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Where the sun don't shine

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By Bill Varble
for the Mail Tribune

Willie Clark and Al Lewis were one of Vaudeville's top comedy acts for 43 years and can't stand each other. They haven't spoken in 12 years, 11 since the act broke up plus the last year they worked together.

Now CBS wants the boys to perform one of their classic routines for a special comedy retrospective, but that would require that they speak to each other. It sounds like a set-up for a sitcom, and that's pretty much what Neil Simon's "The Sunshine Boys," now in revival at Camelot Theatre in Talent, plays like.

Stubborn, curmudgeonly Willie (Bruce Lorange) lives in a seedy flat on upper Broadway on a low income and still expects his agent, Ben Silverman (Brandon Manley) to find him work, although he can no longer remember lines or even the names of commercial sponsors.

The program says it's 1983, although the play opened on Broadway in 1972 (the film version with Walter Matthau and George Burns came out in 1975). This stretches the timing of the backstory a bit, since the boys worked together 43 years, up to 12 years ago, and Vaudeville pretty much died out by the early 1930s.

Silverman, who is also Willie's nephew (who else would take him on?), shows up with the CBS offer, which will pay the boys \$10,000, but the "tortures" Willie suffered in his years with Al (Paul R. Jones) — a hard finger poking him in the chest to make Al's points, showers of spit every time he had a line with words that began with the letter T — are fresh in his mind, and he's not about to forgive and forget.

So why did he work with him in an act ironically known as The Sunshine Boys all those years?

"As a comedian, no one could touch him," Willie says, setting up the line you can almost hear before it comes: "As a human being, no one would want to touch him."

But Willie needs the money, and he's reluctantly persuaded. The slower-moving Al, who has done better than Willie financially, is open to the reunion at first but quickly finds Willie's non-stop insults pushing him to the limit.

The timing felt slow early in the first act — faster is usually funnier — but picked up as old pros Jones and Lorange found their chemistry. In one scene they decide to have tea before running through the routine — it's about a man's visit to a doctor's office — for the first time in years in Willie's apartment.

There's a lot of passive-aggressive huffing and puffing and maneuvering and manipulating around the preparation of the tea, and then a long, very funny sequence in which no lines are spoken but each man is subjected to the other's assortment of sips, slurps and other annoying noises.

So it goes. Every tic of daily life is for these guys an exercise in one-upsmanship, since neither will give the other the satisfaction of declaring his hatred. When Willie is bedridden from a heart attack, and Al is coming to visit, Willie sets up his chair on the far side of the room to make Al walk as far as possible, then sits on pillows to make himself bigger and taller than Al. The endless skirmishing is so entertaining that the doctor skit is maybe the least funny thing we see Al and Willie do.

Simon in his early plays was often accused of creating cardboard characters and placing them in sitcom-like situations. It's true that there's more focus here on the bits and the jokes than on character development. But in part, that's Vaudeville. Sometimes when the boys get going on each other, and the punch line comes, you almost expect to hear a rim shot from a drummer in the orchestra, ba-da-bing, ba-da-boom.

But Simon's script and the chops of Jones and Lorange flash us with little bits of character, and these over time add some depth and even a certain odd, pained warmth. The world these men loved had its glories and now it's gone. The cranky, almost manic Willie fails to come to grips with that fact even as he is sliding deeper into old age. Al is in better shape than Willie — at least until the two are thrown together again. In the end, life is too short and the reasons people stick together are sometimes obscure.

Camelot has been on a run for some time, and the new stage, here beautifully done up as a down-at-the-heels hotel by Don Zastoupil, has clearly lifted productions to another level. "The Sunshine Boys" plays through Sept. 11.

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