

Waiting in the Wings: Celebrating Life

by Chloe Chapman



Jan Wikstrom and Susan Angelo. Photo by Ian Flanders and courtesy of the Theatricum

Maybe getting old isn't so bad if you and all your friends are the main characters.

Directed by Willow Geer, Theatricum Botanicum's production of *Waiting in the Wings* by Noël Coward centers an age demographic so often brushed to the side, telling the heartwarming tale of the residents of a retirement home for actresses. The 1960 script is brilliantly comedic and full of heart. Noël Coward's writing displays a celebratory view of old age and full lives lived, keeping these lovable characters in the spotlight where they belong. In a world that still unfairly favors youth in its protagonists over much-needed representation of the elderly, I found this play to be very refreshing, despite being over 60 years old itself.

Waiting in the Wings follows a group of around nine retired actresses living together at a charity home called The Wings. They all express different combinations of resentment and contentment for where life has brought them, and have different methods of facing their final years. Each character is charming, witty, and theatrical in their own unique way, with fully fleshed out personalities and relationships between them.

In the first scene of the play, the audience learns, along with the current residents of The Wings, that there will be a new actress moving in. One of the residents, (or inmates, as they often jokingly call themselves) May Davenport, played by Jan Wikstrom, is horrified to find out that the newcomer is none other than Lotta Bainbridge, her long-time rival, to whom she has not spoken in 30 years. Lotta Bainbridge, played by Susan Angelo, is adoring and optimistic; instantly well-liked by most of The Wings' residents. Coward takes his time in naming the origin of May and Lotta's feud, and by the time the truth does come out, the audience has already been led to concoct a nosy sea of postulations about whether the age-old conflict first sprung from a matter of the stage, or a matter of the heart.

Through time and effort and emotion, Lotta and May's commonalities win out over their differences, and a long overdue friendship blooms. As an audience member, I enjoyed the contrast of Lotta and May's personalities, and it felt intimate to be let in on their opposing feelings about living in a retirement home. Lotta comes into the environment with gratitude and a real desire to make the best of her experience, whereas May confesses her deep discontent with living at The Wings. The play also explores the visibility of aging in the public eye; will the characters be left alone, contentedly living out the rest of their days in private, or will their old fame spark unwanted media coverage and invasive exposure?

I was nearly the youngest person in the audience on the Sunday evening that I went to see *Waiting in the Wings*. I was in awe of how expressive the elderly crowd was throughout the play, filling the outdoor seats of Theatricum's mainstage with laughter, gasps of shock, and agreeable noises of relatability. The characters, the writing, and the emotion really resonated with the audience around me, and I was no exception. I was impressed by many aspects of the show; the play itself, as this was my first exposure to the story, the incredible acting and direction, and the perfect casting. I don't think

the actors could have been better cast—each actor's embodiment of their character was exceptional and aided in fully immersing the audience in the story, and in the environment.

Although I was highly impressed by the acting across the board, Ellen Geer really stood out, astounding the audience with her wonderful rendition of Sarita Myrtle, a retired actress with a dangerous penchant for matches, and a tendency to slip into her theatrical past with moments of out-of-context Lady Macbeth. Geer played Sarita with her entire body, leaning into the childlike excitement of the character, and my eyes were glued to her whenever she was onstage.

Waiting in the Wings is full of theatrics: multiple songs are performed joyously by The Wings' residents and staff; decades of juicy, interpersonal drama is served up on a platter to a hungrily curious audience; the costumes are phenomenal, the laughs are constant, and the feelings and life obstacles are real. In the wise words of Noël Coward himself,

"...the play as a whole contains, beneath the froth of some of its lighter moments, the basic truth that old age needn't be nearly so dreary and sad as it is supposed to be, provided you greet it with humour and live it with courage."

Waiting in the Wings is at Theatricum Botanicum now through October 3. Make sure to go see this unique gem of a production on a weekend that works for you. <https://theatricum.com/waiting-in-the-wings/> ■

Chloe Chapman has written a handful of film reviews and other features for Topanga New Times, a few Substack articles, and a lot of unfinished business. Chloe grew up in Topanga and is still based in LA, currently finishing her Gender Studies degree at UCLA. Her interests include writing of all kinds, art of many kinds, and movies of some kinds. You can find Chloe on Substack: @chloejoelle01, or on Instagram: @chloejoelle.



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