

Lab Theater actors pose nude for charity



CHARLES RUNNELLS, CRUNNELLS@NEWS-PRESS.COM 10:38 a.m. EDT October 8, 2015



(Photo: Mila Bridger)

It's hard enough getting onstage and acting for a live theater audience. Just try doing it naked.

Those bright, bright stage lights don't hide much.

Actor Pat Clopton, 79, knew that moment was coming. She'd been rehearsing for weeks, but soon she'd have to actually do it: She's have to stand onstage — in the buff — for a full house at The Laboratory Theater of Florida.

"The reality started setting in," Clopton says. "All of the sudden, we started to think, 'Oh my God, what have we done?'"

"I had to go home at night after rehearsals and think, 'Oct. 2 is going to come, and on that night I'm going to stand on that stage with no clothes on.'"

Then opening night for the comedy "Calendar Girls" finally did arrive, and Clopton and her five co-stars slipped out of their robes and posed in their birthday suits.

These women — ages 45 to 79 — stood there with nothing to hide their "naughty bits" but a teapot, a strategically-placed fruit basket or a pair of pastries.

And you know what?

It wasn't that bad at all.

"We'd been rehearsing for weeks," says actor Suzanne Davies, 66, of Cape Coral. "By the time we actually got there, it was sort of anticlimactic."

It helped that the opening-night audience was so supportive. Many of them already knew the story based on a 2003 movie: A group of British women becomes a media sensation after posing nude for fundraising calendar. So the Lab Theater audience probably knew what was coming, too, and could imagine how tough that must be for the actors.

Davies puts it this way: "I'm not a person who's used to standing naked in front of an audience."

So when the nudity finally came at the end of Act 1, the audiences last Friday hooted and hollered and clapped and generally showed their full-on support.

That moment, Clopton says, made all the actors' stress, fear and insecurities worthwhile.

"That was the thing that just overwhelmed us," Clopton says. "It was like they were standing right next to us, cheering us on."

These actors didn't take off their clothes just for the thrill of it, of course. They did it for the play's empowering story of sisterhood and defying expectations even when you're in your 50s, 60s and 70s.

They also did it for charity. In a case of life imitating art, the cast and crew posed for a fundraising calendar themselves. The women were photographed by local photographer Mila Bridger.

Even director Brenda Kensler, 65, disrobed for the cause.

"I couldn't ask them to do it without doing it myself!" she says.

Lab Theater is selling the calendar throughout the run of "Calendar Girls" — now until Oct. 17. They raised more than \$1,000 on opening weekend, alone, and the money will be donated to [Partners for Breast Cancer Care](#).

Kensler and the actors in the show are quick to say there's nothing titillating about the nudity in "Calendar Girls." In fact, the director went to great pains to ensure that the audience members — no matter where they're sitting in the room — wouldn't actually be able to see the actors' nipples or genitals.

"Nobody was going to feel exposed in any way," Kensler says. "Even though they were. They still had to feel protected."

Kensler says she wanted to save her actors from any undue embarrassment and make sure they were as comfortable as possible onstage. That process included bonding exercises such as a slumber party at [Captiva Island's Tween Waters Inn](#) and having everybody show up for the September calendar shoots — even if it wasn't their day for a photo.

"We certainly came back with the feeling that we were all in this together," Clopton says. "It really became a sisterhood."



The cast of "Calendar Girls" (Photo: Mila Bridger)

[Nudity](#) is a huge part of the story, of course, but actors in the show say that's not why they did it.

Kensler points out that many people in the show have been touched by cancer, and that gives a new level of poignancy to the production and the fundraising calendar. Kensler's husband is currently fighting prostate cancer. Davies' mother died recently of the disease. And the show's stage manager, Yvonne Shadrach, is a breast cancer survivor.

The play's story involves a woman (played by Davies) who — after her husband dies of cancer — joins her friends in posing nude for a calendar. They're raising money to buy a settee for the local hospital where her husband had been treated.

Besides the charitable cause, there's the play itself. Kensler says she's wanted to bring it to [Southwest Florida](#) for years. The Lab Theater production marks the Florida premiere of "Calendar Girls."

