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Humor, irony from 'Sunshine Boys' light the stage

MICHAEL MORAIN
REGISTER THEATER CRITIC

The title characters in "The Sunshine Boys" aren't sunny, and they're at least 60 years past boyhood.

But thanks to playwright Neil Simon's gift for irony, and two excellent actors, Theater ... For a Change's current production through May 11 at the Viking Theatre at Grand View College seems like a funny stage version of "Grumpy Old Men."

For starters, Steve Mathews' character, Willie Clark, spends three of the play's four scenes doddering around his apartment in pajamas, grouching about the ancient TV set, the latch on the front door and a litany of other annoyances that are slowly slipping out of his control.

When Mike Pace enters as Willie's old vaudeville partner, Al Lewis, he looks like George Burns - maybe a little taller, but just as old.

In their decrepitude, both characters would prefer to never see each other again. They parted on bad terms after a gig on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and haven't seen each other in years. But when Willie's nephew and agent, Ben, coaxes them back together for a televised reunion, both codgers try to swallow their pride and get along.

The plan doesn't work, of course, but the performance does. Mathews and Pace trade jabs with all the charm of Larry David. They're ornery, they're stubborn and they know how to work each other up. The actors seem comfortable in their roles and with each other - no surprise, considering their stage experience and mutual friendship.

The pair founded the production company Radio Garage in 1990 and both have performed throughout the metro area for decades. Most people know Pace from his 22-year stint as the host of TV's twice-weekly Powerball broadcasts.

As the Sunshine Boys, the actors pump the most laughs out of their old vaudeville shtick, "The Doctor Will See You Now," where one plays a doctor, the other a tax collector, and both try to interrogate the other about health and finances, respectively.

Unlike some classic straight-man-and-goofball duos, such as Abbott and Costello or Bert and Ernie, Mathews and Pace's characters both compete for the last laugh.

The dynamic is funny when the dialogue is fast and endearing when it slows, particularly when the two start to make amends. Despite its quick wit, the script explores the blunt reality of old age - and a glimpse of whatever follows - and both actors give the more serious moments their due.

There are times, however, when the two-hour show's pace could move more quickly, and the first act is about 15 minutes too long.

Because Simon overloaded the script with a few too many repetitions of the same joke, director Mike Cornelison (Jerry in StageWest's "Jerry Springer: The Opera") should help the cast

choose which gags to emphasize and which to glide through.

John Robinson ("Cats" and "The Full Monty" at the Des Moines Playhouse, and "Caucus! The Musical") makes an excellent Ben, the worry-wart nephew who fusses over Willie and holds together much of the first act.

Roni Dixon plays Willie's feisty, bonbon-popping nurse and Brendan Michael Dunphy (StageWest's "The Lieutenant of Inishmore") is a harried TV stagehand.

Tammy Brice plays a foxy assistant in the vaudeville routine, but a voice-over covered her lines during Wednesday's preview because she was in Wisconsin.

Reporter Michael Morain can be reached at (515) 286-2559 or mmorain@dmreg.com
