



AgingWell
New Flu
Old Problem
H1N1

AgingWell
IS NOW
DIGITAL!

CLICK HERE
TO VIEW THE
DIGITAL
EDITION



Curtain Call — Senior Theater's Dramatic Growth

By Barbara Worthington and Arney Bernstein

Senior theatre provides older adults with an ideal opportunity to display their acting, singing, and dramatic talents. For some, it's an opportunity to revive and reprise their skills from bygone days. For others, it's the chance of a lifetime to take center stage.

Launched and supported by a new and enthusiastic generation of older adults, senior theatre is one of the "fastest growing forms of the performing arts," according to Bonnie Vorenberg, of the Senior Theatre Resource Center in Portland, OR. The center's database—the largest of its kind—boasts more than 770 senior theatre companies nationwide, an increase from only 79 in 1999.

Vorenberg attributes the remarkable growth of senior theatre not only to the interest and stamina of the current generation of older adults but also to the concerted maintenance of their health and positive outlook on aging. Those who become active in senior theatre fall into one of three categories, she says. They've either never acted before but always wanted to, have acted previously and wanted to do it again, or have been involved in drama and theatrical productions all their lives.

Designed specifically for older adults, senior theatre incorporates techniques to accommodate their abilities. Scripts feature a majority of older characters in situations based on occurrences in older persons' lives. Productions involve a variety of genres, including plays, follies, variety shows, and musicals.

"People who participate in senior theatre are pretty unique," Vorenberg says. Older adults engaged in theatrical pursuits revel in the opportunity to challenge their abilities, meet new people, and enjoy the experience, and they develop a remarkable esprit de corps. "They start to overlook each other's oddities and quirks and start to see the value and richness of those quirks," she says.

Senior theatre enjoys a broad variety of sponsorships, including commercial, professional, and community theatres; senior centers, retirement homes, universities; and social service organizations. Active in

both urban and rural settings, senior theatre performers range in age from 50 to 90, with the majority in their 60s and 70s, according to Vorenberg.

Starring Role

Many consider Stagebridge in Oakland, CA, which was launched in 1978 as an acting class at a senior center, the grandfather of the senior theatre movement. It's not only the oldest senior theatre company in the country but also one of the best known. It averages 150 members with an average age of 70 and has expanded from simple performances to include school and community programs, workshops, storytelling, and more. And its impressive growth continues.

"It's not like I woke up one morning and said, 'Think I'll start a senior theatre company,'" recalls Stuart Kandell, PhD, Stagebridge's founder and executive director. "In 1978, I was in England studying drama in education for my master's, and for the last weekend of class, worked with two older people. I spent the whole weekend getting their life stories and transferring them into drama projects."

When Kandell returned to the United States, he began working with an arts agency, which included visiting senior centers where he held drama improvisation classes.

"There were five women in their 70s who had never done anything like that in their lives who participated," he says. "Five months later, the center asked me if I'd put together some skits for Christmas. It seems like my students heard the sound of applause and liked it. The skits went well, and Stagebridge grew out of that."

Kandell began developing plays specifically for older audiences. One of the first was a play based on an elder couple selling the family house and moving to an apartment in Florida. Others soon followed. "Older people saw their peers on stage and could relate to the material," he says. "Soon, some of them expressed interest in acting themselves, and we began to grow."

The following year, Kandell put together a play for elementary school audiences called *Was There Light Before TV?* in which the elder participants performed short scenes from older peoples' lives followed by a discussion. "This was an audience of 9 and 10-year-olds who were seeing people not their grandparents' age but their great-grandparents' age, and there was an almost immediate rapport between them," Kandell says. "I knew then we could really impact audiences, and now, almost 30 years later, that's what we continue to do."

While many of Stagebridge's performances are of the touring variety, staged on site at nursing homes, schools, senior centers, and assisted-living facilities, it also rents space in a local church hall for holding shows, most of

which are well attended. Various clubs and organizations frequently request performances. Over the course of one year, the senior troupe stages several hundred performances.

The group is supported by the Friends of Stagebridge, comprised of independent and group donors, as well as by grants from government agencies, foundations, and private corporations. It charges fees for its services but usually on a sliding scale, depending on the situation.

Adapting to Entertain

Senior theatre works because it doesn't rely on set formulas or procedures. It's all about flexibility and adaptation. It can be drama or comedy, inexpensive or extravagant, a singing duo or an extensive cast. But across the board, it's fun, as participants attest.

Two veteran senior theatre performers, both acquaintances of Bonnie Vorenberg, have found their experiences challenging and rewarding. Though their involvement with performers and performance styles are different, they eagerly anticipate the many opportunities to teach and to entertain.

Prosper Egan, 63, of Hilton Head, SC, has been involved in senior theatre for six years. She has focused on presenting reproductions of old-time radio shows, such as *George and Gracie*, *Baby Snooks*, and the *The Great Gildersleeve*. She and her colleagues have performed at nursing homes, senior centers, assisted living centers, and a variety of other venues from Savannah, GA to Charleston, SC.

"It [senior theatre] provides some social outlet," says Egan, who acts, directs, and produces. "I'm busier now than I was when I was working." She hits the road with a continually expanding company that currently includes 17 older adults.

