

## The Idiolect

The language or speech pattern of one individual at a particular period of life

# All the Senior Ladies

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By [Sam Hurwitt](#)

[Sylvia's Advice on How to Age Gracefully on the Planet Denial](#), Stagebridge, February 12.



Joan Mankin, Sara Moore and Franklin Hall. Photo by Eric Ferrante

[Nicole Hollander](#)'s been doing her comic strip [Sylvia](#) since 1979, with the chain-smoking bohemian of the title offering wry commentary on politics sexual and national from the comfort of her desk or her bubble bath. Oakland's Stagebridge Theatre Company has been around a year longer than that, giving it the amusingly phrased distinction of being the nation's oldest senior theater company, with actors ranging anywhere between a half-century and a whole one. Now the two come together with the unwieldily titled world premiere musical *Sylvia's Advice on How to Age Gracefully on the Planet Denial*.

This isn't the first time Sylvia's been turned into a stage musical: in Hollander's Chicago hometown, Pegasus Players did it twice in the 1990s with *Sylvia's Real Good Advice* and *Female Problems: An Unhelpful Guide*. Written and directed by Martha Boesing, founder and former artistic director of Minneapolis's At the Foot of the Mountain women's theater, Stagebridge's version of *Sylvia's Advice* blends the world of the comic strip with Hollander's otherwise unrelated book [Tales of Graceful Aging from the Planet Denial](#) and a bit of *The Golden Girls* for good measure.

The show starts off seeming like it's going to be pretty hokey, with the cast strolling around singing "Sylvia's Excellent Advice Service" over and over. But in fact it shapes up to be a very funny and true to the strip, despite a wispy, meandering plot that seems to be just to give Sylvia something to do other than just sit around at her typewriter making quips. She's being kicked out

of her home and tries to convince her bohemian circle of senior gal pals that they should all live together, couched in some unconvincing rhetoric about it being a sort of social movement that will give them all their second wind.

It helps considerably that the production is anchored by a fabulous performance by [Joan Mankin](#) as Sylvia, packed with forceful personality and a ton of jittery energy. She totally evokes the aura of the character from the comic despite the always tricky balance of dragging a cartoon character into some semblance of real life. (Although I don't care what anyone says—[Popeye](#) was an awesome movie.)

That said, the show is continually stolen by the incorrigible clowning cats: Sara Moore is a scream as high-strung Lassie the Wonder Cat, and Franklin Hall also terribly diverting as the mellower and less omnipresent Kismet. The best running gags are straight out the strip: the cats' constant attempts to hypnotize Sylvia to do their bidding, and their plotting acts of domestic terrorism to help get Sylvia's mind off her problems. Really, practically whenever the cats are involved it's a highlight.

KPFA radio host [Kris Welch](#) is full of wisecracking charm as acerbic skeptic Audrey in Sylvia's trio of old friends alongside Cindy Carrico as downbeat shrinking violet Sally and Linda Sciacqua as enthusiastic ex-hippie Bitsy. Some of their scenes do drag on, especially long conversations in which the pals try to come up with money-making ideas and squabble about how to arrange their own senior care. Also popping up periodically are Bill Liebman as a curiously mild male chauvinist who fondly reminisces about men-only bars and resonant-voiced James "JB" Brooks as a sympathetic bartender.

The singing in general is strong, with pretty much everyone afforded her or his own song. Several numbers are transparently only there to give someone or other a solo and don't add much to the action, such as it is. (Although to my mind one of the weakest songs is a showdown back-and-forth that's as plot-driven as they come.) Some of Boesing's lyrics are cumbersome, with choruses like "Even When Life Is Terrible, It's Good," but they're sweetened considerably by [Scrumby Koldewyn](#)'s buoyant music, played by himself on piano. Sylvia's cabaret ode to denial in particular is a delight.

The play could stand trimming and spins its wheels a bit in the second act, but if you like the comic strip—which I hope is still running somewhere in the Bay Area now that the [Berkeley Daily Planet](#) is discontinuing its print run—you'll probably enjoy it. I know I did.

*Sylvia's Advice on How to Age Gracefully on the Planet Denial* runs through February 21 at the Ashby Stage, 1901 Ashby Ave., Berkeley. <http://stagebridge.org>

Tags: [franklin hall](#), [joan mankin](#), [kris welch](#), [martha boesing](#), [nicole hollander](#), [sara moore](#), [scrumby koldewyn](#), [stagebridge](#), [sylvia](#)