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“Sunset Daze” radiates an aura of beauty and sentiment

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I was sure that *Sunset Daze*, a new reality show set in a retirement community, would be for ironic viewers only. Most reality TV, after all, is sport for the young, to throw darts at willing targets: sex-addicted D-listers, MTV hot tubbers, New Jerseyites, Tori Spelling. *Sunset Daze* would have to be yet another new reality low, inviting us to laugh at Viagra-obsessed elders showboating for the cameras.

And I was so wrong. This show, which premieres tonight at 10 on WEtv, is really well done; it's actually kind of touching. It's a docu-soap, like *The Real World*, which means it is by definition kind of hokey, with obviously set-up scenes and an imbalance toward the more extroverted characters. But, that said, *Sunset Daze* manages to deliver a bittersweet but mostly sweet portrait of the sunset years, that last chapter or two that terrifies most people under the age of 60. I can't say the show made me yearn to move to Arizona and live in a retirement community like Sun City Grand someday, but it did remind me that you don't have to be dead until you die.

Part of the success of *Sunset Daze* has to do with casting. The characters we meet in the first two episodes are more than the flat types we too often see on reality TV you know, *The Jock*, *The Wallflower*, *The Drunk*. Ann, 61, who was a nun in Ireland until she was 39, is experiencing her later years with a newfound sense of joy. In one scene, she goes skydiving yes, folks, the Flying Ex-Nun and she has what she describes as a moment with God. Sandy is a clear-eyed, blond widow who's starting to date, and who is crushing on a local shooting instructor. As this 68-year-old gathers her courage to ask him on a date, she could as easily be 16.

My favorite so far is Gail, who identifies herself as 70-plus. Originally from New York, she has a long history in show business and a very Broadway, show-must-go-on attitude about life. Her hair oh, her hair! It's as orange-red as a ripe tomato, with a bouffant sprayed into a flip-shaped statue. Every Saturday, her son and best friend, Cary, comes to visit her and do her hair. During a nice brisket dinner she makes for him, Cary invites Gail to attend his beloved gay rodeo. And before you can say Boot Scootin' Boogie, she is line-dancing with the fellas and flirting with the drag queens.

Jack, 72, is one of the few single men in Sun City Grand, and he has fallen in love with a woman named Kathleen. She's sending mixed signals about commitment, though, and he senses danger and heartbreak dead ahead. *Sunset Daze* doesn't undermine Jack's sorrow with a typically flippant reality TV tone involving fast-edits and campy soundtrack flourishes. The show can certainly be funny, as it is in almost every scene with Gail, but it also lets us feel badly for Jack for a minute, as he realizes he can't waste a lot of time waiting for Kathleen to come around. There is no condescension afoot on *Sunset Daze*, just a sense of respect for the risks these people are taking, as they jump out of planes and jump into love, hoping for one more safe landing.