How to Create a Dynamic Senior Theatre Program

By Bonnie L. Vorenberg

The Senior Theatre director was about ready to explode. She was so frustrated with the community theatre that sponsors her group that she needed to vent. “They treat us like an ugly stepchild,” she said! “No support, no help, just ignore us. Maybe they think we should just go away!” Here she was running an active, fun company and was getting no respect. It’s too bad. Her sponsoring community theatre is missing a rich opportunity.

My challenge is to encourage you to make over those “ugly stepchild” senior programs and transform them into beautiful ones. If you don’t have a program, begin one. You’ll increase members, broaden opportunities, and enhance a viable income stream.

So what’s the current status? To bring you the latest information, two surveys were conducted, one by AACT and the other one by the Senior Theatre Resource Center. Sixty percent of community theatres responding to the AACT study have a senior program. Many groups are quite vibrant, performing many different types of theatre. So, how can your community theatre nurture a Senior Theatre program that will attract some of the 10,000 folks who reach age 65 every day? I suggest that targeted classes, solid support, and innovation are the keys.

Begin with classes.

I’m a huge believer in the value of classes especially for seniors. These educational offerings attract both skilled and beginning participants and blend them into a cohesive group. With continual classes taught by good teachers, you’ll have a constant stream of new actors for the senior group. Since most Senior Theatre participants only take part for an average of three years, use classes to build a stable of willing and skilled understudies. Begin with the basics then venture towards other successful offerings like short-course trainings, intensives, and senior summer camps!

Build a Senior Theatre program.

It won’t be long before students ask to perform. That means it’s time to create a senior performing group. Using the Senior Theatre Resource Center survey along with my daily work in the field, we can predict what a “typical” company looks like. It will be a group of up to twenty community-based older adults who meet once a week in the afternoon for two hours. Most perform mainly to older audience members with a majority of shows in the spring and companies on hiatus in summer. Tickets are usually $10 each. If groups charge performance fees, most bring in around $100 per show. Directors are usually paid; performers are usually amateurs who appreciate reimbursement for transportation and other costs.

Meet the seniors’ needs.

Seniors will be devoted if the theatre experiences meet their needs. Participants want to be stimulated but not taxed. The work should meet physical, mental, cultural, and emotional needs. Most of all the seniors love the social ‘esprit de corps’ that comes along with the fun, bonding theatre experiences that we all love!

Leap over the largest hurdles: memorization and experience.

For both classes and performances, most Senior Theatre actors do not memorize. Instead they perform readers theatre or script-in-hand. Then there are many unique “script hiding” techniques as well as innovative tools like PowerPoint and Bluetooth that are used so

Many Senior Theatres present fully mounted and memorized shows which feature active members, like Autumn Players’ Peter and Beth Ely.

Senior Theatres usually tour to audiences of older adults in non-theatrical settings, like Rubin Feldstein, who performs at the local synagogue.

Photos by Roger Bargainnier featuring The Autumn Players, Asheville (NC) Community Theatre
it looks like the show is memorized. Be sure to always add to your publicity, “No memorization required.”

Many seniors who turn to theatre in their retirement have not performed since school days. Perhaps it’s one thing on their “bucket list.” Except for a few skilled performers, you’ll mainly be working with novices. You’ll attract more attention when you advertise, “No prior experience required.”

Provide dynamic programming. There’s no need for senior companies to re-create old, boring “chestnuts,” instead look to modern materials that speak to older actors and audiences. Seek out plays and classroom readings that feature feisty, energetic characters in current situations so performers can have fun creating age-appropriate roles.

Keep the senior company changing. One of the reasons senior groups fail is because they do the same thing all the time. So, vary the programming between short plays, musicals, oral history, and issue-oriented shows. Mix in some other forms like storytelling, intergenerational experiences, and acting in commercials. Constantly vary your message, your performances, and your offerings for a vibrant program.

