



JOURNAL REPORTS

Older Actors Are Taking to the Stage

Theater Companies See Growing Interest Among the 50-Plus Crowd



A Stagebridge performance of 'Hair' in Berkeley, Calif. The group offers 30 classes a week and has eight performing troupes. PHOTO: STUART KANDELL

By SALLY ABRAHMS
March 15, 2015 11:04 p.m. ET

1 COMMENT

Clovis Clark, age 59, is a professional nurse. But she also has spent time recently as a conniving, murderous sister and a madam in a brothel.

Her latter roles came courtesy of an Atlanta theater group, the Past Prime Players.

"I love this," says the Ellenwood, Ga., resident, who has performed in dramas, comedies, murder mysteries, skits and monologues. "Acting is an opportunity to become someone else."

JOURNAL REPORT

- Insights from [The Experts](#)
- Read more at [WSJ.com/Encore](#)

MORE IN ENCORE: THE NEW RETIREMENT

- [How to Say 'No' to Retirement](#)
- [The Best Way to Invest a Nest Egg](#)
- [It's Time for Grown-Ups to Get Their Shots](#)
- [The Value of Pumping Iron](#)
- [Why Portland, Ore., Is Drawing Retirees](#)

The 50-plus crowd is stage-struck. Across the country, growing numbers of older adults are joining theater companies and signing up for classes in acting, directing and playwriting. Many—empty-nesters or newly retired—have never set foot on a stage and are seeking new outlets. But many others, like Ms. Clark, caught the acting bug in high school or college, before pursuing other (paying) careers.

Return engagements

Now, they're back. And finding new rewards.

"The experience of acting is very different as a 50-something-year-old," says Karen Sellinger in Albany, Calif. She majored in theater in college but opted to be a psychologist.

Now, at age 60, she's taking classes at Stagebridge, a senior theater company in Oakland, Calif.

"There's not this dog-eat-dog competition," Ms. Sellinger says. "It's a...community where we're all rooting for, and supporting, each other."

"We're all struggling with health issues and memory," she adds. But "I'm not thinking about my stage of life on stage. I don't feel my knee hurt. Age is not a part of it."

Stagebridge is evidence of the trend. Currently, 250 people take one or more of the 30 classes taught weekly in acting, playwriting, improv, storytelling, singing and musical theater, among other subjects. The number of courses has doubled in the past five years. At least half of the enrollees are ages 50 to 70.

In all, the company has eight performing troupes that visit schools, senior centers, public theaters and adult day centers. Every other year, the nonprofit commissions a play in which both professionals and students act.

Curtain Up

A look at senior theater in the U.S.

◆ Currently, 791 companies identify themselves as senior-theater groups, up from 79 in 1997.

◆ Companies are sponsored by, among others, theaters, senior centers, retirement communities, colleges, and social service and arts organizations.

◆ Most actors are in their late 60s to mid-80s.

◆ Short plays are most popular. But groups also stage fully mounted plays, follies, variety shows, autobiographical scripts, puppetry and more.

Source: ArtAge Senior Theatre Resource Center
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

"The appeal for many is that they know they're going to be working with a group of people," says Stuart Kandell, the founder of Stagebridge. "What they may not realize is that the group becomes a real family. Laughing, depending upon one another, making mistakes and recovering together builds a real bond."

Bonnie Vorenberg, president of ArtAge Publications' Senior Theatre Resource Center in Portland, Ore., which works with theater groups across the country and internationally, says she now has 791 senior theater groups in her database—up from 79 in 1997. While the growth is welcome, new organizations, she says, invariably face a steep learning curve.

Put another way: "King Lear" isn't always the right play to start with.

"What works well for older actors is a very narrow genre," Ms. Vorenberg explains. "Plays can't be too long—short work is best, at 10 to 20 minutes—[and] they can't be too difficult

because that would require more rehearsals, and people will say, 'I'm not doing this.' But they can't be too easy because then actors won't be artistically challenged." (Some companies have actors read their scripts on stage; others require them to memorize their lines.)

