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Linking the Generations Through Improvisational Theatre

FULL CIRCLE

by Nancy Z. Henkin

and Rosalie Minkin



Photo: Nancy Z. Henkin

“Kids today

... you show no respect. All you ever do is play your loud radios, smoke pot and think about sex.” (Harry, 70)

“Complain, complain—that’s all you old folks do. You can’t find anything better to do with your time, so you just talk about your aches and pains and how life was in the good old days.” (Rodney, 16)

Does this dialogue sound familiar?

How common are these stereotypes?

In an effort to enhance the nature of age relations and to dispel age-related myths, the Center for Intergenerational Learning at Temple University’s Institute on Aging (see accompanying story) created an intergenerational improvisational theatre troupe called The Full Circle. Over the past two years, this multi-racial troupe comprised of both teenagers and elders has performed at 40 senior centers, schools,

community/religious organizations, and conferences in the Philadelphia, Pa. area. More than 2,000 people of all ages have been involved in this unique theatrical program which draws upon the experiences of the actors themselves and emphasizes audience participation. From the reactions of older persons, teenagers, professionals and community leaders, it is clear that this innovative educational tool has been effective in making audiences aware of the importance of meaningful cross-age interaction.

The overall goal of this program is to increase understanding between older people and teenagers by sensitizing both age groups to issues they have in common as well as those that have po-

tential for conflict. It is an attempt to reduce elders’ fear of teenagers by enhancing their understanding of the needs, values and experiences of today’s youth and to educate young people about the aging process and the heterogeneity of the aged population.

Training

The troupe consists of 10 teenagers and 10 older persons who are recruited from schools and senior centers in the Philadelphia area. In order to prepare troupe members for performances, a 12-week intensive training program is conducted. Players learn both skills in improvisational theatre and information about lifespan development.

The training process proceeds through four stages: group building; presentation of the information on aging; character development and

scene formation; and preparation for performance.

"At first the young sat across the way from us, like we had some kind of disease." (Eleanor, 75)

"I never thought I could speak to an older person; but when he insisted that I look into his eyes, it was easy." (Joyce, 17)

During the initial sessions, exercises are designed to foster a sense of group cohesiveness. Participating in non-verbal exercises, exploring common stereotypes about "young" and "old," sharing stories and bringing in old photos all help members to see each other as individuals with unique life histories. As troupe members look at each other's photos, they begin asking questions about personal life experiences. The level of self-disclosure deepens and the development of group trust is evident.

Meeting weekly for 3-hour sessions, the group soon develops a personality all its own. Through experiential exercises like the "living life line," individuals learn more about themselves and the issues of aging. In this exercise, people are asked to place themselves in a line according to their chronological age. With the youngest and oldest members at opposite ends of the line, group members are then asked to think about their feelings. For example, the director asks Doris, 69, "What's the best and worst about your age?"

"I like where I'm at," she replies. "I hated work. I'm so glad I retired. But when I look at the young and the way they pass me on the street, I'm envious of their energy."

As members begin to share feelings, they gain a greater appreciation of each other's personal histories.

To supplement this segment of the training, mini-lectures on topics of common concern, such as drug misuse and abuse, sexuality, coping with loss and work/retirement, are presented. The group discussions that follow enable members to gain a deeper understanding of lifespan development issues.

Proceeding from this stage to character development and scene formation, members of the troupe create characters based on their own experiences or the experiences of others whom they know. Although some find character development difficult at first, most are eventually challenged by the process.

As players continue to discuss such issues as teenage suicide, widowhood, depression and marital stress, they are able to refine their characters. With an

ing" scenes (*who* are you, *where* you are, *what* is the message) rather than rehearsing dialogue. The training process is intended to shape the actors' spontaneity and to help them transfer that spontaneity to on-stage performances.

Performances

Full Circle uses theatre as an educational vehicle. Thus, if audience members leave with new knowledge or dif-



Photo: Nancy Z. Henkin

Theatre performances consist of a series of scenes that reflect concerns common to young and old and that portray conflict between generations.

understanding of some of the major issues facing people at different stages of the life cycle, troupe members begin to develop scenes and place their characters into a variety of real-life situations. Psychodrama techniques are used to help members take on other roles and think on their feet. The trust that has developed within the group allows members to give each other feedback on both the content of the scene and on the acting itself. As time passes and the players become comfortable with their characters and the issues to be presented, rehearsals are spent "block-

"I want to portray someone with a completely different personality." (Charles, 68)

ferent feelings about aging or age relations, the performance has had a positive impact. Each performance is tailored to the specific needs or concerns of the audience. Since every agency requesting Full Circle is urged to invite a different age group to the performance, most audiences are intergenerational. It is hoped that this initial contact between groups will lead to ongoing interaction throughout the year.

