

## Soak up Richmond Hill's 'Sunshine Boys'

QC Times - Feb. 23, 2006 – by Ruby Nancy

Full of wry humor and the kind of zinging one-liners that Neil Simon is well-known for, "The Sunshine Boys" is classic Simon — yet it is not one of the Simon plays that gets trotted out every year or two.

Consequently, most local audiences will get the chance to see a show that has a fresh edge to it (kudos go to director Tom Morrow for championing the script), and the actors get to sink their teeth into roles they probably haven't seen at least a half-dozen other performers already play on a local stage. And several performers do just that in the current production of "The Sunshine Boys," which is playing now at the Richmond Hill Barn Theater.

An entertaining glimpse into the lives of vaudeville performers well past their genre's prime, this show centers on Willie Clark (Ray Rodgers), an aging vaudeville star — from the comedy duo Lewis and Clark — whose talents have never translated well into the medium of television. More than a decade after his last performance with Al Lewis (John VanDeWoestyne), Clark is reluctantly booked to reunite with Lewis for a 1972 television special on the history of comedy, and the longstanding enmity between the two performers proves to be alive and well.

Though Rodgers' adoption of Clark's heavily regional inflection is somewhat shaky in the first couple of scenes (at least during last Sunday's show), he finds his rhythm and plays Clark — an irascible codger with both energy and bitterness to spare — very well. Facing some memory loss and other health issues, this character still finds great sport in baiting others, and Rodgers hits many perfect notes in these quite funny scenes. I especially enjoyed his work in the sketch comedy piece, where his over-the-top performance as a medical quack is simply great entertainment.

His interaction with Eugenia Giebel, who plays a smartly turned-out registered nurse assigned to work with Clark, is particularly entertaining. Giebel is sassy and full of vinegar here, breathing comedic life into this small, perfectly done role, and her assured handling of the repartee with Rodgers' Clark leaves you hoping to see her become more comic characters in future shows.

Stan Weimer also does a nice cameo as a put-upon television director faced with the task of getting Lewis and Clark ready for live television, and Jean Melillo is cute as Edie, the young production assistant whose attempts to aid in this monumental task are also fruitless. Pete Meyer also does nice work in a walk-on role as an actor cast in a vaudeville sketch, and Molly McLaughlin (though strangely smeared with thick, jarringly-out-of-place makeup) also seems to be having fun as another sketch actor who teeters on the verge of cracking up at the "on-stage" antics of Lewis and Clark.

VanDeWoestyne is superb as Lewis, whose reserve and nattily clad look are completely at odds with his vaudeville persona. As the actor-turned-stockbroker who carries the weight of tangible regret, VanDeWoestyne is wonderfully subdued. His Lewis, though, when given the opportunity to step back into a vaudeville sketch, is a totally hyperactive, constantly mugging ham whose lines fly fast and furious. Clearly, this actor understands the rich comic tradition of what was once the most popular form of entertainment in America, and his acting — playing an actor who plays another role — is deft, delightfully-layered entertainment that is simply too good to miss.

As Ben Silverman, Clark's harried nephew, Archie Williams turns in a stiff, somewhat awkward performance that lacks sorely-needed inspiration. Written large enough to be a central character, yet lacking in sufficient depth or interest, Silverman is something of a dud — and Williams (perhaps) lacks the experience to wring anything beyond a functional presence out of the role.

Overall, though, "The Sunshine Boys" is an enjoyable theater piece already playing to some sold-out houses, so if you want the chance to see this Simon show, make your reservations now.

## **Grumpy `Boys' are amusing**

**Disptach-Argus – Feb 23, 2006 - by Julie Jensen**

Senility and rancor are not the usual ingredients of humor, but the Richmond Hill Players' production of "The Sunshine Boys" gets a lot of laughs from the mix.

Directed by Tom Morrow, the Neil Simon comedy is about the attempted resurrection of the comic duo of Lewis and Clark, known as the Sunshine Boys, for a CBS special and the problems they have getting their act together after being apart for 11 years.

