

Living unassisted: Compton & Bennett's Metamucil-Age musical casts off its walker for a professional tour

By CHRIS SILK

Wednesday, March 2, 2011

NAPLES — It all started on the evening of July 23, 2008, when Rick Compton looked across a parking lot in Bonita Springs and saw a senior citizen nudging along with a walker.

Slide. Shuffle. Slide. It was a game of inches — much like the journey taken by "[Assisted Living: The Musical](#)."

March 11, 2011 will mark 962 days from wild idea to stage debut of the fifth version of the script. A national tour launches this summer. In between, there have been three logos, eight states, four trips to New York, two stops on the BBC and one suspicious Delaware State Patrolman.

How did they get here?

Rick Compton (he's 60) and Betsy Bennett (she's not 60) have been fixtures on Collier County's entertainment scene. They've been business partners — Bennett is single; Compton is married — since shortly after being cast together in a 1996 Naples Players production of "They're Playing Our Song."

Realizing their personalities and voices mixed well, they decided to keep performing together, doing gigs and eventually churning out [a series of flip shows](#) that "observed the situations and the people around Southwest Florida with humor." Each show turned out funnier than the last and built their reputations as Southwest Florida's premier satirists.

Though they were successful, Compton and Bennett knew these were "throw-away shows." In 2006, they decided to write their "big hit": a show they could sell to other performers. It was going to be a rock-and-roll revue called "[Sandy Bottoms and the Jimmie Buffet](#)," about hippies running a beach-front ice-cream parlor.

"We knew we'd gotten the craft at that point. Song-writing, drafting — we understood dramatic structure, the story arc," recalls Compton. The two forged their mission: "We're gonna work our butts off. We're gonna work it here and we're going to try and sell the show for publication."

"Sandy Bottoms" raked in the laughs. It also raked in a stack of rejection letters.

The birth of a musical

If it didn't make them rich, "Sandy Bottoms" did, indirectly, provide the spark that led to "Assisted Living."

"We did a staged reading (of 'Sandy Bottoms') at the Art League in March 2009. After the show, we walked out to the parking lot. Someone asked what our next show was," relates Bennett. "Rick looked over and there was a woman getting up with a walker. He blurted out "Assisted Living" and I tacked on 'The Musical.' We looked at each other and go 'Now we have to write it!'"

And they did.

They aimed squarely down the barrel of their own Baby Boomer generation, tapping out songs like "My Hide" (a takeoff on the theme from a popular TV show past, "Rawhide"), "Goin' to the Chapel (And I'm Gonna Get Buried)" and "Ballad of the Tennessee Walkers."

Compton wants their audiences — baby-boomers who are "moving through society like a big, fat pig through a skinny, anorexic python" — to take away the message that they have to embrace aging and not fight it.

"We are absolutely the most selfish and self-gratified generation in the history of man," Compton preaches. He goes on to tick off a list of baby boomer entitlements that run the gamut from technological to scientific.

"When the kids moved away, we got e-mail and Skype. When we hit puberty, we got birth control pills.

"And when our generation couldn't get it, we had Viagra!" Bennett chimes in, tactfully leaving off the "up."

Speaking of Viagra, [the musical's popular "Viagra Medley"](#) ("There ain't no -agra like Viagra"), which has survived every re-write unchanged, almost never saw the light of day. Only a chance remark from long-time supporter Mary Margaret Gruszka questioning the absence of Pfizer's little blue pill in the show prompted a last-second addition — four days before the first date.

"And it has remained. Unchanged," Bennett proclaims. "It is the strongest song in the show," Compton adds.

The fame monster

A series of sold-out dates at [Fred's Food, Fun and Spirits](#) on Immokalee Road in the summer of 2009 introduced Southwest Florida audiences to "Assisted Living: The Musical," one lost-denture joke at a time.

There, in an unassuming shopping plaza, with the performers sandwiched into a space barely large enough for Compton's keyboard and a box of props, the fame monster smiled. The Associated Press sent a writer from Miami to profile the duo; [the story ran in 180 newspapers](#) and prompted calls from the [BBC](#) and ABC World News.

