

# Community and Senior Theatre: A Perfect Match

by Bonnie L. Vorenberg

I just returned from another jubilant AACTFest and was reminded how Community Theatres and Senior Theatres have so much in common. As Carol Ries of the Topeka Civic Theatre & Academy says, "Community Theatres have a tremendous interest in Senior Theatre." Perhaps because they're a perfect match.

Senior Theatre and community theatre have many of the same goals. Both are volunteer-based activities that provide challenge and an artistic outlet. Both companies create dynamic works with small budgets using a strong esprit de corps to build passion. They have so much in common that it's only a small leap to make both very successful.

To encourage more work, I thought that perhaps your community theatre needs a step-by-step plan to help you start or expand a Senior Theatre. So, using my 29 years of experience in the field, here are some ideas I'd suggest.

**Get on the same page.** Using the similar missions as a starting point, bring the community theatre board of directors and the staff or key volunteers together with the idea, add staffing and a budget. Most Senior Theatres are successful if there's a strong leader who endorses the idea, promotes it, and encourages staff to help out. Senior Theatre is not an expensive proposition but even a class or small company will need funding for scripts, royalties, props, costumes, printing and other incidentals. Scheduling Senior Theatre is easy because it happens during the day, when most community theatres are dark.

**Buy into the benefits.** Senior Theatre not only benefits the participants but it also helps the community theatre. Senior Theatre brings another population group into the theatre.

Many community theatres create senior companies so their older members can have an opportunity to perform. With fewer younger people spending time as volunteers, it's important to keep the oldsters involved as long as possible. Don't forget the upcoming influx of baby boomers, which will bring a whole new group of folks to the community theatre. These highly educated, relatively healthy seniors have always used their numbers and innovative ideas to spread their opinions. They want to be heard and the

psychological and cultural. But the social factor is so important that many Senior Theatre cast members frequently tell me, "You know, Bonnie, we're a family." Recent research has documented the therapeutic value of arts participation. In fact, one study shows that out of all the arts, theatre is one of the most beneficial for seniors.

**So how do you start?** The first step is to involve seniors in your on-going community theatre program.



Roger Bargannier

*In acting classes, props help seniors jump easily into character.*

community theatre is where they can have a voice.

Senior Theatre is fundable. Lately, even beginning companies are receiving grants and awards to support their work. So, it might even be a new income stream for the Community Theatre.

Senior Theatre makes great publicity for the community theatre. Tell your story to the media because they love images of older adults doing amazing things. Plus senior actors make great photos!

For the seniors, theatre has many health benefits—physical, mental,

Community theatres around the country document how many of their audience members are older. So now that seniors are in the seats, get them involved. The main goal of Senior Theatre is to promote active involvement, so be sure you offer matinee performances and talk backs after performances. Some companies begin their Senior Theatre program with Theatre Appreciation experiences so that the seniors can meet directors, actors, and technical staff to learn the behind-the-scenes magic that makes theatre so fascinating. This helps seniors bond with the company as they begin to feel more comfortable in the space.

Introduce seniors to explorations in the box office, technical theatre, promotions and other areas where the theatre needs the help. Perhaps you can use a try-it-out process where they 'intern' with different departments to help them discover where the senior's talent lies and what they enjoy doing the most.

**Classes are an important next step.** If you have an education department for youth, expand it for the older learners. Teach all the basics like acting, directing, and technical theatre before exploring more advanced topics like acting in commercials and films.

Timing is everything. The classes need to be held during the day with the most productive hours being from 10am to noon or from 1pm to 3pm. Not only are these the times of peak concentration powers for seniors but they also are when traffic is lightest and public transportation is best.

Understand older learners and their needs. It's a fact that older adults can't see or hear as well as they did when they were younger. You'll need to teach your instructors and the staff about how to make accommodations for older performers. To help with readability, I always enlarge the type size on scripts so they are at least 12 points with a serif font. Older eyes take longer to adjust from bright to dim spaces so give more time for seniors to move from backstage to onstage. Use glow in the dark tape to indicate level changes of stages and stairs. Add handrails to help with balance. For hearing, have directors articulate and speak clearly to help actors hear their directions.

**Avoid memorization.** Many seniors think they can't do theatre because they fear memorization. I face this barrier up-front by using the phrase, "No memorization or prior experience required" in publicity for the program. More actors will show up and know they can be successful. You'll draw seniors who have never performed before, those that did it in school, and ones that have

performed all their lives. And, you'll always have more women than men! I really like to start with classes because it helps the group bond, builds theatrical skills, and starts the company out on the right foot.

Actors of all ages love to perform. So it will only be a matter of time before class members suggest they perform.



Dale Peck

*Grosse Pointe Theatre's Encore Players perform in readers theatre style.*

Try to schedule a work-in-progress showcase for your final class to teach new thespians how to work a crowd. Just like that, you've created a Senior Theatre company.

