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Beat goes on

Theatre on the Ridge gets to the heart of loss and familial love

By [Carey Wilson](#)

Facing and dealing with the loss of a loved one, especially the death of one's offspring or sibling, is a very private and personal process. Which of course makes it a fascinating subject for dramatic writing. Likewise, living through a catastrophic medical crisis is an event that can be truly appreciated and evaluated only by the survivor of a near-death experience, but such survivals and survivors make great fodder for fictional depiction.

Playwright Sean Grennan's *The Tin Woman*—which opened last weekend at Theatre on the Ridge—combines both of those dramatic premises and introduces a quandary that only the technological marvels of modern medicine could make possible: What if the heart of your recently deceased loved one walked through your door encased in the living body of a stranger to whom he had donated that most vital of organs?

The tin woman in the play is Joy (Susan Vesely), a youngish graphic designer who, despite a wisecracking exterior, isn't exactly ecstatic about her new lease on life as enabled by the heart of organ donor Jack (Brandon Larson). His invisible-to-her spirit/ghost is a constant presence in her life as he silently—aside from addressing the audience—shadows her through every scene of the play.

On the receiving end of Joy's continuing life is Jack's nervously cordial family, whom Joy contacts on the advice of her kooky but cool preschool-teaching friend Darla (Nicole Collado, in fine comedic form).



Does Jack (left), Hank's dead son, live on?
PHOTO BY JAY CHANG

Review:

The Tin Woman shows Thursday-Saturday, 7:30 p.m. & Sunday, 2 p.m., through Feb. 21.

Tickets: \$12-\$22 (Thrifty Thursdays, \$10).

Theatre on the Ridge
3735 Neal Road, Paradise
877-5760

www.totr.org

Jack's father, Hank (Jeff Dickenson), is a man at the end of his emotional rope, full of regrets for his less-than-ideal relationship with his son, but also still capable of throwing out an occasional one-liner of dark humor that lets us know he hasn't entirely fallen into depression. It's the kind of role that Peter Boyle could have brought to dourly comic life, and Dickenson brings out both the pathos and the submerged strength and humor of the devastated, but not completely defeated, father.

But the real heart of the play, and this cast, is Jack's mother, Alice (Teresa Hurley-Miller), a truly monumental tribute to the maternal spirit, whose gentle strength and generous humor sustain her family through the deepest of tribulations even as she deals with her own grief. Alice accepts Joy's visit with gracious good humor. But her graciousness is backed by the sadness of a still-grieving mother whose partner's deepening withdrawal into depression and daughter's nearly manic attempts at processing her mourning via a blog have her too busy comforting the living members of her family to dwell on her own loss.

In awkward attempts to brighten the conversation with positive memories about her brother, Jack's sister Sammy (Hannah Lockhart) provides some tragicomic relief in her conversation with Joy, who is a bit overwhelmed by the social challenges of bringing a dead relative's still-living heart for a family visit.

Director Jerry Miller's ingenious stage design allows the action of the play to move from Joy's apartment to the home of Alice and Hank to the graveyard where Jack is buried with minimal shifting props. And Ryan Vesely's sound design, which accompanies the play's narrative with ambient, mood-reinforcing guitar music, is subtle, well-crafted and nonintrusive. Within this simple setting, the play builds to a closing scene that evokes genuine sentiment and empathy by finding its own heart and offering it to its audience. It's hard to refuse.

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