

At 85, Carol Channing isn't slowing down

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When you have a lifetime achievement Tony Award on your mantle, you shouldn't have to play to a half-empty house.

Period.

But that was the unthinkable challenge presented to Broadway legend Carol Channing on Saturday night in Kuss Auditorium.

Then again, this is the woman who toughed it out for more than 5,000 performances as Dolly Gallagher Levi — and for more than a few of those, she was fighting ovarian cancer.

So on Saturday night, she gave the crowd of 800 a performance fit for 1,500. Channing, the goofy Tony-winner who came to fame clear back in 1949 in the original stage production of "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," was undeniably funny as she reminisced about her life as part of a one-woman show she calls "The First 80 Years are the Hardest."

At 85, Channing makes it all look pretty easy.

During a Q&A session after the performance, Channing said she has one son.

Oh, how I envy his genes.

Channing, who turns 86 in January, is redefining what it means to be, well, old.

There she was Saturday night thrusting her hips as she sang "Little Girl From Little Rock" — and, yes, that really was a leg-kick during "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend."

The fact that she was on stage, without an intermission, for about an hour and 40 minutes suggests they just don't make 'em like Carol Channing anymore.

At one point during the show, she told the story of a fellow cast member who missed a performance. "She said, 'I was sick.' I said, 'You missed your own best performance,'" Channing recalled. "When you reach to the heavens to get the show out, the heavens answer."

Whatever forces were at work Saturday night resulted in a show that certainly deserved to be seen by more than 800 people.

That's not just because Channing has become a sort of octogenarian marvel.

She's still really funny.

In fact, just like she used to play up being a scatter-brained blonde, she now plays up being a scatter-brained elderly person.

Underneath it all, though, is a sharp comedian who knows what they're doing, even though it might seem otherwise.

That's the mark of a true professional.

And on Saturday, Channing proved she's still worth every inch of that lifetime achievement award.

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