

Oakland Stagebridge offers theater training, opportunity to older people

If you examine the word "stagebridge," you can see another word embedded in it -- age.

Oakland's Stagebridge is the nation's oldest and most respected theater of, by and for older adults. Founded in 1978, the Stagebridge organization has been an award-winning pioneer in the field of Creative Aging, whether with the training it provides, or by its outreach and performance opportunities to seniors throughout the Bay Area.

Its nationally acclaimed Performing Arts Training Institute offers professionally taught classes for seniors in a wide range of genres, including storytelling, acting, playwriting, musical theater and improvisation. The classes are held at the historic First Congregational Church, at 27th and Harrison streets, an Italian Romanesque-style house of worship designed by noted architect John Galen Howard.

Stagebridge presents 600 events, classes and performances annually, reaching an audience of 25,000. It is seen as a national model, and executive director Marge Betley and her staff offer technical assistance to other communities seeking to establish their own senior performing arts programs.

Betley said that as life spans increase, seniors want to remain active and engaged in meaningful pursuits. "Stagebridge not only offers an opportunity for lifelong learning, but even more importantly -- an opportunity for seniors to continue giving back to their communities through entertainment and education.

"We sent teaching artists and elder storytellers to more than 40 Bay Area schools last year, and our Seniors Reaching Out programs logged hundreds of hours through our workshops, classes and performances at West Oakland Senior Center, Rossmoor and Satellite Housing, among many others," Betley said.

Stagebridge was the only California arts organization that recently received a visit from a delegation of senior Chinese retired classical musicians and Beijing Opera stars, who were traveling the United States on a cultural-exchange tour.

A current project is a piece commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts -- an original musical about the 1964 free speech movement and the life of Mario Savio and other activists. The musical is slated for a 2014 premiere at UC Berkeley, on the 50th anniversary of the movement, Betley said.



By Annalee Allen, Oakland Tribune Columnist

10/13/2013

The First Congregational Church, where Stagebridge holds its classes, has been active in supporting education, the arts and social justice since the early days of Oakland, including playing a role in founding the University of California and the Pacific School of Religion Seminary. First Church, as it is sometimes called, dates back to 1860, starting with a group that had been meeting at the home of early settler Francis Kittredge Shattuck (1824-98).

At 7 p.m. Oct. 25, Stagebridge will present "Go Ahead, Scare Me!" an evening of ghost stories for adults. A \$10 donation at the door is requested. Be advised, this is an adult event; stories may not be appropriate for young children (why should they have all the Halloween fun?). For more, go to www.stagebridge.org, or call 510-444-4755.

Learn more about the history of Oakland's early religious institutions on a walking tour sponsored by the Oakland Tours Program; more information is at www.oaklandnet.com/walkingtours.