

Written by Mike Schulz  
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The Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's latest is *Mid-Life! The Crisis Musical*, and it's pretty much exactly what you'd expect given the title and exclamation point

*in*  
the title: a cheeky, kind of forced, kind of obvious song-and-dance revue that pokes gentle fun at memory and hair loss, adulterous urges, prostate exams, and other "wacky" perils of aging.

As you also might have expected, the show hasn't been designed for 40- and 50-year olds so much as 60-, 70-, and 80-year-olds who want to *remember* life as a 40- or 50-year-old. Despite gags involving Botox and STDs,

*d-Life!*

authors Bob and Jim Walton don't offer fresh comic insight for 21st-Century audiences, opting instead for the same jokey clichés on ticking biological clocks, menopause, and men who want to sleep with their kids' babysitters that have been old-hat at least since the era of

*Maude*

Fifty may be the new 30, but here, it's still the old 50.

Yet like middle age itself (he said, speaking from experience), Circa '21's current outing still delivers its share of happy surprises. Directed and choreographed by Ann Nieman - whose 2008 *Are We There Yet?* followed the same presentational blueprint, and addressed several of the same issues -

*Mid-Life!* doesn't really have depth. But it does allow its cast the chance to stretch some comedic and vocal muscle; the show's ensemble provides just enough shading for their caricatures to be relatively relatable. And with all due respect to the three-dimensional people doing their damndest with two-dimensional roles, the production's *most* surprising element is literally one-dimensional: a center-stage video projection of an eye chart, which, on opening night, elicited laughs even before the show had properly begun.



In a lovely, inventive touch, *Mid-Life!* and its individual vignettes are preceded by the familiar image of an eye-test triangle, the letters on which shift around to spell words or phrases introducing the evening's themes. I don't recall any word earning a bigger cackle than the first

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one - "prostate," which is always comedic money in the bank - but you could feel the pleasurable hum in Friday's house as the mostly senior crowd collectively attempted to predict each new formation. ("Retirement" and "Geritol" were easily guessed, while "hot flash" and "classical menopause" weren't - I actually thought the latter's eye chart was going to spell "Cialis.") The projections made for a nicely lighthearted opening and welcome diversions every three to five minutes afterward, although there was still plenty of diversion to be found elsewhere, especially whenever Tom Walljasper was around.

Anyone who witnessed his glorious Captain Hook in Circa '21's recent *Peter Pan* - and it was your loss if you didn't - knows that Walljasper can be miraculous in richly drawn, outsize character roles. Here, though, the actor (again) proves that less sustaining roles don't have to result in a lesser degree of invention, as Walljasper's invigorating cleverness and intelligence continually transcend the one-joke limitations of his material.

*Mid-Life!*

finds him performing wonders as a hip-hop-influenced hubby and a Botox-injected sap (his frozen, scrunched expression suggests a shrunken apple head), and an early routine on "Father Tourette's" - in which Walljasper finds himself shouting "Don't make me tell your mother!" and "Your face will freeze like that!" against his will - would be pretty lame if not for the performer's dazzling physical and vocal transformations; it's throwaway skit as *tour de force*



Under the circumstances, Walljasper's work is less inspiring than heroic, and the gifted actors surrounding him are no less welcome. Brad Hauskins, who engenders more audience goodwill than perhaps any other frequent Circa '21 performer, delivers a particularly outstanding, hilarious solo bemoaning "My Lost Love," and Paul Gregory Nelson has terrific, goofy bits as a grinning TV huckster and a stoner slacker. Together with Walljasper, the men also make *Mid-Life!*'s "Weekend Warriors" segment its most consistently appealing. (Nelson, sporting a too-revealing half-shirt, earns bonus points for comic bravery.)

Carrie SaLoutos, a knockout with a radiant smile, comes through with divinely dynamic menopausal meltdowns, while Kathi Osborne exudes a fantastically earthy, seen-and-done-it-all presence graced with emotional texture and dry-comic wit. *Mid-Life!*'s only questionable bit of casting, in truth, lies with Jessica Swersey - not because this marvelous singer and game comedienne isn't talented, but because even with (too-)heavy eye makeup, her look and

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physicality clearly reveal that she's a good decade-plus too young for her roles. (Far more so than old age, middle age can't be easily faked.) She'd be perfect for the production if actuarial tables showed our median life expectancy to be 45.

Still, better to have a miscast Swersey than not to have her at all. With exceptional on-stage support provided by keyboardist (and musical director) Sarah Brett England and percussionist John Ladson II, this sextet significantly upgrades its rather retrograde script and unmemorable lyrics, and Nieman paces the vignettes with panache; there are random bum moments here, but no dull ones.



I do wish, however, that something could've been done about the penultimate number - "The Long Goodbye" - in which the lachrymose melancholy that had been mostly avoided is laid on with the heaviest of hands. After all the chortles generated by forgetfulness, failing health, and even mammograms (and believe it or not, the "Singing Mammogram" number is a legitimate riot), it feels mean of *Mid-Life! The Crisis Musical* to present, as its 11 o'clock number, a doleful ballad equating the care of one's elderly parents with the care of infants. (One verse involves a mother who, while at the mall, accidentally urinates on the floor of the Gap.) True or not, this sentiment is hardly a note on which audiences of

*any*

age will want to exit; instead of celebrating the vigor in life's middle years, you leave with the uncomfortable knowledge that the worst is yet to come.

*For tickets and information, call (309)786-7733 extension 2, or visit [Circa21.com](http://Circa21.com) .*