

Readerâ??s Theater gives people the chance to perform without pressure: no memorizing lines, just building confidence in speaking in front of others

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Thereâ??s no memorizing lines or pressure to perform in â??Acting and Self Expression,â?• said instructor Kathleen Stefano, â??so no stress.â?• Which makes it a perfect class for anyone who wants to develop self-confidence or just have fun.



Photo courtesy of Kathleen Stefano

Itâ??s one of the many classes hosted by the San Francisco Senior Center, housed in a 1939 Streamline Moderne structure once known as the Aquatic Park Bathhouse Building.

â??We do scenes, monologues. People bring in poems, they sing,â?• Stefano said. â??A person tells a lie, and we guess what the lie is. We address peopleâ??s capabilities.â?•

For students who want to perform, there is the Aquatic Park Playersâ?? Readerâ??s Theater productions. The actors read scenes from different plays or monologues. Sometimes there are costumes or props, sometimes song. Readerâ??s Theater is a perfect format for anyone who has trouble remembering dialogue, said Stefano.

A recent performance on Zoom, was â??LOVE, LAUGH AND LOUNGE PANTS.â?• â??Lounge pants was a reference to our attire during the pandemic,â?• said Stefano.

One of the scenes performed was â??Disney Momsâ?? Therapy Group,â?• where the moms of Bambi, Snow White, and Jumbo got to express their feelings. For example, Bambiâ??s mom was angry she was going to get killed off early. Another performed scene was called â??Supreme Beingsâ?• where the Beings were deciding what characteristics to give humans as they were creating them, such as giving women the ability to give birth and making men good at math.

Stefano, a graduate of Kent State, has a Bachelor of Fine Arts in theater. She acted professionally all over the Bay Area, in Los Angeles, and throughout the country, as well as forming four theater companies. She started teaching at Aquatic Park in 2016. â??My agent retired, so I stopped acting in 2010, and I really miss it,â?• she said.

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The Aquatic Park Players will perform live for their Fall/Winter show at the center. Hereâ??s bit of background on three actors who performed in â??LOVE, LAUGH AND LOUNGE PANTS:â?•

Louise Vogel, 73



Photo courtesy of Louise Vogel

Louise Vogel, an actor as well as Aquatic Park Playersâ?? manager since its inception in 2016, is also writing for Readerâ??s Theater. Sheâ??s been collaborating with Catherine Hampton on dual monologues between women in history.

â??Weâ??re focusing on womenâ??s empowerment â?? what women chose to do in a certain period in history,â?• she said. â??We do this by having the famous woman engage in a conversation with someone they interact with on a regular basis.â?•

She and Hampton are currently writing as Marie Antoinette and her dresser. Hampton writes as Marie Antoinette, then sends it to Vogel, who replies as Lisette, her maid.

Vogel, a compliance officer for Charles Schwab before retiring, is also a performer and instructor of improv, a form of live theater in which the plot, characters, and dialogue are created spontaneously by the performers. She teachers at Next Village, which provides residents in the cityâ??s northeast corner of San Francisco resources to stay in their home as they age. All it takes to do improv, Vogel said, is a â??willingness to play. It is important to create a safe environment by leaving the critic outside and having no judgment.â?•

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Vogel began studying improv in 1995 and performed mainly at the Blue Bear Music School at Fort Mason.

John Nockels, 85



Photo courtesy of John Nockels

Nockels attends Stefanoâ??s class every Tuesday morning. But heâ??s been acting professionally for years, with support from work as a receptionist in architectural and law firms.

He was a beach boy in the early days of â??Beach Blanket Babylon,â?• when it was in the Club Olympus on Columbus before it became Club Fugazi. He had singing roles in local musical theater in San Leandro, Sacramento, and San Francisco.

Nockels performed songs by Jerry Herman, the Tony-winning composer who wrote â??Hello Dolly, â??Mame,â?• and other top musicals, at The Club up on 1171 California Street â?? no longer in existence. â??It was called â??Tune the Grand Up,â??â?• he said, â??and we took that show to Sacramento for the 1989 â?? 1990 season.â?•

Stefano doesnâ??t teach playwriting but some students, like Nockels, do it on their own. He likes Stefanoâ??s class because it makes him â??use my brain in creating a story or a character. Itâ??s fun to get outside yourself and be someone else,â?• he said.

Nockelâ??s play, â??The Last Cookie,â?• takes place in 2020 as the Covid crisis begins. Tension invades an upper middle-class home in Orinda, Calif., as an older couple takes in the wifeâ??s sister, an out-of-work actress but high maintenance diva. A cookie stands in as â??the last straw,â?• on top of the coupleâ??s other problems.

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On reaching his mid-80s, Nockels said, â??Cross your fingers your body wonâ??t fall apart. Keep moving. You canâ??t avoid everything.â?• He exercises three times a week through a Golden Gate Senior Center strength and conditioning class on Zoom.

Catherine Hampton, 69



Photo courtesy of Catherine Hampton

Hampton had a career as an elementary school teacher, but she was also a professional storyteller and musician. She plays the harp, the piano, and the Penny Whistle. She and her husband both sing and he also plays the guitar. â??We play for each other,â?• she said. Her daughter is an actor, singer, and theater teacher in San Diego.

Since joining the Aquatic Park Players, Hampton has added play writing to her repertoire, producing a one hour-length play and eight dual monologues with writer Louise Vogel. â??itâ??s so gratifying,â?• she said.

Her one-hour play, â??Our Sheltering,â?• which the Aquatic Park Players presented in May, was the first time the troupe had performed a full-length play. It turns the spotlight on a husband, wife, and sister-in-law sheltering together during Covid. It focuses on how a sort of kooky but typical family interacts while dealing with a serious societal issue. Despite all their idiosyncrasies, ribbing, and arguing, their inherent love carries the day.

Hampton also performs with â??Drama with Friends,â?• a monthly Readerâ??s Theater sponsored by the Community Living Campaign, a non-profit serving seniors and adults with disabilities. Each event features three one-act plays.

She and her husband live in Santa Cruz, but her husband works in San Francisco. So, because her mother-in-law owns a condo near Aquatic Park, they live there during the week. Hampton says she loves the setting: the tile work, the water, Alcatraz, and Fort Mason.

She likes meeting people from all walks of life and said you donâ??t know the treasure youâ??re unfolding when you meet someone. â??I take yoga and ceramics at the senior center, and I really connect with people doing creative activities.â?• Through Next Village, Hampton facilitates a weekly meditation class.

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