The worldwide press even included an appearance on page 37 of the October 25, 2010 supermarket tabloid "The Globe," right beside a "Conan Will Kill You" piece.

"Betsy always wanted to get probed by an alien," Compton cracks, before being shushed.

"We knew we had a good little show because we were sold out at Fred's six weeks in advance," Compton said. "Suddenly we were forced to look at this product we had with entirely different glasses."

Until the calls started pouring in — and in and in — "Assisted Living" was another throw-away summer show to take on the restaurant and country club circuit while they continued working on "Sandy Bottoms." The two decided to switch their attention to "Assisted Living," reasoning the attention did them little good unless they had the ability to take the show on the road.

"We were naive to believe that we could write a script, sell it to a producer and sit back and wait for the royalty check and the reviews to come in," Compton said. "It's not like that at all."

The producers

Enter [Douglas Gray](#), who owns his own production company and has worked on long-running shows such as "Shear Madness" and "Late Night Catechism." He also ran the entertainment departments for Holland America and Norwegian Cruise Lines. Bennett's cousin worked with Gray on Twyla Tharp's European tour and put the two in touch.

"Nepotism trumps networking every time," Gray, 59, quips. "Nepotism, and an unedited Rolodex."

He first saw the show at [The Silver Cricket Restaurant in Lady Lake](#); he liked the potential in the show and the way that audiences responded.

"I love to watch audiences, and their audiences have a terrific time," Gray said. "They come back to see 'Assisted Living' again just to make sure they had such a great time the first (or second time) they saw the show. Then they bring their friends."

Gray encouraged the pair to dream big. He wanted them to completely re-write the show, turning it into a full-fledged "show" that could be packaged, sold and performed nationwide by anyone, not just the creators.

"'Assisted Living' should run for a long, long time in everyone's hometown," Gray said. "The show should be like a familiar friend that you go to visit with other friends every once in a while when you want to feel good or need to laugh."

Life on the road

Even while playing to capacity crowds at Fred's, more venues were wooing the pair, both for their wit and ability to pack in the crowds.

Compton & Bennett took the musical up and down the Eastern Seaboard during the summer of 2010.

They piled a keyboard, a PA system, some props, their backdrop and a few clothes into the back of Compton's Dodge Magnum station wagon and set off on a 3,000-mile road trip that took them to shows in Valley Forge, Wilmington and various private bookings. Navigation assistance came courtesy Bennett's iPhone, complete with pink Otterbox cover.

Bennett laments only the lack of satin tour jackets, while Compton marvels that a Delaware State Police trooper pulled them over for doing 78 in a 55 mph zone — and let them off with a warning.

Bennett can barely contain herself as he tells the tale - which happened as they were on the way to the [New Candlelight Dinner Theater](#). "You knew the minute he pulled out," she crows. "I still have the warning - it will be framed at one point!"

The pair remember New Candlelight and owner Chris Alberts not only for two nights of sell-out crowds in his 175-seat space, but what Bennett calls "one of the best compliments we've ever been paid."

After the show, a woman, accompanied by her husband, who was wearing a nasal canula attached to a mobile oxygen tank came up to the comedians.

"This show was just great," Compton, smiling, relays her compliment, trying to contain a huge grin, "It was so funny that I had to go out at intermission and get my husband a second bottle of oxygen, he'd used up the first one."

Pounding out the show night after night, week after week, gave them the room to explore the material and to discover its strengths and weaknesses.

"We felt it was a very safe and comfortable environment for us." Bennett said. "We would change material periodically, insert lines or add songs. You could screw up in a relatively small test tube."

The pair are especially proud of the fact that after just two weeks they sold out Wednesday nights, even though owners Ethan and Rebecca Kurland had worried about attracting crowds on "church night."

"It was the best night!" Bennett howls with glee. Compton chimes in "The sinners make a good audience."

