

Stagebridge

Oakland's Stagebridge is the nation's oldest senior theatre company


ON THE EVE OF STAGEBRIDGE'S 30TH ANNIVERSARY, founder Dr. Stuart Kandell has an air of mild surprise at the organization's success. In 1978 "I was just putting one foot in front of another," he says, a children's theatre guy teaching a class of five women who had never acted before at a senior center. Kandell describes the class's first public performance by holding up his hands as though mimicking flashbulbs going off. "They heard the applause and that was it, end of story. Beginning of story!"

The story has grown into a lean yet far-reaching nonprofit that began as the College Avenue Players, staging collaboratively created works for seniors and young people that provided a better-rounded view of the experience of aging. Notes Kandell, "We don't put makeup on people's wrinkles, we don't say don't go on with your walker, your cane, your oxygen. This is what 60, 80, 94 looks like."

The Players went into schools and senior and community centers, offering "an aha experience" as seniors saw their concerns onstage and kids learned about their grandparents' lives. In 1980 playwright Linda Spector joined up, and the Players created 30 new plays over 20 years.

In 1989, the Players became Stagebridge, reflecting a wider mission to make more aspects of theatre available to older people, and is today the nation's oldest senior theatre company. Stagebridge recently established the Performing Arts Training Institute, an umbrella for its classes in beginning and advanced acting, improv, storytelling, puppetry, dance and movement, and singing and playwrighting. PATI students hone their skills, go out on auditions and go into the community to teach and direct. Through the Public Performance Season Stagebridge still presents one

or two new plays a year for families, seniors and children. The Storybridge Schools Program brings intergenerational storytellers into elementary schools in nine counties, where as well as telling stories they teach kids how to interview their grandparents, leading to a marked improvement in students' reading and comprehension skills. The Healthy Aging Program offers workshops and training for seniors and healthcare providers, including sensitivity-increasing improv work with nursing students. Finally, Stagebridge is home to the Center for Creative Aging (West) and the only West Coast organization using the TimeSlips™ system for creative storytelling work with people with dementia. There are more than 150 actors, storytellers and students in the company, ranging in age from 50 to 92. It also runs an improv troupe, plans to start puppetry and playback troupes and works with top-notch teachers such as Julian López-Morillas, Joan Mankin, Jeff Raz, Liebe Wetzel, Barbara Scott and David Ford. In 2007 Stagebridge began offering a popular performing arts summer camp for older adults.

"To the outside world we're trying to communicate that what we do has value, what we're doing is not babysitting, recreation," says Kandell, adding that someone turns 60 in this country every 30 seconds, creating "a growing demand for challenging opportunities where [older adults] can learn, take risks and give back." 



An Essential Public Good is a recurring series focusing on theatre and dance companies that have a positive impact in their communities.

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