



Stage acting for the young at heart

■ Oldest senior theater company in nation to host storytelling festival Sunday

By Martin Snapp
STAFF WRITER

On Sunday, Stagebridge, the oldest senior theater company in the country, will be the local venue for a worldwide storytelling festival called Telabration, co-sponsored by the Storytelling Association of Alta California and the Urban Librarians Project.

The event will take place at 3 p.m. at Stagebridge's headquarters, Arts First Oakland, located at First Congregational Church, 2501 Harrison St. in Oakland.

Participants include internationally renowned storytellers Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo and Nancy Wang of the San Francisco group Eth-Noh-Tec, as well as storytellers from Stagebridge.

Many of Stagebridge's storytellers say acting keeps them young at heart.

"I don't do it for anyone else. I do it for me," said Audrey Goodfriend, 87, of Berkeley. "For an older person, being able to have fun is very important."

Her friend, Isabelle Ferguson, 91, agrees.

"I wouldn't do it if it wasn't fun," she said.

But they are also very serious about their art.

"I read Stanislavsky and try to find out as much about the character as I can," Goodfriend said. "When I played the author Mary Austin in 'Jack London and Friends,' I read everything she wrote and everything written about her."

And they're real troupers. Goodfriend keeps performing despite seven hip replacement operations, and Ferguson hasn't let hearing problems deter her, either.

"I had to give up improv because you can't say something witty if you can't hear what the



Stagebridge students Roanne Butier, left, and Nancy Pearlman, right, react to a performance in the improv class. (Joanna Jhanda/Contra Costa Times)

other person just said," she said. "So I switched to storytelling. It's very frustrating, but there are worse things."

Such dedication comes as no surprise to Stagebridge's director, Stuart Kandell, who founded the company 29 years ago.

"Theater is all about risk taking and being spontaneous — all the things that people don't associate with growing old," he said. "They're able to live in the moment, which is a powerful thing for people of any age."

And nobody get any concessions because of age or infirmities.

"We don't have understudies, so they know they've got to get up in the morning, they've got to remember their lines, they've got to be here," Kandell said. "We've had people performing up to the day they died."

It all began in 1978, when five women in their 70s enrolled in a drama class taught by Kandell at a

senior center on College Avenue in Oakland.

They spent nine months honing their acting and storytelling skills, then gave their first very tentative performance at the center.

"To be honest, they weren't very good yet," Kandell said. "But when they heard that applause, they were hooked."



Stagebridge student Olithia O'Toole watches a performance during the improv class Wednesday, Nov. 7. (Joanna Jhanda/Contra Costa Times)

Buoyed by their reception, they recruited other seniors, and the College Avenue Players was born.

Their first play, "The Boarding House," about the problems of daily living faced by many of the actors themselves, toured senior centers and retirement homes for six months.

The following year, the company received grants from Vista College (now called Berkeley City College) and the California Arts Council, enabling Kandell to devote to directing the fledgling troupe full-time.

The company started touring local elementary schools with a new play, "Was There Life Before TV?" — a compilation of stories about what it was growing up in a different era.

In 1980, playwright Linda Spector came aboard, eventually joining Kandell as co-director. Over the years, their collaboration has produced more than 30 orig-

inal plays about such themes as stereotypes of old people in fairy tales, elders as crime victims, work and identity, and love and sex at an older age.

By 1983, the troupe was giving more than 50 performances a year, from local venues to the Ashland, Ore., Shakespeare Festival. That same year, they separated themselves from the senior center and struck out on their own as an independent company.

In 1989, the company changed the name to Stagebridge and moved into First Congregational Church.

Today, Stagebridge numbers more than 150 actors, storytellers and students, ranging in age from 50 to 100. Their average age is 70. During the 2006-2007 season, they gave 534 performances and workshops for more than 34,000 people, from schoolchildren to seniors.

If you go

"Telabration" is 3 p.m. Sunday at Arts First Oakland, located at First Congregational Church, 2501 Harrison St., Oakland. Tickets are \$10 in advance, \$15 at the door and can be purchased at www.stagebridge.org. Stagebridge is a nonprofit organization, and donations can be sent to Stagebridge, 2501 Harrison St., Oakland 94612.

Stagebridge also welcomes volunteers as ushers, office support, box office and bulk mailings.

For more information, call 510-444-4755 or e-mail info@stagebridge.org

Stagebridge offers four overlapping programs throughout the year:

▶ The Public Performance Season, which presents one or two new plays a year for families, seniors and children.

▶ Storybridge Schools Program, which brings theater, oral history and storytelling to local elementary schools.

▶ Healthy Aging, which employs the arts to educate health care professionals about older people.

▶ The Center for Creative Aging-West, a network for artists training older adults in theater arts.

And last summer, Stagebridge inaugurated its first annual performing arts camp for adults 50-plus.



Stagebridge improv instructor Josiah Polhemus, standing, and student Lynn Jones react to the discussion during the improv class Wednesday, Nov. 7. (Joanna Jhanda/Contra Costa Times)

Currently, Ferguson is appearing in a new production of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

"I play Martha, and I'm impossible," she said. "I scream at everyone and treat them abominably. It's wonderful."

Goodfriend is rehearsing her next play, and she's already feeling the butterflies in her stomach.

"It's very exciting to watch a whole play put together from the beginning — thinking it'll never be ready, getting the director's stage direction, working with the other actors, and finally realizing that it's going to be OK," she said. "It's a very creative feeling."