Charge for your work. If I hear once again how Senior Theatres perform just “for the love of it,” I will scream. Why do artists feel that they need to do their work for free? Instead, I suggest that they provide spot-on entertainment that audiences love so you can charge what the market will bear.

What are some things that work well?

Short plays. This is the most popular play length in Senior Theatre. These dynamic pieces create strong plots, characters, and situations all within 10-20 minutes. Tie several together on a theme or perform them individually. The shows are easier to rehearse than longer pieces. When someone has to miss a performance, it’s a snap to make substitutions in short plays. Finally, since many senior groups perform for older audiences, the short plays fit well with reduced attentions spans. Short plays are winners!

The folks at Lemon Bay Playhouse in Englewood, Florida love short plays. Their upcoming 5th Annual Shorts Aloud Festival “pulls in the audience” who return time and time again to watch “a unique form of live theatre in laugh-filled performances with twists and surprises.”

Improvisation seems to be a growing trend in classes and performances. It requires no memorization, a major fear-factor for seniors. The spontaneity and humor keeps both actors and audiences fresh. Companies like Sun Lakes (AZ) Community Theatre’s “Improvables” perform improvisations, games, and audience-suggested sketches, all to rousing applause!

Bring seniors back to the theatre. In the AACT survey, George Quick from the Chattanooga (TN) Theatre Centre spoke about how they use real-time captioning for the deaf and hard of hearing audience members. It works so well that it brings “many seniors back to the theatre.” Sensory changes and mobility problems happen—so find ways to accommodate them!

Involve seniors in all aspects of the theatre. Many community theatres do a great job involving older adults in their theatre operations. However, this might be a good time to re-assess so you can involve a whole new group of fresh volunteers.

Anne Dubrule loves acting because as a lifelong learner she finds it stimulating, educational, and most of all, fun!

Support the Senior Program. Many seniors who participate don’t want to do the ‘grunt work’ that’s required for a company. Here’s where the community theatre can help. Supply staff time along with funds for materials, scripts, royalties, and be ready to utilize stock costumes and scenery pieces for touring companies. The community theatre’s name is on the elders’ work so keep an eye on the artistic direction to ensure that it remains within the community theatre’s mission.

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**Enhance the senior programming.** Pull out your bullhorn and tell the community about your expanded offerings, then deliver. Schedule a main stage show to feature the senior company. Supply theatre teachers who can go into the community and teach drama to retirement community residents. Yes, charge for it!

**Let’s talk money.** New awareness and statistical research has proven the value of arts for older adults. Use this data to solidify your grantwriting efforts. According to our survey, only 30% of Senior Theatre groups apply for grants. This is a missed opportunity because funding brings more community awareness, enhances credibility, and increases revenue.

The Senior Theatre group can help the community theatre financially with donations, performance fees, and ticket sales. Some senior groups bring in enough funds that they make money for their sponsor. One group in Texas has netted over $100,000 during their extended run. Another new group has earned over $500 for its sponsor in a very short time. Your Senior Theatre can be a vibrant income stream.

**Partner with the community.** Think creatively, like the Sykesville (MD) Little Theatre which is based on the campus of a continuing care retirement community. The theatre’s first show was sold out! As founder David Pagano says, “It’s a way for theatre lovers of all ages to come together and create something really outstanding!”

The ideas go on and on. My challenge to you is to tap the many possibilities that will open up when you look to the senior communities, not to develop an “ugly stepchild” but instead, a dynamic and vibrant senior program.

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*If you need help, suggestions, or more direction don’t hesitate to contact Bonnie L. Vorenberg, President of ArtAge’s Senior Theatre Resource Center, the source for plays, books, materials, and information. On the forefront of the field, Bonnie is a passionate speaker, author, and educator whose goal is to inspire older adults’ theatrical dreams.*

www.seniortheatre.com, bonniev@seniortheatre.com, 800-858-4998 or 503-246-3000