

Winter Haven Theater Group Spreads Its Holiday Joy

Free performance at Spring Haven for its residents raises spirits

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Wes Counsell says his eyesight isn't very good anymore. He can't drive a car. He's 91, and he insists you put "and a half" at the end of his age. Daily activities have become difficult, so a night out on the town is out of the question.

But Counsell and the residents at Spring Haven Retirement Center didn't need to leave the comfort of their home for a full-scale theatrical performance of "The Winter Wonderettes" last weekend.

It's the inaugural show of TheatreWorks Florida's TheatreCares program, which brings performances to audiences that may be physically or otherwise challenged in going to see a live show.

"We've never had something like this at the center before," Counsell said. "I enjoyed everything about it. The set, the songs, the girls."

Scott Cook, TheatreWorks Florida's artistic producer, chose "The Winter Wonderettes" for the program's inaugural show to perform 1950s and 1960s holiday songs like "Jingle Bell Rock" and "Santa Baby" for the elderly.

"When I hear a song from when I was younger, it practically transports me to that time and place," said Candy Marilyn Heller, the actress who plays Cindy Lou. "(The show) allows us to do just that for the people who shaped musical theater (and) our world into what it is today."

The musical comedy takes place in 1968 at the Harper's Hardware Holiday Party. When Santa Claus goes missing, the four-woman group uses its harmonies of more than 20 holiday classics to save the party.

Jennifer Mandala-Gravel plays Missy, Frida Söderdahl plays Suzy and Desiree Perez plays Betty Jean.

The performances are free.

"It was especially nice to watch the memory care residents with things like Alzheimer's come to life," said Lisa Roberts, enrichment coordinator at Spring Haven Retirement Center. "They knew every word to every song and just to see the awe in their eyes was really special."



PHOTO PROVIDED TO THE NEWS CHIEF

Wes Counsell, left, a resident of the Spring Haven Retirement Center, with Frida Söderdahl, who plays Suzy in "The Winter Wonderettes."

TheatreCares started when the National Endowment for the Arts approached TheatreWorks Florida about a grant opportunity, Cook said.

"It's not every day that this huge organization goes around calling people to take their money," he said.

But it reached out to TheatreWorks Florida to represent Central Florida in its Art Engagement in American Communities program.

The catch: TheatreWorks Florida had seven days to come up with a community project that would make them eligible for the \$10,000 matching grant.

Cook already was planning to take the holiday show on the road to assisted living facilities, but TheatreWorks Florida manager Abel Gonzales saw the potential of Cook's idea to become an ongoing project that reaches more audiences of needy people.

"The Winter Wonderettes" has been performed for residents at Grace Manor Suites and Spring Haven Retirement Center. Their next stops: Southern Gardens in Lake Alfred today and The Estates at Carpenters in Lakeland on Dec. 21.

"Memories are very important to me, and this was a good one," said Sue Brock, 83, a Grace Manor Suites resident.

She especially enjoyed the interaction between the performers and the residents. She said the actresses had a great instinct on which residents to bring on stage and how to hold the audience's attention.

"I loved the music, the costumes, the props were very festive," she said. "The performers were so upbeat and kept the tempo going."

The show's glitz and glamour were almost too big for the activity room at Grace Manor Suites, but Cook made it work.

"They brought the show to us for free and were able adapt it to our space, which is wonderful because some of the residents can't walk or physically make it to the theater, and some of them don't have the money to afford stuff like this," said Tiffany Barnhart, activities director at Grace Manor Suites.

Cook said the grant couldn't have come at a better time, not only allowing TheatreCares to bring some holiday joy to the assisted living facilities but also making the program eligible for another grant as soon as February.

"This is about bringing theater to anyone and everyone who doesn't have the opportunity to experience it," Cook said. "We definitely want to bring a performance to children in the next round, whether it's kids in hospitals or at-risk youth."

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