.

Since AFT's beginnings, playwrights here have also performed in their own shows. Fred Alley wrote pivotal roles for himself in virtually all his musicals, including "Lumberjacks in Love" and "Guys on Ice". And Lee Becker and I have been fortunate to be in all the plays we've co-created.

As terrific as it is to bring to life a role you designed for yourself, there's one downside: you never get to see the show. This is like being permanently strapped in the front seat of your car and trying to figure out if it needs a new paint job.

## **Marcus Magic**

All this changed recently when for the first time ever I got to see a professional production of a show I'd co-authored. "Packer Fans from Outer Space", penned by Lee Becker, Jimmy Kaplan and me, is running at the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts in Milwaukee through July 15. It has an all-star cast of Milwaukee actors in a crack production.

I can't begin to tell you how thrilling this was. Ya, sure, I have a tendency toward grandiloquence. But there are moments in life when we peek through the gauzy curtain of normality that surrounds us and glimpse a brighter, cheerier world.

Weddings, births, and graduations are like this. So was watching this show.

The entire experience rocked. First, my wife Jody and I drove three hours to Milwaukee from the Door, savoring the anticipation as the green fields rolled by in the early summer heat. Then we approached the theatre, a modernist cathedral of glass and concrete on the Milwaukee River. Sitting in the rich red air-conditioned seats, I felt like a Northwoods rube. I had to make sure I didn't have food in my teeth.

Then the show began. We haven't done this piece at AFT since 2003, so I barely remembered the lines and just let the thing wash over me like a breaking wave from Lake Michigan.

### **Stellar Cast**

The cast was extraordinary. Bill Thiesen, artistic director of the Skylight Music Theatre, played the lead role of Harvey Kiestler as if born to it. Rhonda Rae Busch (whose daughter Emily is an AFT intern this summer) performed the role of his Bear-loving wife Marge with nuance and sweetness. Famed Milwaukee actor Norman Moses did Coach as if My Favorite Martian had morphed into Vince Lombardi. Both Packer aliens (Paul Helm and Josh Krause) were hilarious misunderstanding the ways of Earthlings (e.g., when Marge asks if they'd care for a snack, they respond, "We would not know how to care for a snack").

And then there was Beth Mulkerron nailing the role of Peggy Kiestler, the daughter dreaming in 1953 that visitors from another world can help bring peace to ours. I know this show's title makes it sound kooky as a frat house skit, and laughs abound. But as Mike Fischer noted in his rave review in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, the show centers on something much deeper. Peggy's journey from idealism to disillusionment to intergalactic proponent of love becomes its true spine in this shimmering production. When she sang the show's two ballads, I was in tears.

To write for the theatre is quixotic. Plays take years to come to fruition, criticism abounds, and most playwrights never see their work on stage. It took seven hard

years to write “Packer Fans”. But sitting in that dark theatre and watching it---even if only for a fleeting two hours---I’d do it again in a heartbeat.

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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