

## 'Sunshine Boys' lives up to its name in Public Theatre show

David A. Sargent Special to the Sun Journal  
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LEWISTON -- "The Sunshine Boys," Neil Simon's laugh-filled comedy about two crotchety veterans of vaudeville, delivers some heartfelt insight about hard-tested friendship in its current run at The Public Theatre.

A talented trio of central characters give excellent performances in this play that has entertained audiences for more than 40 years. It has reached a large audience thanks to a hit movie starring Walter Matthau and George Burns.

Bill Van Horn portrays proud and high-strung Willie Clark and Michael G. Dell'Orto plays Al Lewis, whose sudden retirement from the successful team of "Lewis and Clark" led to decades of rancor between the aging vaudevillians.

Now, in 1972, a major television special about the greats of comedy is planned, and the network wants to reunite the team for one more presentation of their famous "Doctor Sketch."

Willie's nephew, Ben, who is also Willie's agent, is dead-set on accomplishing the reconciliation, even though Willie's reaction is a loud and unequivocal refusal. Al has agreed, but emphasizes that he is "against it."

Michael Anthony is excellent as Ben, the long-suffering, yet respectful nephew. Every Wednesday he brings Willie the current copy of "Variety," along with a few groceries. Willie spends his days in a shabby apartment watching TV in his pajamas and insisting that Ben should be getting him some acting jobs although his declining memory has made him unemployable in show business.

With the increasing possibility of a reconciliation, Ben arranges for Al and Willie to meet for a rehearsal, and it appears that the unlikely reunion will occur. It doesn't go smoothly, and Willie's weakened heart rebels. The final scenes confirm that strong bonds of friendship can overcome the rockiest test. The show is neatly wrapped up with a happy conclusion that hints at a continuation of the chronic squabbling.

There are only two brief female roles in "The Sunshine Boys." They are very different, but they serve to draw a contrast between vaudeville's view of women and real life.

Victoria Machado plays the buxom nurse in the sketch that "Lewis and Clark" are recreating for television. Teri Shepard appears near the end of the play when Willie is recuperating from his coronary troubles in his apartment. Shepard is a no-nonsense nurse who doesn't fall for Willie's constant barrage of vaudeville-style quips in place of conversation.

"The Sunshine Boys" reflects some of Neil Simon's early career when he was a writer for legendary TV comedies and stars including Sid Caesar, Phil Silvers, Jackie Gleason and Jerry Lewis.

The first act of "The Sunshine Boys" gives Bill Van Horn lots of opportunity to develop Willie's cantankerous personality and his hilarious attempts to justify the team's split. He blames Al's onstage habit of poking a finger into Willie's chest and spitting in his face when the dialogue is heavy on Ts.

Another hilarious scene involves Willie and Al telling the TV personnel what they will need for props. It's fun to see them make use of the props as their video version of the old routine comes to life.

Dell'Orto brings out another side of the quarreling comedians. He's more low key, but equally proud of their accomplishments in vaudeville, and just as insistent as Willie on the details of their long-ago act.

A fine performance by Michael Anthony as Ben emphasizes his recognition of the mutual compassion in the feuding comics. Despite the unreasonable attitudes of Willie and Al, he perseveres in getting the old men together. There's lots of good comedy in his caught-in-the-middle situation.

Director Janet Mitchko, who is also The Public Theatre's co-artistic director, has done an outstanding job of presenting this popular Neil Simon play. She noted that the younger actors in the show had no first-hand exposure to vaudeville. This presented a chance for them, like many in the audiences, to see what it was all about. Other actors with supporting roles were Matthew Delamater, Adam P. Blais and Benjamin Cuba.



Bill Van Horn, left, as Willie Clark, and Michael Dell'Orto as Al Lewis, give excellent performances in Public Theatre's production of "The Sunshine Boys," currently in production through May 10.

Remaining performances of "The Sunshine Boys" are at 7:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday, May 7 and 8; at 8 p.m. Saturday, May 9, and at 2 p.m. Sunday, May 10. There is an additional matinee at 3 p.m. Saturday, May 9.

Tickets are \$20 for adults, \$16 each for groups of 10 or more, and \$5 for anyone 18 and under. Call 782-3200 or visit [www.thepublictheatre.org](http://www.thepublictheatre.org) for more information.

The Public Theatre is located at 31 Maple St in downtown Lewiston.