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## YOUNG AND OLD JOIN FORCES TO CREATE 'SOMETHING' SPECIAL

- Sam Hurwitt



Chronicle / Liz Hafalia

Two Oakland arts organizations wanted to work together on a project about the youth and elderly of their community.

Stagebridge Senior Theatre, one of the oldest troupes of its kind in the country (the company, that is, not the actors), was founded in 1978 to foster a positive image of aging through plays and storytelling classes for the elderly.

Performing in elementary schools as well as senior centers, Stagebridge is all about bridging the generation gap, so it hoped to partner with Opera Piccola (meaning "small works"), a 15-year-old multicultural organization devoted to youth education in the performing arts, focused especially on kids who otherwise might not be exposed to theater.

Director Ellen Sebastian Chang, co-founder of Life on the Water and a recent honoree in the Marsh's San Francisco Treasures Series, had done consulting work for both companies, so they asked her to create "Being Something: Living 'Young' and Growing 'Old' in Oakland," a piece for their student and senior actors.

Sebastian Chang's original intention was to have youths interview seniors and teens around Oakland to create a testimonial theater piece in the manner of "The Laramie Project" or "The People's Temple," now at Berkeley Rep. But the interviews turned out to be none too penetrating, so she scrapped them and asked a number of local playwrights -- starting with Anne Galjour ("Okra, " "Alligator Tales"), already enlisted as a dramaturge for the piece -- to contribute 10-minute plays for her group of actors: two white seniors, three African American teenagers from Carter Middle School and two Chinese American actors.

"As the conceptualizer of the whole thing, I realized I'm always interested in who shows up," the director says. "We had hardly anyone show up for the audition. I picked these people because they all lived in Oakland, and I'd figure out their talent base later."

Jane Chen, 29, had come to the audition only to drive an elderly auditioner, and ended up being cast because Sebastian Chang thought she was interesting. With a background in clowning, Chen became a spirit who undulates through the piece, tying together its disparate elements. Jay Chee, 58, works in an appraiser's office, and contributed a monologue about the value of a life, explaining how tools and other useful things have no value from a reseller's perspective -- it's useless, decorative objects that have all the value.

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**"I wish the audience could see the process, almost more than the show."** Director Ellen Sebastian Chang

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She had the actors create a time line of what was going on at the time of their birth. "I was born in 1916 in London. There were zeppelins flying overhead when I was born, and most of the family ran to the basement," the eldest, Isabel Ferguson, told Sebastian Chang. "But my mother couldn't get there, and she went under the kitchen table."

"You don't need to say anything else," Sebastian Chang marvels. "That's everything."

Tim Hannon, 67, was born the year the Golden Gate Bridge was built, and 15-year-old cast member Tia Hicks arrived the year "The Simpsons" premiered on TV. Kenneth Foreman, 13, had a twin who died shortly after they were born in 1991.

"So we had them all lined up, and here's Isabel, 1916, here's Kenny, 1991, " Sebastian Chang says. "Just reflect on these two worlds sitting next to each other for a minute."

Hicks and Chee are rehearsing a scene by Eugenie Chan in which a Chinese American man berates his African American granddaughter for hanging out with Oakland Tech kids when he's paying good money for her to go to College Prep. La'Sharae Williams, 14, sits off to the side knitting a scarf, cracking up every time Chee mimics the black kids who come into his store: "You know Bruce Lee? Kung fu, kung fu!"

They're lined up again for a farcical scene by playwright Tom Swift in which the two eldest performers keep getting their cell-phone signals crossed with Foreman trying to get with the girls and Chen yelling in Mandarin. Then hip-hop choreographer Naomi Bragin walks the ensemble through the cakewalk, the strut of slaves imitating whites in the antebellum South.

"I have a question," Williams says. "What does the cakewalk have to do with anything?"

"It's history," Sebastian Chang tells her. "When you're walking into someone's home, you're walking into history."

The East Bay's past is present throughout the piece.

Amelia Earhart's doomed around-the-world flight out of Oakland is recalled in a short play by Erin Blackwell, as Chen embodies the pilot's restless spirit summoned by Wiccan invocation. Galjour's segment has Hannon and Ferguson reminiscing about the Oakland Oaks baseball team as he struggles to extricate her from the chair fort she's constructed to stave off being taken out of her home and put in a home. Though Ferguson is very agreeable about hiding out under a sheet, lying in wait for Hannon as her long-suffering brother, it turns out she's somewhat claustrophobic and probably shouldn't be under there too long.

At this stage, everything is just taking form -- scripts, transitions, blocking, everything -- and new parts are being introduced left and right. The director explains that her inspiration for these moments is as much instinctual as it is conceptual. "Sometimes I'm picking stuff because it's about how you go into the innermost core of delight and wonder and thought of an audience member, and sometimes that's not frontal lobe," Sebastian Chang says.

She suddenly brainstorms that maybe Chen can dart through the cakewalk like a ninja, setting up chairs for the next scene.

"This show could end up being a big mess," she acknowledges.

"The audience might go, what is this? This appraiser guy is talking about objects, and now there's this ninja putting out chairs, people are doing a cakewalk, now they're doing cell phone conversations and Kenny's having a dream about going to heaven. And that's OK, because it's like, welcome to the Bay Area, which is kind of a big mess, too."

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BEING SOMETHING runs through May 1 at the Oakland Metro, 201 Broadway, Oakland. \$15. (510) 444-4755, [www.stagebridge.org](http://www.stagebridge.org).

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