

Enough With the Kids Already! NBC Gives Talented Seniors a Shot at Fame

THE OLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL

IT'S OSCAR SUNDAY IN Palm Springs, Calif., a kitschy desert oasis where the median age of the population seems to rival the mercury (today: 86 degrees). A wrinkled man motors down the street in a Lark. A white-haired lady hooked up to oxygen snoozes outside a drugstore.

And inside the Ramada Resort, a 70-year-old woman is stripping. As in tearing pieces from her skimpy pink-and-black burlesque bustier and gyrating to a number from *Pal Joey*. The judges huddle. Maybe it's the Ensure talking, but I think granny's going to the finals.

Mat-lock the doors and hide the Centrum Silver: It's an open casting call for NBC's reality special *Second Chance: America's Most Talented Senior* (June 1 at 8 p.m.). That's right, after semi-scoring with *America's Most Talented Kid*, the Peacock is spotlighting the Met-amucil multitudes. (Someone has fallen into a trend and can't get up.) When 1 of the 10 nationwide auditions seeking exceptional 50-plusers was held in Palm Springs, folks flocked to it en masse. And by *flocked* I mean gingerly stepped out of their Buicks. And by *en masse* I mean 88 people.

Today's contestants, who'll be given 90 seconds to impress, have been corralled into a spartan greenroom. A frighteningly limber sixtysomething in a sequined leotard twirls around emotionally, earning her a competitive stare from a white-tuxed seventysomething who belongs to a dance posse called the Tap-A-Tooties. Others joke that the program should be called *Last Chance*. "I think the mortality rate is gonna be a lot higher than on *American Idol*," says Ron Randolph, a genial 68-year-old retired

yacht broker. "I just hope these folks get through the whole thing. If it's a 10-week contest, who the hell knows?"

With cameras rolling, Randolph cautiously sings "You'll Never Walk Alone"—and is dismissed. ("I was a scared old man up there," he confides. "I swear to God in heaven I can sing better than that.") His "Comeback CD" arrives in my mailbox several weeks later.) Reese Allen, a tiny 75-year-old British man wearing a silk ascot printed with musical notes, insists he's not nervous. "Believe me, I'm fabulous," he says, adding that he once accompanied Judy Garland in France. Despite his rather jaunty medley featuring



AGED TO PERFECTION

(1) A group of *Talented Seniors* wait for their big break; (2) Prescott with dance partner (and former nun) Cyzan; (3) Arline struts her 70-year-old stuff; (4) Anita Maltin is tutu cute; (5) Rita Agnese has a leg up on the competition

"I Will Survive," Allen does not, and is sent packing.

So are most of his Polygrip peers, like the 87-year-old harmonica whiz, the 79-year-old tutu-clad comedienne singing "Nobody Loves a Fairy When She's Forty," and the contestant who can't remember her song ("I'm having a senior moment," she coyly confesses). Even Joan Arline, our 37-24-37 burlesque babe—a former commodities broker!—gets stiffed. "I put so much time into shortening the number," she sighs, "and learning a new order of taking the clothes off."

The shocks went both ways. Though 75-year-old Shirley Claire claims, "I was a soprano with a five-octave range, and I've got about five notes left," she nails "I'm Gonna Live Till I Die" and celebrates her callback by rolling on the floor. "We've got some good talent," says NBC casting director Andrea Manos, who saw a salty 89-year-old Pope impersonator and a rapping Liz Taylor look-alike in San Diego. "A lot of characters. Whether they're prime-time, I'm not sure."

At least one pair didn't give two hoots about all that Hollywood nonsense. Retired cop Stanley Prescott, 85, and former nun Lurraïn Cyzan, 82—who performed a cute dance act but weren't picked—are packing up their homemade costumes. With plans for senior domination thwarted, what now? "I'm going to take her to dinner," he says cheerfully. She nods, adding: "Then we're going home. *Lawrence Welk* is on at 6 o'clock."

(Editor's note: None of the seniors from Palm Springs advanced to the televised finals. But don't worry, they'll be fine. Just call or write every now and then, if you can. No need to make a big production out of it.) —Dan Snierson