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~ Effects in health and care ~ Research ~ Programs ~ Policy

Stagebridge: The Magic of Theater with Real Older Actors

By Stuart Kandell

In ancient times, roving troubadours, actors, and storytellers traveled the land. When they came upon groups of people, they unfurled their rug and performed their plays. Time stopped and the audiences were transfixed in magical, timeless, unforgettable moments. When the play was over, they rolled up their rug and traveled on.

Stagebridge has been creating such magic for the past quarter-century. Our troubadours walk with canes. Our actors have wrinkles. And our storytellers wear bifocals. They roam the deserts of the senior landscape and the hills and valleys where children spend their days. The caravan (a Dodge Caravan, that is) winds its way in search of appreciative audiences. Finding them, we unfurl our rug in a variety of venues: lunchrooms abuzz with elders eating, cramped living rooms in convalescent hospitals, cafeterias with noisy schoolchildren, passageways between stacks of books in libraries, and even occasionally on stages actually designed for theater.

Audiences arrive curious, bored, tired, hyper, or upset that they have to stop eating or be quiet. But a silence falls quickly when the show begins.



Photo: Stagebridge

Audiences are stopped in their tracks by the sight of these “ancients” on their magic carpet. Elder audiences witness the enthusiasm of people their own age; younger audiences are shocked by people their great (or great-great) grandparents’ ages doing things they never expected.

Time stops. For those moments, the cafeteria walls

dissolve into far-off lands of adventure and mystery. The crowded living room fades into distant familiar places tucked away in collective memories. The actors take their audiences on journeys that stir up laughter, joy, hope, and memory. When they finish, the journey often continues for the audience. They touch the actors, ask questions, make comments, come up and tell their own stories. Finally, the rug is rolled up and the actors depart. The distant lands recede and the cafeteria or living room returns to normal. People are wheeled out, return to their classrooms, go back to their bingo games—but they are *never* the same.

Since 1978, Stagebridge has been creating theater that brings old and young together. Based in Oakland, California, the company is the nation’s oldest senior theater. Our mission has

always been to make theater and storytelling an opportunity for older adults and use these arts to bridge the generations. What began as a drama class at a senior center with five shy white-haired women has grown into a company of 100 members who average 70 years old. The theater continues to be run by the founders and supports an eight-person staff with grants from government, foundations, and corporations; donations from individuals; and earned revenues.

It is just a few minutes until curtain time at the theater, where we are performing our *Grandparents Tales* play for thousands of schoolchildren. The annual play brings to life popular children's books about grandparents and is performed by a cast ranging in age from 10 to 85. "Hurry up, the play's about to begin," calls the director to a dawdling nine-year-old in the bathroom. The girl turns to her and asks, "Can't they just rewind it?"

Our concept of theater is changing—from the "live" collective world to the manufactured virtual variety that can be purchased in most stores and installed in the privacy of our own homes. Now we fill our lives with reality TV, video games, and enhanced images in the media that serve as the new role models of what it means to grow old.

At a local school, I ask children how often they actually see an older person. Most say "once a month or almost never." Even though the children sit next to elders on the bus and pass them on the street, they don't see them.

When was the last time your children saw their grandparents? My daughters are lucky to see their grandmother (who lives on the opposite coast) twice a year. Instead, they are fed a steady diet of virtual images, even though there are "real" ones all around them that they don't see.

To remedy this, we send real older actors and storytellers into schools. Our Storybridge program recruits, trains, and places older storytellers in local classrooms to mentor at-risk children with personal and traditional tales. They tell everything from "Snow White" and other

traditional tales to living-history stories that bring World War II or the civil rights era to life. Children build relationships, improve their literacy skills, learn to tell their own stories, and even interview their grandparents for the Grandparents' Tales Writing Contest.

Our cultural attitudes about aging are "over the hill." We hardly ever see an actress over age 70 in a play, on TV, or in the movies. Instead, *Time* magazine crowns Martha Stewart (age 65) and Paul Newman (age 81) with the Aging Gracefully Award. Mick Jagger continues to be



Photo: Stagebridge

the butt of aging jokes. And playwrights insist on putting older characters on park benches or in nursing homes. Something is wrong.

So we write our own plays. Linda Spector, resident playwright since 1980, has written thirty plays for the company that have been seen by over a quarter of a million people. We also commission new plays by local authors. The topics of our plays range from stereotypes of old people in fairy tales (*Old Mother Goose Ain't What She Used to Be!*) to problems of crime (*Purse Snatch*), the technical revolution (*Computer Crazy*), caregiving (*Take Care*), and even the forbidden subjects (*Love, Sex and Growing Old*).

We provide opportunity and access. In a typical week, students take improvisation, storytelling, acting, singing, and dance classes. Actors film public service announcements about upcoming Medicare drug changes. Storytellers perform *Busting the Bullies* at a school assembly

and record tales about the Vietnam era for radio broadcast. Our 90-year-old singer leads nursing home residents in a sing-along. Actors tour their musical variety show *Never Too Late* for an elder volunteer dinner. And the improvisation troupe works with student nurses on scenarios that help them learn what it's really like to grow old.

Because theater is an ensemble art, it helps create meaning and connection in people's lives. So when Jerry has trouble getting out of bed at

6 a.m. to make an 8:30 performance, Kathy forgets a line because she just had chemotherapy, or Cecil has to take her nitro backstage, the show must go on—and it does.

This roving band of “ancient” actors unfurls its magic carpet and creates theater that transforms themselves, their audiences, and the way all of us understand aging. ❧

Stuart Kandell is director, Stagebridge, Oakland, Calif. info@stagebridge.org.

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