



## Rich rays of talent flood ‘Sunshine’ stage

By John Busbee, Host of The Culture Buzz, Wednesdays 11A-1P on KFMG-LP 99.1 FM

*Des Moines, Iowa* Theatre...for a change wraps up its fourth season with an unexpected delight for Central Iowa personality patrons. Having to replace the originally scheduled one-woman show due to a late conflict, director Michael Cornelison shifted faster than a top banana's quips in a well-oiled vaudeville routine to tap his personal pals to portray a positively perfect partnership. Ri-i-i-ight! Well-known community celebs Mike Pace, Steven Mathews and Cornelison parlay their long-term friendship into the Neil Simon classic, "The Sunshine Boys."

Simon must surely have envisioned such a duo portraying his leading men, as Pace and Mathews seem wonderfully type-cast as the archetypal, never-give-an-inch, bosom-buddies-for-life (not) Vaudeville duo. Simon's story is about septuagenarians Al Lewis (fastidiously played with deliberate delight by Pace) and Willy Clark (masterfully embellished by the facile and shtick-driven Mathews) who haven't spoken to each other since Lewis walked out on the act more than a decade earlier. Simon's delicious script is filled with witty repartee and some cutting banter that gives each character rich depth. Mathews and Pace make the most of their opportunities. Mathews' opening sequence is priceless physical comedy, harkening to the heyday of Red Skelton and Jackie Gleason. His over-the-top persona is nicely balanced by Pace's understated, melancholic role. They are coaxed into reuniting for one final performance by Clark's nephew-agent, Ben Silverman (played with yeoman-like dedication by John Robinson), as CBS wants to feature them for a history of comedy special as the best of the vaudeville era. During one of the shows best known scenes (Willie Clark's explanation about why "K" words are funny), Robinson's timing is pure fun as he anticipates his uncle's commentary, giving the response just before his uncles does. The eventual rehearsal between these two uncovers old wounds, escalating into a freshly fanned fire of unforgivability.

The natural exchanges Mathews and Pace have reflect their longtime friendship, creating believable dialogue, from the argumentative to the final moments when a glowing recognition of their true friendship shines through. Pace, however, succumbs to Matthew's onstage shenanigans, and is the only person whose underlying boyish charm could pull off his occasional breaking of character, reminiscent of Harvey Korman cracking up to Tim Conway's shtick in Carol Burnett Show sketches.

The show reaches its zenith during the final rehearsal for CBS. The CBS stage manager (an appropriately intolerant Brendan Michael Dunphy) valiantly tries to keep the rehearsal on schedule. Cornelison makes a cameo appearance as the doctor's first victi...er, um, patient. After a hasty exit following a less-than-desired examination, the doctor calls in the requisite buxom sketch nurse (a bodacious and vacuous Tammy Brice) to confirm the next appointment, a lecherously drawn-out procedure. As the sketch doctor, Mathews is a laugh-out-loud cross between Alan Alda and Grouch Marx. The sketch eventually deteriorates into Clark's primary bones of contention – spitting his lines and "the finger" – Lewis walks out, and Clark collapses. As the action shifts back to Clark's apartment, the registered nurse (a spitfire, no-nonsense Roni Dixon with enough sass to keep Clark in his place) shows no sympathy for the yet unrepentant and recovering performer. Dixon holds her own with Mathews, with plenty of fine one-on-one interchanges in their scene.

Scenic & Lighting Designer Sean Kearney wraps this show in a delectably dilapidated set, especially the upstage walls filled with bygone photographs and telegrams. I heartily encourage patrons to savor this rare opportunity to experience two great friends and community personalities sashay through this Simon classic. Also, take time following the show to stroll onto the set and examine the wall decorations more closely. Grand View College was the recipient of long-time Des Moines Register food critic Josef Mossman's collection of memorabilia. And, although that alone is worth the price of admission, the play's the thing. Bathe in the light of "Sunshine Boys" through May 11 at Grand View College's Viking Theatre.