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SUNFLOWER YEARS

Calendar Girls celebrates friendship and female empowerment

BY NICOLE LABRESH ON FEBRUARY 26TH, 2020

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(Sunflower Ladies) from left: **Sylvia A. Bagaglio** as Cora, **Susan Martin** as Ruth, **Karen Gail Kessler** as Chris, **Heather Carey** as Annie, **Preeti Tiwari** as Celia and **Lynn Price** as Jessie star in The Community Players' production of Calendar Girls

They're not the pin-ups you'd expect to see adorning the pages of a calendar, but the women of Yorkshire's Women's Institute bare all for a worthy cause. *Calendar Girls*, currently being performed by Pawtucket's Community Players under the direction of Pamela Jackson, is the stage adaptation of the 2003 film starring Helen Mirren and Julie Walters, based on actual events.

Calendar Girls gets off to a rather slow start, as the six women of the WI, under the stuffy and oft-questioned leadership of Marie (Annette LaBonte), go about their various seasonal activities: baking, flower-arranging, attending boring lectures, caroling and playing golf. The de facto leaders of the group are Chris and Annie (Karen Gail Kessler and Heather Carey), best friends and partners in mischief. The mischief, however, quickly takes a backseat, as Annie's kindhearted husband, John (David Mann) is diagnosed with leukemia. Over the course of the year, his condition worsens, though the only evidence of this is his sudden reliance on a wheelchair in his final scene, when, mid-sentence, he abruptly rises from the chair and shuffles off this mortal coil — and the stage — in a blue light (the blue spotlights seem to be the weapon of choice for lighting designer Christopher Simpkins, who employs them in the second act as the women read excerpts of their fan mail in an effect that in theory is cool, but ends up making the sequence a bit choppy). Annie and then Chris take over for him, finishing the metaphor that sets the stage for the rest of the play: that women, like sunflowers (his favorite kind of flower), are at their most beautiful later in life.

Wanting to do something to commemorate John, inspired by his interrupted monologue, Chris and Annie come up with the idea to raise money for the hospital at which John was treated through the sales of their annual calendar. But instead of Yorkshire churchyards or bridges, the lackluster themes Marie has chosen, this calendar will feature the WI members posing nude — nude, mind you, not naked. The idea is met with mixed reactions. Trophy-wife Celia (Preeti Tiwari) embraces the chance to strut her stuff and schoolteacher Jessie (Lynn Price) sees it as an opportunity to promote body-positivity in older women, while passive goody two-shoes Ruth (Susan Martin) declines to participate, only to show up at the last minute. They then get hospital porter and professional photographer Lawrence (Jacob David Santos) involved.

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DAVE MASON WITH VERY SPECIAL GUEST JOHN MAYALL
SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 2020 | 8:00 PM
 Rock & Roll Hall of Famer Dave Mason first found fame with the rock band Traffic. Over his career, Mason has played, recorded and/or performed with many well known and notable musicians, including Paul McCartney, George Harrison, Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, David Crosby, Graham Nash, Michael Jackson, Steve Winwood, Fleetwood Mac, Leon Russell, Delaney Bramlett, Cass Elliot and, most recently, Derek Trucks and Susan Tedeschi, among others.

Often referred to as "The Godfather of British Blues," John Mayall has an impressive musical career that spans over 50 years. The English blues singer, guitarist, harmonica player, guitarist, and songwriter founded the band, John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers in the 1960s.

MELISSA ETHERIDGE
FRIDAY, APRIL 3, 2020 | 8:00 PM
 Melissa Etheridge is one of rock music's great female icons. Her critically acclaimed eponymous debut album was certified double platinum. Etheridge's popularity built around such memorable songs as "Bring Me Some Water," "No Surrender" and "I'm Not Heavy" for which she won her first Grammy for Best Female Rock Vocal.

ARRIVAL FROM SWEDEN: THE MUSIC OF ABBA
SATURDAY, APRIL 4, 2020 | 8:00 PM
 ARRIVAL from Sweden: The Music of ABBA has all the features a great ABBA show needs: lovely costumes, extremely talented musicians and breathtaking singers. Millions of people all around the world celebrate this show as the closest you will ever get to see ABBA!

BELA FLECK & THE FLECKTONES
THURSDAY, JUNE 4, 2020 | 8:00 PM
 The iconic bluegrass fusion outfit, Bela Fleck and the Flecktones (Victor Wooten, Roy Wooten, Howard Levy), built a string catalog of tunes and live performances throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and this show gives them and their fans a chance to revisit all that they've accomplished. These cats are masters of their instruments — see "Big Country" and "Flight of the Cosmic Hippo," for instance — and it's hard to imagine a more blissful way to spend an evening.

THE MAVERICKS
SUNDAY, JUNE 14, 2020 | 7:00 PM
 Hails to the great songwriting traditions of Cuba and Miami, of Nashville and San Antonio and Memphis, now, on their 50th anniversary as a band, a Mavericks concert is a guaranteed party night.

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The photoshoot itself, which closes out the first act, is probably the highpoint of the play, as each woman, after imbibing their share of liquid courage, disrobes and cleverly covers up their more sensitive areas with teapots or pastries. What makes this scene stand out, though, is the camaraderie between the women. The amount of trust and support in this cast is palpable, and it makes this scene feel all the more authentic.

The second act deals with the fallout of the calendar. Under Marie's disapproving gaze, the calendar is a massive success and a media sensation. Their newfound fame causes a rift among the women: Chris, who has always craved the spotlight, gladly receives the attention at the expense of her personal responsibilities, including the flower shop she runs with her husband, Rod (Richard Griffin). Annie believes she has lost sight of what they set out to accomplish. Ruth, meanwhile, has the most evocative transformation over the course of the play, as she finds her voice and gains the courage to confront the woman with whom her husband is having an affair (Kiki Maples).

Calendar Girls is a refreshing tale of female friendship and body positivity for older women, the likes of which are rare in the entertainment industry. It shows that women are at their best when supporting each other rather than tearing each other down, a notion Celia expresses when comparing the WI to the higher-society golfing community where women talk behind each other's backs. Though it may be easy to pass up *Calendar Girls* upon hearing its questionable premise, as director Pamela Jackson admits to having done initially, what lies beyond the nudity is female empowerment and a reminder that being past one's prime is only a state of mind.

The Community Players' production of Calendar Girls runs through Mar 1 at Jenks Auditorium located on

Division St in Pawtucket across from McCoy Stadium. Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30pm, Sundays at 2pm. For tickets, visit the communityplayers.org or call 401-726-6860.

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