"Where people can't come to us," she says, "we go to them." It's nearly as much fun from the audience perspective as from the performer perspective, according to Egan. "We're remarkably well received," she says with pride.

She welcomes prospective performers with open arms. "I don't audition anyone because I don't want to turn anyone away," she says. Difficulty with memorizing or speaking? No problem. In a wheelchair? Your talents are what's important, according to Egan.

Egan finds that it's fun to include audience participants at venues such as nursing homes or senior centers. She often recruits volunteers to hold up "applause" or "laugh" signs on cue, generating playful responses from audiences immersed in the performance.

Senior theatre, while relatively easy to launch, provides incredible rewards to its participants, says Egan. Starting one can be as easy as placing an ad in a local newspaper. It can also be inexpensive as well. Productions can be staged with or without costumes, using both live and recorded sound effects. The focus remains on developing participants' talents and offering them an outlet.

On a somewhat larger and more lavish scale, Irene Chapman of Van Nuys, CA, stages a two-hour show, *Two Grandmas from Brooklyn*, that has toured nationwide. The 75-year-old voice teacher has been involved with senior theatre for 15 years.

Performing locally and nationally, Chapman customizes musical selections and jokes to appeal to audiences in nursing homes, private parties, senior centers, military bases, and supper clubs. "We make it very much fun," she says.

Senior theatre provides a welcome outlet for the passionate performer who likes to meet people. The many venues at which she performs afford that opportunity. She enjoys the challenge of continually adding to the act and keeping the material fresh.

Chapman says her repertoire includes a variety of show tunes, operatic pieces, classics, and some old favorites. She customizes each performance to target specific audiences, many of which include older adults. "We get such a thrill when audiences tell us 'You brought back memories,'" she says.

The popular outlet for older adults to display their acting and comedic talents offers a number of variations on acting venues. Elders can participate in such programs as storytelling partnerships operated at local schools; classes and workshops on acting, storytelling, playwriting, singing, and improvisation; matinee school performances providing specialized messages to students; and even performing arts camps for older adults.

Rewarding Response

Stagebridge's oldest active performer is 91. Though the group is a bit fluid, there are a number of performers who've been involved for 10 years or more. The record-holder has been involved for 26 years. Some performers memorize their lines, while others prefer to read them from cards. Some have physical limitations and use canes and walkers on stage. "Virtually all of our performers tend to be proud, as is the nature of actors, so they'll do all they can not to go on stage with a walker or cane," Kandell says. "One lung-cancer patient played a hooker and hid her oxygen tank beneath this humongous skirt."

Some have decided to stop being active after a while, and some have performed up to a week before they passed away. Some have had mild dementia. A few have even gone on to do some professional work on TV, in commercials, print ads, and bit parts in films.

While Stagebridge occasionally offers Shakespearean scenes or portions of age-related plays such as *On Golden Pond* or *Driving Miss Daisy*, the vast majority of the material is original, and much is commissioned from local playwrights. Kandell and his recently retired codirector, Linda Spector, have also written a good deal, and Kandell still directs a number of performances.

"A lot of the professional literature that deals with aging has been done a million times," he says. "We needed plays on specific subjects like depression, volunteering, love, sex, growing old, caregiving, and other topics that deal with real issues. Plays don't exist for that, so we needed to create our own."

And while Kandell takes pride in Stagebridge's accomplishment, he says his greatest reward has been threefold. "Personally, this is a fantastic opportunity to work with people in the latter stages of their lives, doing things they really want to be doing, challenging themselves, being creative, giving back, and passing on stories. As far as the performers go, I don't know how

many have told me being involved has kept them feeling better, younger, or feeling needed. One participant in our camp told me the experience changed his life. A senior center director told us we bring light into people's lives. A school kid said we gave him the key to the past. How do you improve on comments like that? You simply cannot."

Wish List?

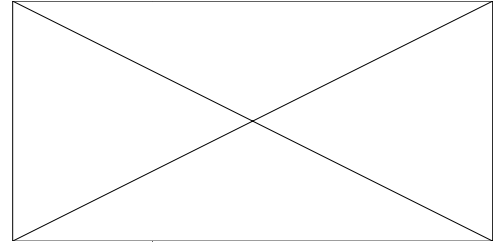
Where does Kandell want to see Stagebridge in five years? "I'd like to grow the company and develop more training programs so we can serve more of the [San Francisco] Bay area," he says. "Right now, we're only serving about half the requests we get."

He'd also like to build a center for creative aging and an art center for aging and older adults with artists in residence, internships, artists' colony, theatre, café, and more. "It's actually in the planning stages; we're working with a developer," he says.

Ultimately, though, what he believes distinguishes Stagebridge from the other senior theatre groups isn't its longevity or diversity. "I think a big part of us is that we don't try to hide the fact that these are older people," he says. "We don't pretend they're 20 years younger. We want to present older people for who they are, so their essence can be seen. There aren't enough role models today; they provide more."

— *Barbara Worthington is associate editor of **Aging Well**.*

— *Arn Bernstein is a Philadelphia-based writer and editor.*



Great Valley Publishing Co., Inc.
3801 Schuylkill Road
Spring City, PA 19475

Copyright [Contact](#)
© 2009 [About Us](#)
Publishers [Writers' Guidelines](#)
of
AgingWell
All rights
reserved.