And right on cue, Bennett caps the phrase with an "Amen."

Bright lights, big city

Two years of constant re-writes — only about half the material that debuted in 2009 remains today — culminated in an intense four-day workshop session in early December 2010. Their rehearsal space at Manhattan's Ripley Grier Studios plunked "Assisted Living: The Musical" alongside blockbuster Broadway musicals such as "Wicked," and "Billy Elliot." Three cast members from the original run of "A Chorus Line" even turned up at auditions.

While exhilarating, the process often proved difficult for the creators. They had to watch other people run their work through a metaphorical wood-chipper — sometimes without even understanding the hopeful, "go boldly into maturity" vision they'd tried so hard to impart into "Assisted Living."

"It was really tough sometimes to sit down and not yell 'You're missing the point, you're missing it!'" Bennett said, struggling for words. "But you have to sit down, because they have to get it. If they don't get it, then audiences won't get it and we need to change our product."

Other changes didn't go over so well — like the addition of four-letter expletives — verboten in Compton and Bennett shows. Those were scrubbed out of the final script.

"We don't do that," Compton said. "We have maybe one or two, carefully placed, for particular effect."

There were new pressures. Someone would ask for changes to lyrics on the fly, with actors and the music director standing and waiting for a new line or verse. The Neapolitans delivered — even as they watched their work evolve in ways they hadn't foreseen.

"Everybody to whom we issue an invitation to stick their nose in the tent changes the product," Compton says with a wry smile. "Any one of them might say something that grows into a major effort."

The New York trip ended with a full run-through of "Assisted Living: The Musical." The run-through proved to the authors and Gray that the underlying material had legs enough to carry a show.

"It was totally enjoyable and delightful to see our faith in the depth of the material fully justified," Gray said. "An 'act' can only be performed by it's authors ... 'Assisted Living: The Musical' resonated with the performers and they found new meaning, depth and humor each time we ran the material."

Gray thinks the effort, which allowed Compton and Bennett to work with a director, music director and see their work performed by someone else for the first time, paid off.

"We brought the show out of Florida, but we didn't want to take the 'Florida' out of the show." Gray said. "Our goal was simply to have some other performers work with the material and have the authors learn from that experience."

Of all the work done in New York, only one major addition may survive, a bonus of the collaborative process that they welcomed. The somber piece "Without You" became a trio, sung in rounds, adding unexpected poignancy to the message about grieving for the loss of a partner.

'Assisted Living,' version five

The seemingly endless re-writes helped hone "Assisted Living" from a loose collection of songs into a story about the aging process. The cast of two swelled to four and contracted back to three. Another voice, South Florida director and choreographer [Bill Castellino](#), joined the project in December 2010.

Compton and Bennett say they appreciate that Castellino seems to share their vision. They champion a view that, as Compton says, "we're propelled with champagne glass in one hand and Medicare Part B papers in the other into a new phase of life."

"We have all these wonderful rituals for the first half of life," Castellino adds. "But then the joyous parts get more sparse ... there's not that much great stuff for getting older."

"Assisted Living" tries to pluck some of those rituals out of the Metamucil-scented halls. Compton even crafted a song about cracking the mailbox to find an AARP mailer. The rousing gospel number opens the latest iteration of the show.

What happens next?

The goal remains — now as it did then two years ago — for the writers to deliver a finished script that successfully fashions Compton and Bennett's trademark snark into a stage musical. Those words, music and

lyrics will be "frozen," in theater parlance, and made available for other artists to license for performances of "Assisted Living: The Musical," just like any play or musical. And when they do, Compton, Bennett and Gray will collect the royalties, just like any author, writer or musician.

The duo plan a [Southwest Florida "tryout" of the latest script on Friday, March 11, at the Bonita Springs Elks Lodge](#), its last before it embarks on a national tour in June.

There's still a level of disbelief that their little "throw-away" show blew up into a career-changing hit.

"There is still a whole lot of denial — that this is not happening to us," Compton said. "But if it is a charade, it is a really elaborate charade!"