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"I want to feel what it's like to be mean and nasty." (James, 18)

Theatre performances consist of a series of scenes that reflect concerns common to young and old and that portray conflict between generations. Since the scenes are improvisational, no two performances are alike. Scenery and props are created by movement and mime. Prior to the actual performance, the director uses a variety of warm-up exercises to create a relaxed atmosphere and facilitate communication among audience members. During each 3- to 5-minute scene, a specific situation revealing the thoughts and feelings of the characters is presented. Most scenes are left unresolved in order to trigger discussion by the audience. For example:

- Upon discovering that his father again has left a burning pot on the stove, a middle-aged son begins thinking about placing him in a nursing home. When his teenage daughter hears this, she angrily confronts her father and insists that the family must keep grandpa at home. Grandpa's feelings of fear and rejection are presented in a soliloquy at the end of the scene.

- Grandmother discovers marijuana in her grandson's room. She is sure he is now a drug addict, has ruined his life and will never amount to anything. She confronts him and makes him throw the pot out in the trash. The grandson, concerned for a long time that his grandmother is using too much medicine, takes this opportunity to confront her. She defends herself and says she needs the medication. The scene is left unresolved and the issue of drug abuse and misuse is discussed.

Following each performance, Full Circle members answer questions from the audience. Remaining in character, the players respond as their characters would respond. In some cases, factual information is presented in order to dispel myths. At other times, the director facilitates group discussion to increase understanding of the issues. Often, au-



Full Circle attempts to reduce elders' fear of teenagers by enhancing their understanding of today's youth and to educate young people about the aging process and the heterogeneity of the aged population.



Photos: Gary McKinnis

dience members are called forward to role play alternative behaviors.

Conclusions

What is the impact of the Full Circle Theatre Troupe on both audiences and troupe members? Post-performance evaluations indicate that audience members are excited by the true-to-life nature of the issues, the realistic portrayal of characters and the spontaneity of the actors. Often comments such as these are heard:

"I can identify with the granddaughter in the scene. I don't know

what to say to my grandmother either."

"Hey! That's me on stage. I get angry real fast—especially at old people."

For troupe members, developing relationships with people of all ages and performing as an ensemble are rich and significant experiences. By becoming personally involved in the process, they gain greater insight into their own prejudices as well as the perspectives of others.

"My assumptions about older people were wrong. They are active, fun to

be with and wise." (Kelly, 18)

"I never thought I would be able to understand young people. I always kept away from them. This group has helped me learn not only about them but a lot about myself." (Selma, 76)

It is clear that improvisational theatre is an effective vehicle for dispelling age-related myths and stereotypes. As it enters its third year, the Full Circle Intergenerational Theatre Troupe will continue to raise public awareness about aging and the nature of age relations. ■

The Center for Intergenerational Learning, housed at Temple University's Institute on Aging, was created in 1980 to foster intergenerational cooperation and exchange. It is a non-profit organization committed to reducing age segregation and intergenerational tension through the development of innovative educational and service programs involving people of all ages.

The Center serves as a resource center and clearinghouse for information concerning existing intergenerational programs; develops and evaluates a variety of demonstration intergenerational projects which have the potential for replication; collects and designs written and audiovisual resource materials for national dissemination; and provides technical assistance and training to organizations interested in developing intergenerational programs.

In addition to The Full Circle Theatre Troupe, programs and activities include:

Learning Retreats. Each summer the Center sponsors a week long residential retreat which brings together approximately 75 persons ranging in age from 13 to 96 for the purpose of fostering communication across ages and breaking down age-related myths and stereotypes.

An important outgrowth of the intergenerational retreats was the creation in 1980 of a community-based organization called Across Ages, which works with the Center in sponsoring workshops, seminars and community service projects.

The Intergenerational Mitzvah Corps, a project which is funded by the Federation of Jewish Agencies, is designed to stimulate the development of innovative intergenerational programs within and among synagogues and other Jewish organizations. Although this project focuses on the Jewish community, it is a model that can be replicated in all religious communities.

Learning English Through Intergenerational Friendship is designed to enhance the language skills of school-age and elderly limited English speakers by mobilizing an intergenerational corps of volunteer tutors. This educational program is a collaborative effort among four agencies and is funded by the Florence V. Burden Foundation.

Linking Lifetimes. The Philadelphia Corporation for Aging funds the Linking Lifetimes project in an attempt to restore neighborhood cohesiveness, foster interdependence among residents and reduce elders'

fears of youth. Two major systems—the School District of Philadelphia and the Senior Center Network—have established 20 senior center-school teams that are currently engaged in a number of intergenerational activities.

Funded by the Montgomery County, Pa., Office on Aging and Adult Services, Linking the Generations, a systems development effort, is designed to stimulate the creation of a wide variety of intergenerational programs in a specific geographic area. Technical assistance is provided to organizations interested in linking the generations through creative program development.

The Montgomery County Pilot Respite Program responds to the need of family caregivers to remain involved in the outside world and take short breaks from caregiving. Trained college students are then matched with families in need of respite service.

Further information on the Center and The Full Circle Theatre Troupe (including video tapes and related curriculum materials) may be obtained from Dr. Nancy Z. Henkin, Director, Center for Intergenerational Learning, Temple University Institute on Aging, 1601 N. Broad St., Rm. 207, Philadelphia, Pa. 19122.