

Stagebridge explores diversity



By Joan Aragone,
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Inside Bay Area

WHEN STAGEBRIDGE, the Oakland-based drama company composed of senior actors, presented "Civil Rights Tales" at the Redwood City Public Library recently, the audience was rapt.

"Stagebridge was scheduled for an hour, but the event grew to about two hours," said Chuck Ashton, youth services and programming manager at the library.

"The actors told stories from their own experiences. They were articulate and moving. People were on the edge of their seat," he said.

Now Stagebridge is preparing another work, focused on relations between the generations in a lively, diverse community. It's set in Oakland, but it could be any town where people of different ages, ethnic backgrounds and economic

levels live and mingle.

"The piece is about people of different generations just being together, not the standard approach of the elderly dispensing wisdom and the hip, young people teaching the elderly about youth culture," said Ellen Sebastian Chang, director of "Being Something, Living 'Young' and Growing 'Old.'"

With a cast ranging in age from teens to octogenarians, the program is a collaboration between Stagebridge and Opera Piccola, an Oakland-based drama company that works with children and teens. The groups invited the nationally known Chang to direct the piece.

A series of short plays unified by monologues and featuring original music and dance, the form of the production grew from improvisations during rehearsals.

"The actors are part of it," said actor Tim Hannon, 67. "We improvised and gave them ideas, and they took them and wrote a scene. It's been a very enjoyable working environment. We work together, ensemble style."

Chang, too, is impressed with the company's cohesion. "The rehearsals illustrate the dynamic," she said. "The cast members and crew get along and enjoy each other. This is the way you fantasize the U.S. could truly be — people relating at all ages, socioeconomic levels and racial backgrounds."

Set in a house in Oakland that is being appraised before sale, each story in "Being Something" has a different focus, introduced by a "researcher" who sets the tone.

Themes are serious as well as comic. There's a scene with kids using cell phones; a piece with Isabel Ferguson, 88, and Hannon as a brother and sister discussing whether the older woman should enter assisted living; and a conversation between a Chinese grandfather talking with his mixed-race grandchild about the importance of maintaining her Chinese identity.

Ferguson also plays a 90-year-old "good" witch who conjures the spirit of Amelia Earhart, who left on her final, mysterious flight in 1937 from Oakland.

"The production is physically challenging but a lot of fun," said Ferguson, who joined Stagebridge four years ago. "We work together, we're all friends, all different, all races."

Ferguson said she tried out for the production because it sounded interesting.

"I thought, 'Why not do it?' That's my attitude," she said.

Hannon shares her views. A retired licensed customs broker, he started with Stagebridge in 2000 after seeing a Stagebridge ad for people interested in storytelling.

"I thought I could do that. I've been working with people all of my life," he said.

Since then he's appeared often in senior centers, schools and other venues, including Veterans Memorial Senior Center in Redwood City.

"We can't show the whole world, just a little corner of a particular piece of the world," Chang said. "I hope we can translate the process of working with this cast and creating this piece to the audience."

"Being Something" opens Friday, April 22, and will run until May 1 at the Oakland Metro, at Second and Broadway in Jack London Square. Tickets are \$15. For information, call Stagebridge at 510-444-4755.

The Stagebridge Company will perform again at Veterans Memorial Senior Center in Redwood City on Thursday, May 12 at 1 p.m. in "Never Too Late," a variety show as a special event for Senior Center Week.