Scriptwriters, directors and actors say that, increasingly, shows with modern, realistic themes resonate. Audiences—and, in particular, older theatergoers—want to see older adults in positive roles, whether it's having a new job or being sexually active.

Says Mr. Kandell at Stagebridge: "Theatrical literature has mirrored the popular cultural views of how we see older adults: either as pathetic victims trapped in nursing homes or as super grannies surfing huge waves and running marathons."

Money trouble

Another challenge for senior theater groups: money. Actors are usually amateurs—not a big draw for donors. And funding for aging doesn't usually go to the arts. Rather than considered life-enhancing, theater groups often are regarded as a frill.

The challenges haven't deterred Monciella Elder, 61, from becoming a theater director and playwright. In 2009, the professional singer and actor had to stop performing due to multiple sclerosis. "I was so depressed," she recalls. Then a nearby senior center asked her to run its drama club. Soon after, she left to found Past Prime Players in Atlanta.

Ms. Elder has taken the 18 or so actors, ages 57 to 68, "from ground zero," she says. She trains them in voice projection, character development, improvisation and acting, along with lighting, sound and set design. In the past four years, she has written and directed more than 20 plays and skits.

For casting, she puts commitment before auditions. Actors must agree to attend twice-weekly, two-hour rehearsals, and three or four a week closer to production.

Her troupe has played at churches, women's conferences, dinner theaters, schools and senior centers, as well as large venues in Atlanta, New Orleans and Atlantic City (where Ms. Clark played her role as a lady of the evening). Along with lighter themes, Ms. Elder has tackled spousal abuse, death and loss, and sexual orientation.

Before every performance, the actors tell the audience, "We may be past our prime, but we still love to play." Through her work, Ms. Elder also hopes to dispel stereotypes about aging and to inspire others in their 50s and beyond. Her message: It's never too late to follow your dreams.

Right on cue, after every performance, Ms. Elder says her phone rings with inquiries from audience members who want to join the Past Prime Players.

At a recent rehearsal, she suggested the group take a week off. They wouldn't hear of it.

"I can't get them to go home," she says. "They're enjoying themselves so much."

Ms. Abrahms is a writer in Massachusetts. She can be reached at encore@wsj.com.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

There is 1 comment.

[Log in to comment](#)

Newest ▾

Francis Farina

I've always dreamed about being Harold Hill or Tevye. I now live a block from a community theatre so this could be the time!

3 hours ago

EDITORS' PICKS



U.S. Aging Baby Boomers Bring Drug Habits Into Middle Age



WORLD China's Steel Exports Spark Protests



ACHES & CLAIMS Can Personal Air Purifiers Keep Cold and Flu Bugs Away?



WORLD Scientists Search for Bones of Cervantes



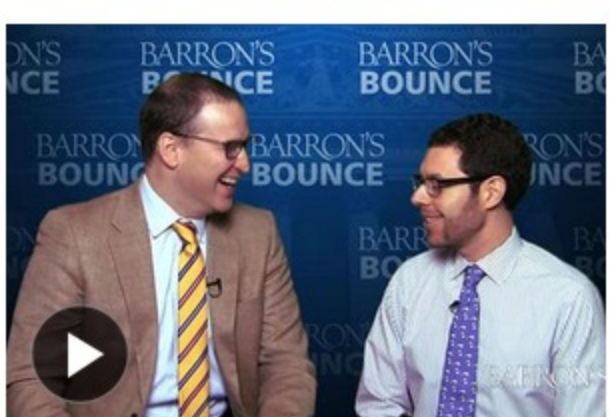
HEARD & SCENE For Netflix Star, His Life Imitates His Art



SPEAKEASY 10 Movies Triggered by the New 'Mad Men' Exhibit



URBAN GARDNER An Urban Archaeologist Lets Go



MARKETS CH Robinson, Forestar and Sinclair Broadcast Jump