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'Assisted Living: The Musical' finds humor in death, dentures



Compton & Bennett

Betsy Bennett, left, and Rick Compton perform "Assisted Living: The Musical" and have received rave reviews in the Naples area. One of their songs is titled, "Goin' to the Chapel (And I'm Gonna Get Buried.)"

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NAPLES - So, a man and a woman walk into a strip-mall restaurant packed full of retirees, and start mouthing off about sagging breasts, lost dentures and how everyone there is standing at death's door. What's the punchline?

Rick Compton and Betsy Bennett implore you to find out with "Assisted Living: The Musical." The singer-songwriter duo dares to poke fun at the aged in ways often off-limits on stage and screen — and audiences are laughing so hard they cry.

"It appears we've managed to make fun of grandpa in a way that he likes," Compton said.

Since opening this summer, the show has developed a strong following in Florida, with waiting lists weeks long and retirement communities across the region calling to book private performances. In a sign of both the audiences' demographics and the show's popularity, Compton and Bennett say they've even been told of people who've died — literally — while waiting to see the show.

And so, from the start of the hourlong show, the duo hammers away with jokes. They begin singing "Key Lime Pie" to the tune of "American Pie," enthusiastically belting "This'll be the place that I die! This'll be the place that I die!" It is an unhesitant acknowledgment that there is only one exit point for many retirees who come to Florida.

From there, the topics include elderly romance, senior driving and Viagra. Among the song titles: "Help! I've Fallen for You and I Can't Get Up," "Nobody Loves You When You Suffer Gout," "I Got The Lost-My-Dentures-On-Steak-Night Blues" and "Goin' to the Chapel and I'm Gonna Get Buried."

In a song chronicling a love of walkers, they croon: "These halls are made for walkers. That's what the brochure said. But a walker in these hallways, you'll surely wind up dead."

When the show turns to melanoma, they sing: "Got a spot on my nose. Lost a finger, three toes. They've amputated my bald spot. Don't get brown much anymore."

Dot Lingren, a 67-year-old former school administrator who retired in nearby Estero, is among those whose face lights up as she watches.

"They're getting into issues that aren't particularly funny, but they make them funny," she said. "You don't want to be obsessing over the sadness of it."

Compton mostly stays behind the piano, while Bennett scampers through the audience, dons a gray wig and pushes a walker with tennis balls on the front legs.

"It's not that we're terribly good or talented, but it's harmonic," Compton said. "And when you have a sense of humor about it, there is a lightness of the subject," Bennett added.

The two have been working together for about 12 years in local theater productions, mostly writing songs from a studio behind Compton's home. Locals have come to know their sardonic wit in numerous shows, but the performers say they were looking for something more culturally relevant and universally appealing when the idea of aging came to them.

They are no youngsters themselves — Compton is 59, Bennett 53 — though here in Naples, where the percentage of people over the age of 65 is more than three and a half times the national average, their portrait of youth is a bit skewed. Nonetheless, they saw an opening for topics not typically discussed in pop culture.

"There are shows about every other stage of life," Compton said, "but nobody has done this phase."

Various shows have addressed parts of the aging process, though not in the same way as "Assisted Living." Pete Townshend, guitarist and songwriter for The Who, is working on a new musical taking on issues of aging and mortality that he hopes to stage in New York in 2011.

Off-Broadway, "The Waverly Gallery" won acclaim in 2000 for its dramatic portrayal of an elderly woman's decline and her family's struggle to deal with it. More recently, "Assisted Loving" has looked at later-in-life love. And "Menopause The Musical," while aimed at a younger audience, offers a model for the potential growth of a small-time show to theaters across the world.

There have been other attempts along the way, but the issue has mostly found itself starving for exposure in the arts as the country's population grows older. On television, no comedy focused on the humor of aging has met wide critical and audience acclaim since "The Golden Girls."

At work in Compton's studio, he and his partner sometimes seem more like spouses than collaborators.

They complete one another's sentences, hurl goodhearted insults and offer playful taps. The material came not only from their own experiences with parents, but from their surroundings in a landscape dotted with senior communities.

On a recent evening, they perform to a sold-out crowd gathered in a strip mall restaurant. At the end, as usual, an audience full of wrinkles and gray hair gives them a standing ovation. Although something was a bit different.

"This crowd isn't as old as we're used to," Compton said. "There's no oxygen tanks."