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By Jean Schiffman



COURTESY OF STAGEBRIDGE

(From left to right) Margaret Saito, Martha Kelman, Audrey Goodfriend, Bernice Thomas and Jerry Fishman in Stagebridge's *Old Mother Goose Ain't What She Used To Be*

Dancing Grannies

No More

As the baby boom generation ages, senior theater mushrooms nationwide.

It's not surprising that senior theater is becoming an important part of the arts scene. For one thing, people are living longer—life expectancy in the United States has increased by more than 30 years since 1900. For another, a baby boomer turns 50 every 30 seconds. Not only that, but today's seniors are not content with “Bible, bingo and birthdays,” according to Bonnie L. Vorenberg, a Portland, OR-based theater practitioner who has been working in the field since the late '70s. Training and performing with groups of like-minded peers—whether in a senior center program, an amateur, community or professional theater or a regional theater's outreach wing—appeals to an increasing number of older individuals eager for challenges and artistic expression, she says. Many have had a lifelong love of theater and some school performing experience. Some are seasoned pros who also work in film, television and commercials.

To meet the growing interest, Vorenberg recently published *Senior Theatre Connections*, the first-ever directory of senior performing groups and resources in the U.S. (also including listings for Canada and Europe). It documents more than 200 groups, and, says Vorenberg, calls are still

coming in from people who want to join a senior theater or start one.

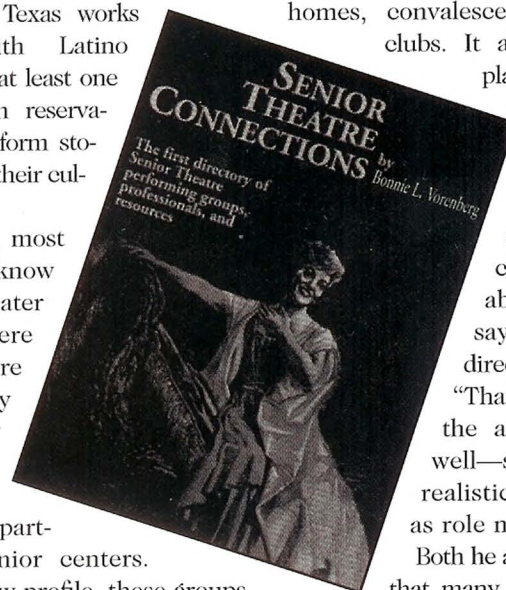
Currently, the majority of participants are Caucasian women, but Vorenberg notes that groups in New York attract people from different backgrounds; a company in Texas works specifically with Latino themes; and on at least one Native American reservation, seniors perform stories drawn from their cultural past.

Until recently, most people didn't know that senior theater existed or where the groups were located. Many are virtually hidden within city park and recreational departments and senior centers. Despite their low profile, these groups have been busy presenting public matinees (for mostly senior audiences), as well as touring to schools, medical performance sites, fraternal organizations, group homes and elsewhere.

The 21-year-old Stagebridge in Oakland, CA, is an example of a successful group that expects to become even more

visible. On an annual budget of \$176,000 and with an ongoing multi-cultural and multi-generational company of 50 (average age: 70), Stagebridge tours short plays (composed of monologues and sketches) to senior centers, retirement homes, convalescent hospitals and clubs. It also takes original plays (based on the theme of grandparents' tales) into the local schools. “Our raison d'être is to change attitudes about old people,” says founder/artistic director Stuart Kandell. “That's what theater and the arts can do really well—show positive and realistic images, as well as role models.”

Both he and Vorenberg agree that many senior theater programs in America settle for amateur productions of light comedies, skits or musical revues, which fulfill certain needs, but nevertheless fall short on two counts: offering serious challenges to older people and helping to improve our youth-oriented society's attitudes toward aging. “Quality theater by seniors negates the myths of



aging and elevates the activity from just something that seniors are doing to fill time," Vorenberg explains. "What you do must be of top quality—you have a whole society's biases to counteract."

Adds Kandell, "One stereotype is that older people are frail and have no energy and that we should applaud them just for being onstage. But that's not enough. We've got to insist on the highest quality, or we buy into patronizing." Accordingly, Kandell's Stagebridge, which is managed by a small professional staff, offers various forms of training for its members and pays them a stipend while highlighting substantial themes in its material.

Ron Nocks, 62, the touring director (and a performer) at Grandparents Living Theatre in Columbus, OH, observes, "In earlier times, senior theater in the United States was a lot of dancing grannies, which gave a bad name to senior theater. People said, 'Wow, they can still kick their legs.'" Grandparents Living Theatre, however, dispels that myth by offering classes in acting, dance and movement.

Of course, leaders in the field know that there are specific artistic and administra-

tive considerations. For example, memorization is more difficult for the aging brain—readers' theater is a popular form for that reason. (But older actors say they can memorize, it just takes longer.) Also, many seniors don't like to drive at night, so daytime rehearsals and matinees are required.

Psychological resistance can be problematic, too. Some seniors don't want to play children; others cringe at playing frail old people; still others don't like to perform in nursing homes.

But the biggest problem senior theaters face is that playwrights are not writing good new material for the aging population of actors. "We're stuck with *The Gin Game*, *Driving Miss Daisy* and *On Golden Pond*," sighs Kandell, "and all those plays are being written by younger people."

Ron Nocks of Grandparents Living Theatre says, "The reason we do original works



From left to right: Audrey Goodfriend, Jordy Sears Zeve and Jerry Fishman in the Stagebridge's *The Keeping Quilt And Other Grandparent's Tales*

is because there's nothing out there to do." His heartfelt cry: "Please, playwrights, write for older performers!" The challenge for playwrights may be to tackle serious aging-related themes in an accessible form that provides multiple roles for older actors.

One such older performer, Charles Hayes, 68, took acting classes and joined the senior ensemble wing of Horizon Theatre Company in Atlanta, GA. The company writes its own plays that have "messages of encouragement about dealing with problems in life," says Hayes. A retired United Methodist preacher, Hayes describes himself as "introverted." Working with Horizon has given him a vibrant and optimistic outlook. "I'm a little bit more open-minded," Hayes says. "You meet all kinds of actors from all backgrounds, religions, different ethnic groups. It tends to keep us younger. I think I would really be lost without it."

Senior theater, at its best, can improve the quality of life for older people and may perhaps eventually reverse society's prejudices toward aging, but, most of all, it can show the younger generation that older people are just like them, with the same hopes and dreams, lit by an inner flame that burns brighter than ever.

For resources in senior theater and to order *Senior Theatre Connections*, call ArtAge Publications at 800-858-4998. SD

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