Seniors take on new roles with â??Drama with Friends,â?? a Zoom project that had its first live performance

Description

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Herbert and Gloria are flirting. Like spooning teens, the elderly pair are joking about their relationship and contemplating new places to have sex. Riding a horse, suggests Herbert, garnering a slightly lascivious grin in return. I loved my (late) husband, says Gloria, hinting that the usually creative man was a rather unimaginative bedmate. Herbert preens a bit, suggesting that he does better.

Mary Gayle â??MGâ?• Thomas and Andy Hamner perform the original short play â??Bucket List,â?• at Ruthâ??s Table art gallery and event space in the Mission District. (All photos by Colin Campbell)

The warm encounter continues for a few minutes. And ends with applause. Herbert and Gloria are, in reality, Andy Hamner, 75, and Mary Gayle Thomas, 72, performers in â??Bucket List,â?• a play presented by Drama with Friends, a theatrical troupe largely composed of San Francisco seniors. Held at Ruthâ??s Table art gallery and event space in the Mission District, it was their first live performance.

Since the early days of the pandemic, Drama with Friends has produced some 150 plays, and with one exception, presented the works on Zoom. The plays are short, generally about 10 or 15 minutes each, and consistently attract a virtual audience of 60 or so. Often the plays touch on themes related to aging. Some are melancholy, like the story of a woman in the early stages of dementia riding an AC Transit bus searching for her former home. Others are lighthearted, like â??Bump in the Night,â?• an argument between two aging burglars during a home invasion.

Rookies and professionals

Most of the troupeâ??s 26 active members came to Drama with Friends as theater rookies; others have performed, written, and even taught theater in more professional venues. A bit of stage fright is normal, but all seem to delight in the experience. Ask a member how participation in the group has affected them, â??fulfillingâ?• is the answer youâ??re likely to hear.

Ugo Baldassari, Andy Hamner, and Joe Kaniewski open Drama with Friendsâ?? first live show with a play called â??Las Meninas,â?• in which the artist Diego Velasquez tries to convince Spainâ??s King Philip II to allow him to paint a portrait of him and his family.

Thomas, a retired executive secretary who goes by M.G., had a taste of the stage when she took a theater appreciation class as an undergraduate at the University of Texas, El Paso. â??I was terrified about acting. I was building sets and doing anything to avoid being on stage,â?• she said. But after retiring, she found she had a talent for writing. Fellow students at a writing class praised her work and

told her about Drama with Friends. After viewing a few performances, she volunteered to act.

Thomas started slowly, reading introductions and short stage directions. â??At first it was scary,â?• she said. But after a few months, I realized I hadnâ??t died from the experience. I was hooked. Itâ??s fulfilling; a major part of my life now.â?• She laughs when asked if there were any real-life sparks between her and Hamner or spousal jealousy. â??Nope, and his wife approves,â?• said Thomas, who lives with her longtime partner in the Outer Mission.

Hamner, her fictional lover, taught drama and English in Bay Area schools and has acted and directed with several local theater groups. â??I thought I had retired, but Drama with Friends has drawn me back into it. I do love it, and the Zoom performances are very fulfilling,â?• he said. And yes, his wife enjoyed â??Bucket Listâ?• and â??is very proud of me,â?• said Hamner, who is 75 and lives in the Outer Richmond.

A pandemic response

Drama with Friends is a program of the nonprofit Community Living Campaign, the parent of SFSeniorBeat. It started in 2020 as the pandemic shut down most forms of face-to-face entertainment and socializing. â??I missed going to the theater. I wanted to see plays again,â?• said Judy Goddess, the producer and founder of the group. Goddess, a retired grant writer and writer for SF SeniorBeat, had a good deal of experience organizing programs for nonprofits, but her knowledge of theater was strictly that of an audience member.

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Judy Goddess, producer and founder of Drama with Friends, welcomes an audience to its first live performance.

It occurred to her that it might be possible to present plays on Zoom, so she contacted a local playwright who told her how to find scripts. Goddess, now 87 and a longtime CLC volunteer, approached the nonprofit and it agreed to sponsor the project.

Drama with Friends obtains plays from several online repositories, including the New Play Exchange, which claims to have on file nearly 61,000 scripts by more than 13,700 writers. Theater groups can perform these plays free of charge, though Drama with Friends awards a $25 honorarium to the authors. Since it started in 2020, the troupe has presented four or five plays a month on Zoom. Viewers come from all over the country and need only to register; there is no charge to watch, Goddess said.

The actors neednâ??t worry about forgetting their lines: they read them. Thereâ??s no need to build sets since the group uses backgrounds projected by Zoom.

Catherine Hampton, a retired elementary school librarian, loves to write and tell stories. She performed with Story Tellers of San Diego for about a decade, often telling folk tales with the help of a puppeteer. Like other members of Drama with Friends, she heard about the troupe during a class and signed up.

â??I was cast in a small part and was hooked,â?• she said.

Catherine Hampton, a retired elementary school librarian, did a solo performance set around her work playing the harp in a hospital setting.

Playing the harp is another of Hamptonâ??s talents. A recent play she wrote, directed, and performed gave her a chance to showcase her musical ability and tell a story derived from her own life.

A play from real life

While living in San Diego, Hampton was part of a program that brought musicians to a city hospital to play in corridors and soothe patients and their families. She was stationed outside an intensive care unit, playing â??Over the Rainbow,â?• on a harp. After a bit, a woman who had just come from the ICU told Hampton she heard the music just as her son had died. â??I knew the angels had taken him,â?• she told her.â?• Hampton, who was deeply touched,â?• was invited to play at the boyâ??s memorial service.

That incident was the basis for â??Magical Antidote,â?• a solo playâ?? including a brief harp composition â?? that Hampton performed before a live audience in mid-November. It was presented the same night â??Bucket Listâ?• and two other plays were staged, the first time Drama with Friends performed live. Appearing in front of a live audience was an experiment the troupe had mulled for some time, said Ugo Baldassari, a frequent actor and director with the troupe.

Baldassari, who gives his age as â??looking at 70â?• has been involved in theater for much of his life. Born in North Beach, he studied drama at the University of California, Berkeley, receiving a masterâ??s degree. But rather than completing a doctorate, he drove a cab and scrambled for roles in the theater. He formed a troupe called Actors Ark in the mid-â??70s. The group had some success, mostly presenting European plays from a home on Mason Street and later Fort Mason.

But when he married and started a family, he realized he needed more money and became a realtor. â??When I retired, and not being a golfer, I decided that theater was a horse I know how to ride,â?• he said.

Polishing the gem

In 2020, Baldassari joined Drama with Friends, first as an actor, and then took on more responsibilities as a director. â??I knew there were talented people here,â?• he said. However, the troupe needed more polish, so he pushed to institute rehearsals and other changes as a director. Now there are at least three or four rehearsals of each play and there are transitions between each. â??The rehearsals made a significant difference in quality,â?• said Hamner. Most of the troupe embraced the changes, but for some, it was too much additional work, and a few cast members left, said Goddess.

The recent live performance was a hit with the groupâ??s members and will likely be repeated. â??Being in front of an audience is tantamount to a religious experience as the spiritual energy is transferred back and forth,â?• said Baldassari. â??And every audience is different.â?•

But virtual performances will remain the troupeâ??s mainstay. When a performer is ready to take the stage, itâ??s customary to tell them â??Break a leg.â?• But when it comes to the actors, directors, and writers of Drama with Friends, it might be more appropriate to offer this benediction: â??Break a pixel.â?•

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12/12/2024
Author
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