Much of the action takes place in the New York hotel room of Willie Clark (played with great energy by Ray Rogers). Willie mistakes the sound of a whistling teakettle for the phone and has trouble opening his door. He's forgetful, confused and opinionated.

His nephew, Ben Silverman (played with feeling by Archie Williams), is arranging a rehearsal for Lewis and Clark. He visits Willie every Wednesday and brings him Variety magazine, some groceries and cigars, even though he knows they are bad for him.

Al Lewis, Willie's former partner, is played by John VanDeWoestyne, and he annoys Willie by spitting in his face while pronouncing words that begin with "T" and poking him in the chest.

Willie refuses to get back together with Al, but Ben ignores his protests and arranges a rehearsal at Willie's apartment.

In their heyday, Lewis and Clark performed as if they were one person. Each knew what the other was thinking. However, when Al arrives for the rehearsal, there's hostility between them.

Al gives Ben a list of props for the acts, including an "ah stick." What's that? The stick a doctor uses to inspect one's throat. They move the furniture around to set the stage for their act, each canceling the effort of the other, until one of them says, "That's not for the doctor's skit; it's the gypsy chiropractor skit." They really can't get their act together.

The doctor skit is played out in the CBS studios, where we see Pete Meyer as the patient; Stan Weimer as director Phil Shaefer; Jean Melillo as Edie, who is getting the Sunshine Boys organized for their skit; and Molly McLaughlin, who plays the nurse with the "big chest and nice bottom."

Willie plays the doctor, and he tells the patient, "You are going to have trouble with your stomach. You just swallowed my stick."

The sexy nurse leans over to check a patient record, and Willie looks up her short skirt lasciviously.

Al, dressed in a shrieking plaid suit, comes in as a tax collector. Willie's diagnosis of him is, "You know what you've got? A filthy undershirt."

In the end, both of them are headed for a home for former actors in New Jersey, where they can trade one-liners for the rest of their lives.

## **Gag Reflex**

**River Cities Reader – Feb 22, 2006 - by Mike Schulz**

Let me preface my review of the Richmond Hill Players' *The Sunshine Boys* by saying that if the material itself makes you laugh, you may well be a fan of this production, and at Thursday's opening-night performance, there were quite a few laughers among us.

I, however, wasn't one of them.

Before sitting down to view Neil Simon's relentless comedy – and I don't mean that as a compliment – involving two aging vaudevillians who reunite for a TV special, I was informed that, if I wanted the best view of the on-stage action, I should secure a seat on the left-hand side of the theatre; all of Richmond Hill's shows are performed in the round – more of a rectangle, actually –

and the seats upstairs and to the left were, apparently, the best ones for this particular production. ("Otherwise," I was told, "you'll see a lot of backs.")

I followed the instruction, and the seat I chose was, indeed, a good one, allowing me to enjoy both the cleverness of director Tom Morrow's staging and the often amusing facial expressions of leading performers Ray Rogers and John VanDeWoestyne; I saw very few backs. And I was especially grateful to have interesting things to look at because, with Neil Simon's comic sledgehammer whacking us on the head every few beats, anything that took my mind off the dialogue for a few seconds felt like a blessing. The *Sunshine Boys* is a vaudeville routine that runs two-and-a-quarter hours, and watching it, you understand why vaudeville routines are meant to run some two hours shorter than that.

Let me be clear that the fault with this *Sunshine Boys* has nothing to do with Richmond Hill's presentation of it; if anything, Morrow and several of the actors make the script play better than it deserves to. But for those of us who find the incessant banter – the hostility posing as wit – of Simon's early work more exhausting than amusing, the show is a tedious slog: set-up, punchline, set-up, punchline ... and so it goes for *The Sunshine Boys*' entire length.

