

Entertainment

Keely Wygonik editor/953-2105



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Actors, director shine in 'Sunshine Boys'

Performances of the Birmingham Theatre production of "The Sunshine Boys" continue through March 15. For ticket information call the box office at 644-3533. The Birmingham Theatre is at 211 S. Woodward in Birmingham.



Mary Jane Doerr

Veering away from a fare of lightweight repertoire, the Birmingham Theatre has mounted a funny comedy with genuine depth and tender meaning.

Witty lines carry the show. This production of Neil Simon's hit "The Sunshine Boys" has the right combination of strong acting, well-timed humor, and non-egotistic stage direction by George Ronco that lets the audience enjoy the play.

THIS 20-YEAR-OLD play, written long before Simon had captured any Tonys or other awards, is not about vaudeville or show business in New York City, although the story features a lighthearted comedy team, Lewis and Clark, a name we suspect has been stolen from the explorers.

This is a kindly look at Americans growing older in a society that tries to reverse them but the approaching senility makes benign their usefulness.

Heartbreaking? No. Allen Swift is funny as Willie Clark, a cantankerous old actor who delights in bugging people, being difficult to his own demise. Unhappy, he lives the broken dreams of his past, unwilling to give up the decadence into which those dreams have faded. On stage

the entire 2½ hours, Swift makes us like his Clark with all of his disagreeableness.

LIKE THE final scene in Dicken's "Great Expectations", Clark's nephew Ben Silverman, Ken Land, tries to break into Clark's faltering world.

Every Wednesday he arrives with a copy of "Variety" and low sodium soups at the dirty one room "suite" where his uncle has lived for decades. A detailed set design by James Morgan captures the unrenovated look of New York's old hotels.

This week, Ben has a golden opportunity for his Uncle Willie to appear on a Flip Wilson TV special if only he will agree to do "The Doctor will see you now" sketch with his partner of 43 years.

Ken Land's performance never descends to that of a saccharin pushover. Land is a Ben who realizes his uncle's condition and tries to help him. A talent agent himself, he really admires his crusty old Uncle Willie, who made six appearances on the Ed Sullivan show.

Through Clark's embittered opinion we gain a colored view of a seemingly unaring partner Al Lewis, Michael Marcus. As the story unfolds, his kindness is more apparent

than Clark will admit.

With Marcus portrays a sympathetic Lewis, suffering from a number of illnesses but readily admitting to his loneliness. He is willing to accept the CBS offer and a chance to regain the lost friendship of his partner. Costumer Patricia Adhead dresses him in a gentlemanly suit and top coat, Clark in old pajamas.

ON THE TV set, the pair do part of the vaudeville routine that made them famous, but Al Lewis squeezes his "It's" spitting in Willie's face and the old animosities surface.

Unlike the way the "The Gin Game" deals with old age friendships, this is a more hopeful look at the golden years. As the final curtain comes down, Lewis and Clark are reminiscing about the past and their future days at the old actor's home, where life won't be peaceful with these two living there.

Mary Jane Doerr of Troy is a full-time teacher and freelance writer who specializes in opera and musical theater.



Michael Marcus (left) and Allen Swift star in the Neil Simon comedy "The Sunshine Boys" at the Birmingham Theatre through March 15.

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