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With senior theatre, performers don't let getting old keep them offstage



Photo by Roger Bargainnier

Call it creative aging. Call it senior theatre. Call it a way for older adults to engage with the arts. [Bonnie Vorenberg](#) of Cedar Mill prefers "senior theatre" – and she should know. A lifelong theatre devotee whose college major was theatre education and who once taught drama at Medford High School, Vorenberg has worked in senior theatre since 1978. She's president of [ArtAge's Senior Theatre Resource Center](#), wrote the first senior theatre directory, edited the first anthology of senior theatre scripts, and established the first talent agency for seniors. In May, Older Americans Month, the federal Administration for Community Living [celebrated Vorenberg as a "trailblazer."](#)

According to the theatre resource center, there are more than 800 senior theatre companies in the United States, including several in Oregon. In Northeast Portland, seniors perform at the Salvation Army's Rose Center. In Southwest Portland, they rehearse with Encore Senior Players at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church and get onstage with Northwest Senior Theatre at the Alpenrose Dairy Opera House. In Southeast Portland, they've performed for three years at Russellville Park retirement community under the name Curtain Call.



Cast of Miramont Pointe's [Laughter is Ageless](#)

Senior thespians will put on several productions this month: "The Best of Enemies," about an unlikely friendship between a civil rights activist and a Ku Klux Klan leader, on June 12 at Willamette View Retirement Community in Milwaukie; "Laughter is Ageless," a series of short plays, on June 16 at Miramont Pointe Retirement Community in Clackamas; and a collection of comic pieces by local playwrights Nancy Moss and Rich Rubin on June 20 at Mirabella Portland on the South Waterfront.

Theatre is a highly rewarding art form for seniors, Vorenberg said. "It produces physical, mental, cultural, emotional and especially social benefits," she said. "The esprit de corps that actors of all ages experience is especially important for older adults."

Senior theatre is designed for older adults, with scripts by older writers and formats accommodating older performers' needs. "The most popular format is short plays which are 10 to 20 minutes long, done as readers' theater or script-in-hand shows where actors do not memorize their lines," Vorenberg said.

Moss, who lives at Mirabella, runs the Mirabella Players, who perform each summer and winter. For material, she writes pieces that take about 10 minutes to read or adapts dialogue-heavy works such as Dylan Thomas' "A Child's Christmas in Wales."

"It's a gas; it's a kick," she said. The productions have proved popular, often filling the 175-seat room where they're held, she said.

At Miramont Pointe, senior theatre also does well, said Julie Dunn, life enrichment director. About 10 residents participate in each of Miramont Pointe's two annual productions, typically finding a second family in the process. "It's a huge social connection for them," Dunn said.

Theatre definitely builds participants' confidence, Dunn added. Although the actors read from scripts and stay seated, they don't need any other accommodations, she said.

And audiences love it, she said. "We always have a full house if not standing room only."

Said Vorenberg, "I always say, 'We use theatre to show that growing older can be a great time of life.' "

-- Amy Wang