

The New Senior Theatre Survey: A Reflection Of What's Happening In Community Theatres



By Bonnie L. Vorenberg



Readers Theatre can be performed with music stands like in this show by The Autumn Players from Asheville Community Theatre.

I went to the local community theatre to watch their Senior Theatre in action. It was such fun to see the older actors explore how different ways to use their voice could influence character development. After the rehearsal, the seniors talked about what the experience meant to them just as the Artistic Director walked in to echo the actors' sentiments. It all came together for me. My French intern, Bernard Marro, and I had just completed the first survey of Senior Theatre and as I sat in the darkened theatre, I realized that the survey accurately reflected what I was seeing on stage.

The survey was answered by 142 of the 800+ Senior Theatre companies in our database, many of which are allied with community theatres. During my career in Senior Theatre, I have witnessed companies come and go. It seemed like they had an average life span of about 10 years. Interestingly, the survey reflected that statistic with 72% of the companies having been in existence between 1-12 years. They mainly operate as not-for-profit organizations though in the current economic atmosphere where grant funding is so competitive, many new companies are being formed as for-profits. Several new statistical studies document the value of the arts for elders' brain fitness. That means grant requests in the health and fitness areas might be very attractive to funding sources.

Senior Theatres are largely amateur groups though there are a few professional companies. Like community theatres, the participants usually live in the local area and participate in classes and performances. Most programs

attract 11-20 actors who stay with the group from 1-3 years, only leaving because of illness or other commitments. The short stays mean that groups must market continually to get fresh talent. If they are allied with a community theatre, the parent company can keep the marketing message ongoing and direct interested older people to the senior company. It can also supply space for classes and rehearsals, which, according to the survey, are usually one afternoon a week for two hours.

In classes, the seniors learn basic acting and improvisation, which are the most popular topics. They perfect skills used in performance, usually working with short plays done as readers theatre or script-in-hand productions. Some companies expand to performances of variety shows while others attempt more serious fare, like productions based on issues or memories. They hold auditions for shows which are most frequently performed in the spring (73%) and the fall (68%) to audiences mainly of older adults at retirement communities and senior centers with 25% performing in their community theatre. The survey showed that a majority of Senior Theatres use technical elements like costumes, props, microphones, sound, and lighting, which are taken on tour into the community.

Over 44% of the Senior Theatres responding to the survey pay for their work by selling tickets or with performance fees and donations ranging from \$1-100. Senior Theatres which are aligned with community theatres such as Theatre Winter Haven's Act IV Players ask for low fees because "it meets our mission to serve the community," says Artistic Director Norm Small. The senior group



all photos by Roger Bargainnier

Community theatres offer classes for seniors to help them bond with the theatre.

also provides outreach and marketing for the theatre. According to the survey, fees are used for scripts, royalties, costumes, microphones and other supplies. When companies employ staff, 82% pay their director and 22% pay their music director, both good investments which promote artistic quality.

The most concerning part of the Senior Theatre survey was that 43% of the companies “don’t charge.” To me, this is a huge mistake. In our culture, which is based on money, we don’t value what we don’t pay for. Just because the actors and the audiences are older, doesn’t necessarily mean that the artistic work isn’t of the highest quality. Indeed if you don’t charge, it lowers the perceived value of the work.

Senior Theatre companies are fully organized arts organizations. The survey showed most companies have one person, the director, who leads both the artistic and organizational elements of the company. Over 80% of the directors use a written rehearsal schedule.

Knowing that Senior Theatre directors have a theatrical background, it was troublesome to discover they were



Senior Theatre helps older people push their theatrical boundaries while having fun.

re-writing scripts and not paying royalties. They even use music without permission. In essence, the companies are breaking copyright law, not having permission to perform, and cheating playwrights out of their livelihood. These easily corrected situations can become costly situations and huge problems for the community theatre sponsors.

Senior Theatre companies are more visible as the electronic age grows. They mainly rely on traditional forms of marketing, word-of-mouth at 82%, along with the traditional use of flyers, posters, and news releases. However, it was very interesting that Senior Theatres have turned to electronic media to spread their message. Almost 40% of the companies have a website and almost half of the companies, 47%, use e-newsletters. They’re also active on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

Directors are challenged. There’s the struggle with actors who have difficulty moving on stage, memorizing text, and learning blocking. Leaders have to focus on attracting new members and finding men to participate. Some directors are frustrated with actors not attending rehearsals regularly. The directors adapt their techniques by using a slower rehearsal pace, large print scripts, microphones, and by scheduling breaks during rehearsals.

The survey showed that directors have no problem with actors’ enthusiasm and they find it’s easy to get an audience. When directing older actors, the directors felt that by having plenty of “patience” they were able to create a “very rewarding experience.”

In the narrative portion of the survey we discovered many other insights. Foremost, the importance of the fine line between art, fun, and seriousness. Because the participants have spent years being competitive, they don’t want the work to be too hard or too easy, not too serious or

stressful. It should be filled with a sense of fun, being "child-like," not childish. Yet it must aim for the highest possible artistic value. The best Senior Theatre directors are able to strike a balance between art, work, and fun.

I saw the bonding again as I watched the rehearsal at the community theatre. There were laughs, hugs, and a sense of warmth. But I was watching actors, yet a bit older, but actors and their director working to create art that moved and inspired. It reminded me of a recent



Simple staging helps older actors tour shows into the community.

Senior participants bond to their theatre. Though there are many physical, mental, cultural, emotional, and spiritual benefits from theatrical participation, the strongest one is social. Esprit de corps reigns supreme! The theatre and their senior colleagues become their "family."

Senior Theatre actors bond not only to the members within the group but to the sponsor, says Susan Harper, Artistic Director of the Asheville Community Theatre. The company fulfills its mission to have "everyone in theatre, from the youngest to the oldest." Their Senior Theatre company, The Autumn Players, provide skilled actors for main stage shows, buy season tickets, and make consistent and generous donations to the theatre.

conversation with a director. She told me, "I don't know why we loved it so—maybe it was the cast, maybe it was the script or the audience..." I stopped her almost in mid-sentence to say, "It's because the magic of theatre works at any age!" ♦

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