This wouldn't necessarily be bad if Simon's jokes were funny, but instead, they're maddeningly obvious, and the clunky vaudeville patter that Simon has created for Willie Clark (Rogers) and Al Lewis (VanDeWoestyne) – the material that was supposed to make the characters' stage act the stuff of legend – is indistinguishable from the rest of the clunky patter in *The Sunshine Boys*. By the end of the show, my head was throbbing from the sounds of Simon. You know that feeling you get when someone begins telling you a joke, and you smile, but the joke goes on and on, and you continue smiling, and still it goes on, and you're too polite to stop smiling even though you aren't the least bit amused? That's *The Sunshine Boys*.

In Richmond Hill's production, the reason that you're smiling at all is because of the leading performers. Ray Rogers is stuck in a noxious, kvetching role; Clark treats everyone around him horribly, yet Simon, it seems, means for us to find his irascibility charming. It's to Rogers' immense credit that we occasionally do. (We're told in the script – twice – that "Lewis without Clark is like laughter without joy," which is odd, because I always thought Lewis without Clark would be joy.) And John VanDeWoestyne, who was such a sensational Tevye in Quad City Music Guild's *Fiddler on the Roof* last summer, plays incredulity and exasperation with convincing deadpan, and he pulls off terrific vocal tricks, his pitch dropping when you expect it to rise and vice versa – VanDeWoestyne's readings are far funnier than the words he's been given to say.

Although you never really get a sense of the duo as the trailblazing comic team they're supposed to be – you buy them as estranged friends but not, unfortunately, as show-biz partners – they seem comfortable with their rapport, and Morrow gives them entertaining bits of physical business; the duo's attempts to set the stage for their vaudeville bit by moving two chairs and a table with excruciating slowness and precision is a great, goofy throwaway, and probably my favorite moment in the production.

What helped the scene, of course, was that, for a few brief moments, we didn't have to endure Simon's dialogue. I wish *The Sunshine Boys* had more scenes just like it.

## **Richmond Hill's Ray Rogers is in it for the laughs**

**Disptach-Argus – Feb 24, 2006 - by Claudia Loucks**

GENESE0 -- Ray Rogers carries his sense of humor and zest for living from the classroom to the stage.

Mr. Rogers probably is remembered most for his 30-year teaching career at Geneseo High School, but he can be seen in his other persona -- actor -- in the current Richmond Hill Players production, "The Sunshine Boys." It was his "classroom connections" that introduced him to the Richmond Hill stage in 1973.

He was teaching physics at the high school and received a telephone call from a student asking him a question regarding lighting. When Mr. Rogers asked what the student was doing with the information, the young man told him he was working at the Barn Theater.

"I wasn't aware at that time that Geneseo had a theater group, and I mentioned that I might be interested in getting involved," Mr. Rogers said.

"The next day (the late) Clyde Walter called me. He asked if I would stop by his store (the former Walter's Men's Wear in Geneseo) and try out for a 'small part that would be perfect for me.' The joke was on me, as that 'small part' turned out to be the lead in 'Poole's Paradise.' From then on, the theater was in my blood.

"I was very fortunate to have had Clyde as my first director," Rogers said. "He provided me with so much information and guidance. The directors I have since worked under have added to that base. Clyde's death has been a big loss to Richmond Hill, but his memories are still very present."

Before he became a part of the Richmond Hill Players, Mr. Rogers said, his acting career was limited to small parts when he was in high school, and later in fraternity pageants in college.

With his sense of humor, it seemed only natural that when asked what type of plays he most enjoys, Mr. Rogers answered, "those with a comedy theme."

"The warm feeling an actor gets on stage when he can create laughter can only be matched by another performance," he said.

The productions in which he has been cast also include Neil Simon's "Plaza Suite" and last year's "Romance in D."

"I have many good memories from all of my performances at the Barn, and I encourage others to become involved," he said. "Geneseo is blessed to have its own theater, which is recognized as one of the best in the Quad-Cities area."