Kensler loves how the [Tim Firth](#) play shows women helping each other in times of need — a far cry from the catty, backstabbing stereotype you might see on TV and in movies.

"When one of us needs help, the others join in," Kensler says. "We all get together and help each other. It's what we do."

Then there's the play's message of strength and empowerment, no matter what your age.

Davies loves a quote that comes up several times in "Calendar Girls": "The last phase of the flower is the most glorious."

In other words: Just because you're in your '60s and '70s, that doesn't mean you can't change and live your life. And if you want to pose nude for a calendar, just go ahead and do it.

"You're not done yet," Davies says. "Go out and do things... Try new things. Be adventurous."

And that's exactly what the actors in the show did by taking these roles in the first place.

Kensler says she's proud of her actors and their bravery. They're women of various ages and various body types, but they all agreed to the project without batting an eyelash.

The resulting play and calendar make a powerful statement, she says.

"If anything," she says, "it says we need to be proud of ourselves no matter what we look like, no matter what our body types."

Many of the actors talk about how empowering the experience has been.

"It's me," Kensler says of her calendar photo. "It's me at 65. That's who I am. That's what I look like.

"And it's about time we admitted it, showed it and owned it. And that's what we did."

Shadrach, 48, of [Lehigh Acres](#) still can't believe she posed for that calendar, but she's glad she did it.

Now she knows she can.

"The calendar is absolutely gorgeous," says Shadrach. "I'm proud of myself for doing it."

Clopton admits she had it a little easier than most of the other women in the show. She's a widow and therefore didn't have to ask her husband for "permission" to appear nude in public.

"At this age," she says, "I never really feel like I have to have permission to do anything."

Clopton doesn't think any of her friends would dare do what she did. And that makes her feel good about herself.

"I looked at it as a life experience," Clopton said. "I never felt like it was something to be embarrassed about. I thought it was something to be proud of.

"I looked at it as one more life experience that I added to the whole collection."

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THEATER REVIEW: LAB THEATER'S CALENDAR GIRLS

The woman sitting behind me said it all.

"That takes GUTS," she whispered to her friend in the audience at Lab Theater.

You're not kidding, lady.

I acted once and found the experience fun but stressful and nerve-wracking. I can't imagine doing it completely naked.

I can summarize my feelings on the subject with four words: No way in hell.

Thankfully, the six women in Lab Theater's "Calendar Girls" are much braver than I am. And the result is one of the funniest, most heartening experiences I've had in a theater.

True, "Calendar Girls" is far from perfect: It's way too long, it spins its wheels in Act 2, and the ending feels abrupt.

But, oh, that calendar scene.

Director Brenda Kensler and her talented cast spend a lot of time building their characters and their relationships, and that pays off spectacularly in the nude photography shoot at the end of Act 1.

You're right there with these women as they down shots of booze for liquid courage, try to flee the room and then, finally, take it all off.

The audience — myself included — cheered and clapped enthusiastically on opening night. They did it! They really, really did it!

The scene is full of humor, heart, skillful acting and Kensler's cleverly staged nude photos.

Don't go expecting to see full frontal, though. These women are, indeed, completely naked. But they're shielded by hoop-shaped photography reflectors while disrobing and then, while posing, by various fruit baskets, pastries, floral arrangements, etc.

It's all very tastefully and sensitively done.

"Calendar Girls" doesn't come to life until well into Act 1, and the whole thing overstays its welcome by about 30 minutes. Two shorter, punchier, funnier acts would have served the story better, I think.

But despite the play's problems, there are enough good moments to keep your interest most of the time. There's a lot to love here: Fearless acting, charming characters, witty lines, a slam-dunk premise and that funny, funny calendar-shoot scene.

You'd never catch me onstage naked, that's for sure. But I'm glad these six actors were ready for the challenge.

— *Charles Runnells*

If you go

What: "Calendar Girls"

When: Now through Oct. 17. Performances are 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday with 2 p.m. Sunday matinees.

Where: The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown Fort Myers.

Tickets: \$25 (\$12 for students)

Info: 218-0481 or laboratorytheaterflorida.com

Buy a calendar: The actors in "Calendar Girls" posed nude for calendar, and it will be sold throughout the run of the play. They're \$15 each. Sales benefit Partners for Breast Cancer Care.

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