



**Cast:**

**Willie Clark** - John Fenner

**Al Lewis** - Neil Vallance

**Ben Silverman** - Dave Crossfield

**TV Director** - Simon Richards

**Assistant (Eddie)** - Henri West

**Patient** - Ian Stares

**Young Nurse** - Imogen Francis

**Registered Nurse** - Christine Carpenter

**Announcer** - John Francis

**Director** - David Draper

**Designer** - Brian Tuck

**Review**

New York Jewish humour edged with nostalgia underpins the plays of Neil Simon. And the remarkable rate at which his highly individual work was regularly snapped up by Hollywood ensured only the biggest star names being cast.

Here the task facing the Talisman was to follow the footsteps of screen giants Walter Matthau and George Burns.

In such circumstances, John Fenner and Neil Vallance deliver a commendable joint effort. But they have numerous obstacles to overcome. This is not the best of Simon. The first act is one long joke mercilessly drawn out and only the lugubrious brilliance of Matthau and the irrepressible, ageless comedy turn of Burns could really make it shine.

Their challenge, then, is to breathe a fair measure of good-natured and crotchety life into the characters of the two old Vaudeville veterans who have hated each other through four decades of comedy partnership. Under David Draper's empathetic direction, they achieve a strong sense of the relationship in act one and have more opportunity to develop it through the livelier second half.

Contrasts are nicely drawn, with Fenner's grouchy and aggressive Willie refusing to give ground to Vallance's more steadfast Al. The latter applies a soft-growl tone a la George Burns and savours his monosyllabic first entrance scene.

Aiding and abetting the duo, with the aim of reuniting them for a TV special, is Willie's nephew, a part that enables Dave Crossfield to inject a sense of modern world into the melee with a spirited portrayal of a young man whose best intentions begin to flounder into despair.

By the end, the piece has gained more substance. It hasn't the bite of Simon's earlier work, such as *The Odd Couple* with its occasional similarities, but remains mildly engaging.

And this is a mildly engaging production.

Peter McGarry



