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Larry Shue's *The Nerd* brings bushels of gay subtext to the Bucks County Playhouse

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Ralph Malachowski

Be careful what you wish for; be very very careful. This might be the lesson behind the modern day fable, **The Nerd**, now at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, PA, until July 15.

Set in November 1979 in Terre Haute, Indiana, we meet a man whose few friends are throwing him a birthday party. All goes well until a phone call, and thereupon hangs the plot of this farce. A stranger saved the birthday boy's life while they both served in Vietnam. This singular act of heroism earned them both Purple Hearts. Willum has promised joyously that anything this hero named Rick Steadman might ever need or want, Willum would be happy to give him, and thereby hangs the major plot of **The Nerd**: Rick comes to visit and wants to stay.

Willum has a love interest named Tansy, who has patiently waited for Willum to commit. Both Tansy and Willum have a friend, Axel, who is a theatre critic with gay written all over him. He's catty; he's bitchy; he loves to play word games; and he has a new actor friend – don't ask! Written by the late Larry Shue in the early 1980s, we need to read the code. Axel is never outed, but there are clues aplenty from his character, and these give much amusement and some of the best punch lines in the play.

The chief reason **The Nerd** is produced is to give the Rick Steadman character ("The Nerd") a chance to shine. Many might think that instead of **The Nerd**, the play should be renamed **The Ass**, since Rick Steadman's behavior is so outrageous and egregiously bad. In London, during its long run in the 1980s, Rowan Atkinson had great success in the role. Here we have Joe Kinosian in the role. Kinosian has claimed that playing the Nerd has been a life-long dream. Ever since he saw the play in Milwaukee when he was 13, he's wanted to play him. Kinosian draws all attention to himself while onstage much as SpongeBob SquarePants absorbs seawater. Kinosian gives a cringe-worthy performance as he capers about as the Nerd. This Nerd seems to be way gay, too. Spoiler alert: there is a terrifically gay denouement to the comedy.

Gavin Lee plays Axel Hammond as the quintessential bitter queen/best friend, while Clea Alsip plays the bombshell girlfriend, Tansy, who has run out of patience with Willum. As Willum, Kyle

Cameron underplays his role to appear to be a rather sensible, self-absorbed nerd himself.

The supporting roles are cast from strength, featuring talent often seen on television and the stage. All gave strong performances. Grant Schaud is Warnock Waldgrave, Zuzanna Szadkowski is his wife, Clelia, and Avey Noble, their awful brat, Thor.

The audience giggled or guffawed at many of the obvious jokes. If you need a bit of cheer (and everyone does) grasp this opportunity to see **The Nerd**. For further information about **The Nerd**, and the forthcoming Guys and Dolls next month, visit www.BucksCountyPlayhouse.org or call 215-862-2121.