

'Buzzard Ball'

Passport Stages makes its debut with drama by and about seniors

BY CATHERINE CONDON GUDIO

Evie is gregarious and generous. The scorekeeper for her husband's softball team, she is also its unofficial caterer. Dorothy, another team member's wife, is shy and reclusive. And then there is Evie's husband, the dim, forgetful Gramps, the team aging shortstop.

"The other players are often yelling: 'Shut up, Gramps!' or 'Pay attention, Gramps!'" said Jerry Hoffman, 77, the Mendota Heights actor who plays Gramps in Passport Stages' upcoming production of *Buzzard Ball*. "In one of the early scenes, I tell my teammates, 'Come on, you guys! Let's get going. I'm driving.' And one of them says, 'But Gramps, you don't drive anymore. Your wife took your car keys.' I say, 'Are you sure?' And he says, 'Yeah, because the last time you drove, you went to the drive-up window at First State Bank and ordered hamburgers!'"

Passport Stages presents theater that is by and about seniors. It was founded last September by Steven Peterson as an artistic outlet for local residents age 50 and older and as a source of entertainment for people of all ages. *Buzzard Ball*, its first production, will open at 7 p.m. Friday, March 7, at First United Methodist Church in West St. Paul.

Described as a cross between "The Golden Girls" and *Grumpy Old Men*, the play tells the story of a mediocre men's senior softball team and the wives who put up with its players. Hoffman's wife, Judy Hoffman, 72, plays Dorothy, and Helen Donnay, 61, of Minneapolis' Nokomis neighborhood plays Evie.

Peterson directs the cast of 12. An actor as well, he has worked with numerous Twin Cities theaters, including Park Square, Theatre de la Jeune Lune, Shakespeare & Company, the Lakeshore Players and Theatre in the Round. *Buzzard Ball* was written by Alexx Stuart, a veteran of 40 seasons as a recreational softball

player and a member of the Minnesota Softball Hall of Fame.

Buzzard Ball's protagonists, the Vultures, lost every softball game they played over the previous three seasons, and it is no wonder why. One player gets around with the aid of a walker. The three outfielders have had a total of five hip replacements. The right fielder once got a birthday call from Willard Scott of the "Today Show."

Gramps' own health woes are made manifest during the show. "At the end of the first act, offstage, I have a stroke," Hoffman said. "I come back at the opening of the second act with a cane, and I don't play anymore. Sometimes I'm sitting with my wife, Evie."

"Evie always has a sunny disposition," said Donnay of her character, "yet she's somewhat naive. When young Brandi, who's the trophy wife of one of the players, makes a comment about having gone to a concert that was 'da bomb,' Evie gasps, 'Did anyone get hurt?'"

"Evie's snacks include Gramps' Special Surprise—hot dog buns quartered and dipped in butter, garlic, mayonnaise and the juice of a block of SPAM," Donnay continued. "But," Evie says, "for all of us watching our calories, I use SPAM Lite!"

Evie's motto is "be prepared," and she walks the walk, carting her basics around in a gigantic tote bag. "When a screw on Gramps' cane comes loose, she pulls out a drill," Donnay said. "When (another character) has a wounded leg, she pulls out hydrogen peroxide and gauze."

"She's the only woman I know with a bigger purse than my real wife," Hoffman quipped.

Judy Hoffman's resume in the *Buzzard Ball* program says that her favorite role is being married to Jerry, whom she credits for helping her break into community theater. The couple, who wed in September, met a few years ago when Jerry saw her perform in *Alive & Kickin'*, reportedly the Twin Cities' only senior



The cast of *Buzzard Ball*, left to right: (top) Brian Joyce, Mike Oslund; (middle) Eric Wood, Annie Zimbel, Christine Dornbusch, Janet Mondloh, Stu Naber; (bottom) Jerry Hoffman, Judy Hoffman, Mikel Clifford, Shannon Kennedy; (sitting) Helen Donnay.

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rock and roll band, which Judy joined in 2010.

Judy's first role on stage was acting with her husband last year in Lex-Ham Community Theater's production of *Days to Come*. "We feel that the opportunities to see theater, as well as the opportunities to participate in it, are a wonderful part of living in the Twin Cities," Judy Hoffman said. "I do think there's an audience for senior theater, and I'd love to see more of it happening. Senior audiences love it because they can identify."

A retired long-distance hauler of explosives who raised five children, Jerry Hoffman is also a tap dancer who performed for 15 years as a singer, dancer and choreographer for the New Fogey Follies, a St. Louis Park troupe for seniors founded by Allan Lotsberg, known to older Twin Cities television audiences for playing Willie Ketchum on WCCO's long-running "Clancy the Cop" show.

Jerry has sung and choreographed for Just for Fun Singers and acted in productions at the old Platinum Theatre, a senior theatre that was sponsored by St. Paul-based Springboard for the Arts. He has also had bit roles in *Pot-*

pourri and *Hunting Buddies*, two independent movies filmed in the Twin Cities.

Donnay's background in theater dates back to high school. In 1987 she married an actor she had met in a show and became a mother. "Then I didn't do anything," she said, until 2008, when her husband's friend offered her a role. Soon people started asking her to take roles. "I like being someone else," she said.

Donnay also serves as the administrative director for St. Paul-based Cromulent Shakespeare Company and will perform with that troupe this summer in *The Comedy of Errors*.

"It keeps you youthful," Judy Hoffman said of theater work. "Finding something you feel great about keeps you healthier and happier. That's why I'm involved in it. I'm a newlywed. I want to live a long time."

Buzzard Ball will be performed at 7 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, March 7-15; 3 p.m. Sundays, March 9 and 16; and 1 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, March 11-13. Tickets are \$15 (\$12 for groups of 10 or more). For reservations, call 612-244-6420 or visit passportstages.com.