

Getting the Stage Right for Older Actors

Stuart Kandell

How do we meet the needs of older adults and also create quality art? This is a seminal question for all artists, directors and teachers who work with older adults. The expression “One size fits all” definitely does NOT apply here. We all change as we grow older. At times we have more energy, more ability and interest to work hard. Other times we are faced with physical or emotional challenges that affect our abilities. And our access to creative programs is also affected very much by our culture and socio- economic situation.

How do we create opportunities for older adults to learn, perform and share their talents with a wide range of audiences? As an American theatre director who has worked with older adults for forty years (and is now one of “them”), I am reminded of Audrey whom I met when she was 60 years old. She had always wanted to be an actress, but her mother wouldn’t let her, so she had to wait 50 years to start learning the art of acting. She took many classes until she felt confident to be on stage. Then, for the next 25 years she performed in a variety of plays, taking time out for five hip replacements. In her 80’s her memory started to deteriorate and it was difficult for her to memorize any more. So, she took up improvisational acting as her spontaneity and humor were still quite intact. Then, gradually into her 90’s her energy was not as strong and she continued taking classes and learning new skills until she died at 93. Thirty three years of “new stages”.

I had the opportunity to participate in the WildWest Senior Theatre Festival held in Gelsenkirchen in early June. This was a great event that brought together senior theatre companies, older actors and dancers to celebrate, learn, and share their work with each other. The primary reason for the success of this festival was the design and coordination of director Beate Brieden and the professional stages of the Consol Theatre. Quality and variety were the keys that Beate and her jury used to select six nine companies from North Rhine-Westphalia. I have chosen to highlight this wide variety by discussing some of the most varied great productions.



GE(H)DANKENVORGÄNGE / Barbara Cleff © Dominik Sutor

Barbara Cleff’s GE(H)DANKENVORGÄNGE had its large company of dancers explore the nature of “walking” in a wide variety of modes. They weren’t handed a script. Along with the director, they had to develop the piece. The process involved older dancers in a research phase of

exploring the many natures/issues/ways/meanings of walking. Then they had to learn the complex choreography of this piece that lasted about over an hour. This work of art was clearly for older people who are comfortable doing a great deal of physical movement; who are willing to trust the director to explore “the unknown”; are then able to let the director create and “set” the piece; and finally, are capable of memorizing extensive choreography.



DER FÄHRMANN VOM BALDENEYSEE / Alte Helden am Schauspiel Essen ©Lars Betke

DER FÄHRMANN VOM BALDENEYSEE is a radio play, something the older actors grew up with and apparently, is still very popular in Germany (not so, in the United States). Each year, the actors take part in helping to shape the detective story, that then becomes “set”, rehearsed, and performed. It clearly serves the needs of older adults who don’t want to memorize their lines or stage blocking, but still want to perform. Having the script in front of them is part of the theatrical form and

gives them the freedom they need to be creative and develop strong characters with their voices.

In COMEBACK FOR NOAH, Bernd Schüren takes the stage by himself for 95 minutes. He is a great example of an older actor who wants to challenge himself in front of an audience for an hour and a half. Bernd found the play that he wanted to do about a modern day Noah. He then raised money to hire a director and rehearsed, rehearsed and rehearsed - - - until he had memorized the extensive script which he performed with hilarity. It is an example of just how far one individual can go to share his talents with an audience.



COMEBACK FOR NOAH / Silberrollen Mönchengladbach © Stefan Filipiak

By far, the most fully realized production was Ibsen’s PEER GYNT by the SeTA Dusseldorf. This theatre clearly used its extensive resources of costuming, directing, and set design with a huge cast who were willing to rehearse four hours a day, several days a week, for six months. The result demonstrated the effort that everyone put into the production. The actors clearly had to



PEER GYNT / SeTA © Božica Babić

make a choice of working on this play for six months and not going on vacations or taking time off. The production also solved a common problem of what to do when you have more than one capable actor for the main role. Ingeniously, they had six Peer Gynts played by men who were progressively older as the play unfolded. The ensemble was so very strong that this convention worked fine (at least for me) and the play seemed richer for this device of having older actors.

Most theatre companies of seniors exist in a kind of isolation. They rarely get chances to see each other perform or see a wide variety of kinds of performances (at least in the U.S.A.). Beate's design again, helped to break this isolation by bringing people together, having them eat their meals all together, participate and meet each other in workshops by professional artists, and at the end of the night "party" together. This is also especially important for the directors and artists involved in each production, who rarely get to see each other's work.

I was most struck by the wide variety of the festival. The fact that NRW has over 80 senior theatre companies in a relatively "small" (by American terms) geographic and populated area is rather extraordinary. Clearly, many older adults are seeking creative work and German culture is supporting this. I wish the same were true in the U.S. We have over 700 senior theatres but they are spread out over a huge geographic and populated area. And it is less common in the U.S. for state theatres or major theatres to have a senior theatre program. Because culture is considered "a frill", funding is always a tremendous issue. Still, theatre happens anyway, thanks to individual artists and because there is a growing interest in serving older adults.

At least here in NRW, theatre with older adults is ALIVE AND WELL! Bravo!

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