

Bringing back the Rat Pack

Show drops the
'60s staple into
the modern day

By **RALPH HEIBUTZKI**
HP Correspondent

BENTON HARBOR — For one night only, the stars of the Rat Pack – Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Joey Bishop and Dean Martin – will come back to life, with all the fabulous swagger that you remember.

However, Saturday's show at the Mendel Center is more than a tribute to the foursome who cut such a larger-than-life figure in 1960s pop culture, say co-creators Sandy Hackett, and his wife, Lisa Dawn Miller.

"We're not a tribute show, we're not an impersonation show – we're a theatrical production with a narrative," Miller says. "So we bring these guys back in their prime to the modern day – they're up in heaven, but God sends them back for one last show."

God's voice will also carry a familiar ring – in this case, Sandy's late father, actor-comedian Buddy Hackett, who recorded his part shortly before his June 2003 death.

"It's really cool that we have that. What's nice about that is we pick up the comedy of the current day, current events that are going on," Miller says.

That quality allows plenty of room for ad-libbing and improvisation, just as the Rat Pack themselves would have done, notes Hackett – a veteran TV actor, producer and writer who plays his late uncle, Joey Bishop.

Miller's roots are equally impressive. A singer, songwriter and producer, she's

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Photo provided

“Sandy Hackett’s Rat Pack Show” will take the stage Saturday at Lake Michigan College’s Mendel Center.

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the daughter of Ron Miller, who was also a staff songwriter for Motown Records.

Two of Ron Miller’s better-known titles include “For Once In My Life” and “Touch Me In The Morning,” which Stevie Wonder and Diana Ross, respectively, made famous.

“You just never know where it’s going to come from,” Hackett says. “When we’re driving, we’re looking up stuff along the way, on the Internet – the comedy finds itself.”

While waiting to hit the stage in Yakima, for example, Hackett found an online reference to the West Coast city as “the Palm Springs of Washington,” from which they gained

plenty of comedic mileage.

“It became such a major joke, and it was so funny because, obviously, Frank Sinatra lived in the real Palm Springs,” Miller says, laughing. “Sandy’s usually the one – as we’re driving into town – who takes quite an interest in what’s going on around town.”

The show’s roots go back to 1998, when Bishop called Hackett about a Rat Pack movie that HBO was planning on doing.

“I said, ‘Uncle Joey, to what I do owe the pleasure?’ He said, ‘I think you would be perfect to play me,’” Hackett says. “So I called, they’d already cast it (the Bishop role), they weren’t interested – but it set me on a course to create a live show about Uncle Joey, and it’s been an integral part of my life for the last decade.”

Since then, the Rat Pack Show has played internationally, with multiple casts, to more than 1 million people – and is considered to be the longest-running production of its kind, according to LMC’s pre-show release.

As the production evolved, Miller helped in shaping the theatrical element of the show – in which she also plays Frank’s One True Love, generally thought to be actress Ava Gardner.

“My character is based on his relationship with her, and I do a duet with Frank where he goes backstage and he has a dream sequence,” Miller says. “He remembers Ava, and I come out, and sing a song with him: ‘Wasn’t I A Good Time?’”

Another example is the treatment of Sammy Davis

Jr., played by Louie Velez. “What a lot of people don’t talk about is – though he’s considered the greatest entertainer of all time, when he got offstage, he wasn’t treated like a normal person. He was treated poorly, because he was black, and Frank stood up for him,” Miller says.

Those kinds of elements make the show more than just a tribute piece, and provide a powerful reminder of why the Rat Pack’s members continue to be celebrated today, as Hackett explains.

“They were human beings with long, illustrious lives,” Hackett says. “They crossed over from show business into the real world – Frank did film, television, nightclubs, concerts, recordings. In 1960, he was at the top of his game – there wasn’t a bigger star.”