### **Select the appropriate type of Senior Theatre.**

Think 'simple' when you begin a company. Use easy techniques that don't require memorization like readers theatre and script-in-hand performances for your novice company. At the Grosse Pointe (MI) Community Theatre, their Encore Players use traditional readers theatre staging. The actors perform seated on stools with their scripts in black notebooks labeled with "Encore Players" that are mounted on music stands. Each sheet of the script is enclosed in a plastic slip cover so turning pages is easy and quiet. All the performers dress in black relying on vocal elements to make the plays come alive.

Once actors are comfortable with readers theatre you can include movement in one of my favorite styles, script-in-hand. I like to enlarge the type size of the script, trim the page to 5 1/2 X 7 inch format, and back each page with

black construction paper. Secure the paper with a metal ring so actors can easily flip from page to page. I really like this format because cast members can move freely around the stage and create fully drawn characters as they emote to their hearts content!

"Comedies rule!" says Barb Elliott of the Grosse Pointe Encore Players. I

find this is true of most Senior Theatre. Older actors and audiences want light humor and comedy, not serious or depressing works. They don't like off-color humor or vulgarity, yet in some locales, a little sex plays well. It all depends on the sensibilities of your community.

When the company is ready, you can present short plays using scripts that run from 10-30 minutes long. This is a popular format because it is so flexible. In rehearsal, I like to work with one cast while an assistant directs another one so more actors are involved. Some actors will be pleased to find out that the shorter roles mean that they can memorize their parts—a huge confidence builder! Select shows based on a theme so you can build any length of performance. Absences are a reality in Senior Theatre, but with short plays it's easy to make substitutions. I suggest that you have plenty of short plays in your repertoire so your company is always ready to perform.

There are many other forms of Senior Theatre. At the Topeka (KS) Civic Theatre & Academy, their senior

*continued on page 20*

## Senior Theatre continued from page 17

classes developed into two performing companies, one that presents old time radio shows and the other is an improv group. Find out more at [www.topekacivictheatre.com](http://www.topekacivictheatre.com).

You don't need to limit yourself to traditional play production. Turn instead to memories as fodder to create new works. The shows can focus on personal stories, historical events, or eras like the 40's or elements of history like railroads or old time radio. Other companies use



intergenerational casts that blend young and older performers to create plays that foster greater understanding between the generations. Some other Senior Theatre companies create plays based on issues such as health awareness topics like falls or diabetes. I recently talked to a Senior Theatre company which was performing a show to help audience members understand the dangers of undiagnosed heart disease in older women. Whatever your passion, there's a place for you in Senior Theatre.

### Focus on portability.

You'll find that your Senior Theatre will probably tour to audiences who meet in senior centers, retirement communities, or groups at conventions and reunions. In no time at all, your company will be so busy that they'll have to turn down performances!

Since most of your performances will be in non-theatrical settings, rely on costumes and props to create your visual statement. I like to use a unified costume with bright, showy pieces that further the concept of the show.

Many companies also use portable backdrops to heighten the theatricality of their touring production. The backdrop should be light, easy to assemble, and large enough to create a 'backstage' area. I like to use black backdrops because they make the actors more prominent which is an important consideration when you're entertaining older audience members, many with less acute vision.

Since older audience members

have difficulty hearing, I suggest that you invest in portable sound equipment, instead of having to depend on questionable systems that vary from site to site. With your own sound system, the cast becomes familiar with the microphones and the mixer settings. Good sound is an important element in Senior Theatre because it gives the cast more confidence and thus, insures better performances.

### What to charge?

Performance fees vary widely. For example, Grosse Pointe Community Theatre uses their Encore Senior Theatre for outreach and to promote their theatre season so they do not charge. However, they say "We will accept an honorarium," which often brings in \$100 or more per show. Before each senior show, a community theatre spokesperson talks about the season and what's new at the theatre. Barb Elliott shares, "People love the theatre even if they're not regular theatregoers. Give them a taste with really good readers theatre and you'll get them as regular

ticket holders." Another Senior Theatre donates all its profits to the nineteen community theatres in their area.

Whichever way you go, I suggest that you get paid for your production. In America, we don't appreciate things that are free. The performance fees can be used to fund scripts, royalties, costumes, and props, or can form a transportation fund to reimburse actors for ever-increasing travel costs.

### What about quality?

Strive for the highest performance quality that is possible. If as a director, you expect high quality, the performers will deliver. Don't expect less, just because the actors are older.

### Keep work and fun in balance.

There's got to be sense of fun and camaraderie for Senior Theatre to be its best. Too much work will discourage participation; too much fun will encourage lower quality than what's possible.

### Community & Senior

**Theatre.** What we know is that both theatres work well together. They bring the arts to underserved groups using entertainment to unite the community. Perhaps at the next AACTFest your community theatre will have a Senior Theatre and you can tell me how they are "a perfect match!" ♦

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