

There is not a lot of physical action in “Finishing School,” the award-winning original play that opened the Elkhart Civic Theatre 2017-18 season Friday evening in the Bristol Opera House.

This is not surprising.



The setting, to quote playwright Elaine Liner, is “a small park with a bench next to a nice senior living facility in Texas.” The two male members of the four-person cast are residents. — and seniors — hence the minimal action.

There is, however, a good deal of dialogue, most of which drew resounding laughter from the near capacity audience.

No surprise there either.

“Finishing School” is described as “A two-act comedy about life’s second act.” Definitely an accurate description. Its appeal, however, easily spans generations.

Al (Dave Dufour) is in his late ‘60s, a fairly recent resident moved in by his son and daughter-in-law, a fact that he clearly resents.

His new best pal is Wizzer (Gail Janssen), who is hovering around 90, confined to a wheel chair and has a tendency to drop off to sleep “every few minutes.”

Their daily routine consists of reading the obituary page, discussing other residents and, with Al as “pusher,” trips to the Dollar Store for soda and candy bars and avoiding “the cave,” aka the Memory Care Cove, destination for those with fading recall.

The relationship between the two is warmly combative, obviously bonded in the shared trials of geriatrics and instantly protective.

Testing its strength is the appearance of Minnie McManus, (Melissa Auvil), 30ish, daughter of a recently deceased resident. She arrives to meet her mother to deal with her father’s belongings and strikes up a friendly conversation with Al, Wizzer being mostly asleep, who is definitely attracted.

A new dimension is added when Al meets Minnie’s mom, Shirley (Sandra Woodiwiss), and age becomes less of a problem.



Throughout, the conversations between Al and Wizzer offer audience members the opportunity to laugh loud and long at subjects that are not often laughable. When tossed around by two elderly gents, the humor definitely rises to the top and offers a universal release.

Obviously, a play in which three of the four characters are past the half-century mark requires actors at least close to the characters’ ages. Old age makeup can only do so much.

This means the performers must be able to deal with one of the pitfalls of old age, sometimes any age — faulty memory.

On opening night, at least, the gaps signaling searches for lines were, for the most part, well-covered, with the playwright’s naturally easy language surviving to trigger another laugh.

The bulk of dialogue is carried by Dufour, who not only has most of the short, snappy comebacks but delivers dauntingly long patches of dialogue that uncover the man behind the comedian. He handles all very well.



Janssen's difficult assignment is to nod off believably, all the while being alert to his wakeup lines., an assignment even more difficult considering the similarity of his dialogue. Wizzer's recounting of his memory test engenders one of the biggest and most sustained laughs in the show.

Some of the funniest bits are offered off stage as The Voice of the senior facility recites daily menus, entertainment options and rules, many of which are too familiar.

Newcomers Auvil and Woodiwiss show no signs of being newcomers to the ECT stage, creating warm and believable characters who offer a look at the outside of senior living.

Director Kevin Egelsky sets a gentle pace for the elderly characters which gives the audience permission to fully enjoy Liner's sometimes too-close-for-comfort dialogue.

As always, the set designed and built by artistic director John Shoup is just right, with Texas trees and mid-century-era streetlights obvious just over the stone wall of the nearby park.

Unlike other more harsh depictions of senior facility life, "Finishing School" offers an up-side that allows one to look at what's next for us all with humor and love.

"FINISHING SCHOOL" plays at 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday in the

Bristol Opera House on SR120 in Bristol. For reservations, call 848-4116 or visit elkhartcivictheatre.org.