

'Sunshine Boys' hasn't lost its luster: Dick and James Van Patten star at Worcester Foothills Theatre

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Waltham -

With their delightful production of "The Sunshine Boys," by Neil Simon, Worcester Foothills Theatre proves that there's still plenty of humor to be mined from a well-written chestnut, especially when you've hired a talented cast capable of bringing their own twist to it.

Foothills has made a superb choice in casting Dick Van Patten, of "Eight is Enough" television fame, as Al Lewis and Boston actor John Davin as Willie Clark, two old vaudevillians who had been a famous comedy team for over 40 years but never got along with each other offstage.

James Van Patten, the son of Dick Van Patten and a television and film actor in his own right, plays Ben Silverman, Willie's nephew and theatrical agent. He tries to bring the two old comedians together to perform one of their famous routines for a television special about the history of comedy. Sparks fly when they first meet to rehearse, and they never stop flying during the course of Simon's comedy.

Walter Matthau brought such a sour contentiousness to Willie as he railed against the world in the 1975 film version that it was hard to feel much affection for him. But in the Foothills' production, Davin gives him much more dimension, so that he becomes sympathetic, almost lovable, in spite of his surly unreasonableness.

Davin has a terrific sense of the comic moment as he calls for help with his television set, not realizing he's pulled the plug out himself, and as he complains about how Al would jab his finger into his chest and spray him with spittle during their comedy routines.

Both Davin and Dick Van Patten know that the key to good comedy is being emotionally honest instead of playing for laughs. Davin validates all the funny one-liners that Simon has given him when responds to the question "Then why did you work with him?" by becoming very quiet, reaching deep within, and saying very honestly, "Because he was the best."

Dick Van Patten brings a wonderful elegance, dignity and straightforwardness to Al, so you'd think he'd be the character you'd favor. But he also has his own stubborn righteousness that could easily get under the skin of a lesser man like Willie. Van Patten brings more fight to the role than George Burns did in the film version.

You wouldn't think the straight man could be so funny, but he consistently is, as when he says with clinched teeth over the phone to his daughter, "I can't talk now," though it's much more for her benefit than Willie's.

James Van Patten catches the humor of Ben and saves him from being merely the set-up man, but at times he can sound more like a television actor saying funny lines than a deeply grounded, unique character. Such is the risk of working as often as he does in television. Two years ago both of the Van Pattens did a 10-month national tour of "Sunshine Boys" under the direction of Curt Wollan, who does an excellent job of directing this production.

Amanda Ferguson nails the sexy stereotype of a nurse in the vaudeville routine as she shakes her chest and derriere at Davin's doctor and walks with a sassy step that's practically a dance move. Alisa D. Miles is hilarious as the African-American registered nurse. The contrast between the stereotyped and real nurses is one of Simon's brilliant creations. Another is the way the dialogue between Al and Willie often sounds like a vaudeville routine, even when they're just talking to each other.

Sure there's something a little dated and familiar about the humor. But, unlike the more dated film version, this cast makes it still seem funny. And they do it largely by finding the humanity of their characters.

"The Sunshine Boys" runs through Feb. 22 at the Worcester Foothills Theatre, 100 Front St., Suite 137, Worcester. Tickets range from \$29 to \$35 and can be purchased by calling 508-754-4018.

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