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Neil Simon's 'Laughter' lives up to its name

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In the early 1950s, long before "Saturday Night Live," there was "Your Show of Shows," a popular sketch-comedy show featuring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca.

And before there were behind-the-scenes SNL spin-offs like "30 Rock" or "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip," there was "Laughter on the 23rd Floor," Neil Simon's play about his timid start as a comedy writer, working alongside such legends as Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner and, later, Woody Allen.

As one would expect, "Laughter," which Theater...For A Change presents through Dec. 17 at Grand View College's Viking Theatre, is a constant, rapid-fire contest of one-liners, with each new character trying to one-up the last. It's surprising, really, that all of the jumbo-sized egos fit in the same cramped office.

But that's where the current production excels. For most of the two-hour show, eight of the nine cast members are on stage at the same time, clustered around — or standing on — a table cluttered with legal pads and half-eaten bagels.

With skilled direction by Michael Cornelison, however, the actors manage to stay out of one another's way just long enough for each to have a moment in the spotlight. So what could have easily been a two-hour shouting match — "Hey, look at me! I'm funny!" — instead becomes a genuinely entertaining study of human behavior in pressure-cooker conditions.

There's Val (Michael DeNato), a constant moaner with a gravelly Russian accent. There's Ira (Joseph E. Smith), the hypochondriac who barely catches his breath before launching into another rant. There's Carol (Amy E. Williams), the lone woman writer who can't believe her colleagues act like such little boys.

And in the thick of it all, there's Lucas (Ben Eichner), the shy, young newbie who Simon based on himself.

Dan Chase particularly shines as the pill-popping, narcoleptic Max, a man teetering on the brink of a nervous break-down. Pressure from NBC execs to cut the show's budget and dumb it down for a wider audience drive him nearly bonkers, and every time anybody so much as mentions the name of Sen. Joe McCarthy, he punches a new jagged hole in the wall.

The show benefits from the slightly cartoonish set design by Sean Kearney and the intimate, wrap-around stage of the theater itself. It's almost as if the audience peers into a giant fish tank, filled with frantic humans in beige suits and very loud ties.

Besides all that, the script itself is funny. Although some of Simon's earlier plays are better known — "Barefoot in the Park," "The Odd Couple," "Biloxi Blues" — "Laughter" clearly comes from the same clever mind.

And in the able hands of Theater...For A Change, everybody's in on the jokes.

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DETAILS

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday through Dec. 17.

Where: Viking Theatre, Grand View College Student Center, 2811 E. 14th St., Des Moines.

Tickets: \$10, available at (888) 288-9512 or www.iowatix.com.

Info: www.theaterforachange.com

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