



Telling the Story of GeriActors and Friends



agefriendly
EDMONTON

GERIACTORS & FRIENDS





Joan was an actor who had always dreamed of playing Juliet.

The problem was, she had not been on stage since the Second World War. She had survived the bombing raids in London and had crossed the Atlantic to build a life and a family in Edmonton.

She had long ago given up on her dream.



Then, in her 80s, she discovered us, the GeriActors, a not-for-profit theatre company founded by actor, playwright, director, and University of Alberta professor David Barnett in 2001.

“Oh she was extraordinary,” remembers David. “She could have devoted her life to this. She was a great actress, with a story that needed to come out, and she performed in everything. She was Juliet at 84: pure Shakespeare, and no one in the audience moved. We were introduced to greatness, to potential, to promise, to mystery. She had in fact achieved her single ambition, as she had told her granddaughter: to play Juliet.”

In 2001, it was about the power of art in our lives — at all ages. No one was thinking about the health benefits of writing, creating, and performing in our senior years but multiple research studies have proven what now seems obvious.

For much of his career, David has focused on social action theatre, on creation and performance as catalysts for change. He is interested in what he calls “the oneness, the reciprocity between performers and audiences.”







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What he realized, as a teacher, was that an even deeper level of reciprocity was possible. Why not bring seniors and students together?

In 2007 he created a U of A class out of his work with GeriActors: Intergenerational Theatre.

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If they work and create and play together, young people and seniors can share both the universal themes we see in all art and the more specific problems and obsessions that define each generation.

GeriActors became GeriActors & Friends, the friends being University of Alberta drama students and alumni.

“The social milieu is so engaging,” he says. “They all bring different things, different ideas and experiences. The problems, the improvisation, the acting, the role of the audience.”

And none of the participants are the same afterward.

An early volunteer in our program, Becca Barrington, found something she didn't know she was looking for when she worked with seniors. “You don't have to contribute much, in theatre, before you feel you own it,” she says. “To have people from different generations come together and build something, to belong, to pick lines and change lines, it's like nothing else.”

After she graduated, Becca travelled the world and worked elsewhere before she came to feel her time with GeriActors was one of the most meaningful experiences in her life. She returned to Edmonton and is now our associate director.

Her experience is not unusual. Students in David's Intergenerational Theatre class speak movingly about how working with seniors has utterly transformed their ideas about aging.

"What sold it for me personally is I saw a GeriActors show, and I saw my late grandfather's story represented," says Maggie Salopek, a 24-year-old former student of David's who decided to volunteer with us after graduating.

"I didn't know what I was going to do, at the time. But performing with the GeriActors helped me realize how important it is to understand someone else's story, how important seniors issues are. It's helped me want to learn more and work more with seniors. I now work at the Edmonton General as a recreational therapy assistant, with seniors, and I want to eventually go to grad school for occupational therapy — to help more people."





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This season, we participated in USchool, a University of Alberta program that brings socially vulnerable children to campus for a week, to understand how post-secondary education can change their lives. It brought a further dimension of intergenerational exchange to the program.

Children from Fort MacKay or an inner-city school learning not only about theatre but about art and creativity and playfulness at 70 or 90 made for one of USchool's most successful sessions all year.

At our year-end GeriActors show, a group of seniors and students gathered on campus to perform several short plays based on the theme of belonging. Some of the seniors had always wanted to be on stage. Most of them were shy when they were younger, not at all "theatre types."

They are surprised by how a bit of curiosity led them to a program that had changed their lives.

The performance began with a song, (In) Visible, composed by a young volunteer and performed by everyone on stage. Fifteen seniors and eleven students had taken part in the season, and many of them had invited friends and family to the show. Others are part of our regular audience — future GeriActors & Friends, we hope.

In Reading the Signs, a man dealt with the repercussions of losing his driver's license. Audience members cried during Sanctuary and laughed during Love Me Tinder, a thoughtful and funny take on dating and technology. Claire and Jacob looked at the profound changes in LGBTQ rights since the 1970s and its effects on real people of all ages. Each show had an element of the Greek chorus.

Part of our philosophy at GeriActors & Friends is that the work is never finished. Watching and feeling the audience react to the plays will inspire our writers and performers to continue writing and playing, to find deeper cracks in the material to explore.

During the question-and-answer session, at the end of the show, what the audience members wanted was more — of everything: more stories of discomfort, of fear, of joy and accomplishment, funny stories, sad stories.

One of our participants, a long-time GeriActor, had the last word before the final applause: "We're so blessed to be working with young people. We're not seniors. We're born-again teenagers."

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For more information on GeriActors and Friends visit: www.geriactors.ca



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