

Sylvia: The Making of a Musical

(This is the third of a four-part series by Maryann Maslan on the process of creating an original musical.)



Opening Night — we're almost there. The cast and crew of *Sylvia's Advice on How to Age Gracefully on the Planet Denial* will move into The Ashby Stage Monday, February 1 when they will be on the real set for the first time.

"After almost two and a half years since the idea for the production,

bringing everyone on board and working through the process of creating an original musical, it's so exciting to see it opening," said Josiah Polhemus, Stagebridge's Co-Artistic Director and production manager for *Sylvia*.

"It has exceeded all expectations," he added.

Rehearsals are fun, by all accounts, with the cats Kismet and Lassie the Wonder Cat leading the antics and choreographer Bruce Bierman incorporating it all into dance movement.

Bruce's process has been one of drawing character movement from the actors to complement Scrumbly Koldewyn's music and he draws his inspiration from the master Jerome Robbins.

"It's all about ideas: character, theme, plot and story. The movement has to go somewhere," said Bruce.

With a snap, snap, snap of his fingers then sweeping his hands up in front of his face he spreads wide his fingers watching the actors, "more, more lollipop hands. Yes, that's it!"

Off stage left, watching the action with an eye on the script is stage manager and properties master Dorothy Carnegie. She smiles at the clown-like goofiness of Sara Moore (a.k.a. Lassie the Wonder Cat and the only non-senior in the company) who is mugging for all she's worth.

"See what happens when you put a youngster in the mix?" notes Dorothy.

Parts of the mix are the two understudies Charmaine Hitchcox and Miyoko Sakatani. They watch intently from the sidelines, echoing movements, picking up the blocking and dance steps knowing that at any moment they could be called in to replace an actor.

There's a comfortable routine to the rehearsal with only a week to go. A warm camaraderie has built up from months spent together learning, changing, polishing and fine tuning what began as a comic strip and a concept for a show.

"To bring three such powerful women together – Nicole Hollander, Martha Boesing and Joan Mankin – in one event celebrating creative aging is a triumph and an example of what Stagebridge is all about," said Josiah.

From the GREENROOM

(A series of profiles on company members who reflect the energy, enthusiasm and great variety of talent at Stagebridge)

From critical care nurse to singer, actor and dancer in less than two years

Miyoko Sakatani, with a twinkle in her eye, a radiant smile and a glance to the musical director, steps to the front of the stage to share the joy of song for nursing students at Samuel Merritt University in Oakland.



"A lot has happened in a very short time," Miyoko says.

A critical care nurse for 35 years, she retired from hospital life in 2008 to part-time independent consulting. She continues to teach holistic health courses, but she still misses hospital nursing.

"It's hard to let go of your identity. That's who you are, but Stagebridge helped with the transition," she added. "You are offered the opportunity to sing and dance and do things you only dreamed of."

She started with a singing class and then auditioned for *Never Too Late*, Stagebridge's touring musical troupe. She is also currently an understudy for two of the main characters in the world premiere musical *Sylvia's Advice on How to Age Gracefully on the Planet Denial*.

With her nursing background and as a member of *Never Too Late*, she is part of Stagebridge's internationally recognized Healthy Aging Program "See Me!" which takes the performing arts into nursing classes as part of their geriatric training.

"We do a short performance so they get an idea of what we do. We then share actual stories of experiences in the hospital as patients, or in my case as a nurse," Miyoko said.

Role playing, group discussions and improvisation also are part of the workshop. The question and answer portion goes both ways.

"Students ask questions like 'What does it feel like to be old?' or 'how do you want to be treated?' and they tend to stereotype older people as grumpy, angry and inactive," she said.

"Then we tell them what we would want from nurses. These young students are so mesmerized by our stories, you can hear a pin drop."

Stagebridge's Healthy Aging Programs are offered throughout the Bay Area. Students and teachers are appreciative of this approach to training, Miyoko continued. "But, I wonder if they really know how much we appreciate them."

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