Stagebridge Santa Cruz trains aspiring actors 50 and older

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APPEAL — Kathryn Adkins believes that participation in the performing arts should be available to all age groups. As an instructor teaching voice and acting for the Cabrillo College Theater Arts Department, Adkins has also gained Cabrillo Stage productions as both a leading lady and supporting player in beloved musicals such as "My Fair Lady," "The King and I," and "Carmelit." Adkins' newest role this summer will be for Stagebridge Santa Cruz, which is offering classes for people 50 and older that offers training in performance arts as well as an opportunity to perform and share their talents.

The program kicks off with a summer workshop as part of a collaboration with Cabrillo Stage and Cabrillo College Theater Arts Department. Offered through Cabrillo College Extension, the Cabrillo Arts Summer Workshop will offer classes in a variety of performing arts ranging from storytelling to improvisation and movement.

Adkins is slated to teach "Musical Theater Adventure" and "Solo Character Acting." "Stagebridge will be a very special opportunity for people to learn and explore," said Adkins, who is the program director for the Cabrillo Arts Summer Workshop. "As we get older, we realize we have limited time left on our own. We see young people and wonder what they do things that aren't available to us at their age. The whole idea of developing Stagebridge for seniors is truly life-affirming." Stagebridge Santa Cruz is affiliated with Stagebridge, a nonprofit founded in 1978 in Oakland that is the oldest continuously operating senior theater company in the United States. Stagebridge first started its program where senior citizens gradually evolved into a small collective theater company in 1989. Stagebridge founder Stuart Kendall said, "We started doing plays at senior centers and schools and we found there was both a need for what we were doing as well as an audience of other people who shared the idea of seeing their peers up on stage addressing topics that were of interest to them.

From that first acting class that had five participants, Kendall continued, Stagebridge grew to its current slate of 25 weekly classes that are attended by about 200 seniors. The free-based classes are geared toward older adults on limited or fixed incomes. Kendall described Stagebridge as the fiscal arm of Stagebridge.

Encouraging seniors to become involved in theater arts, Stagebridge members perform for residents of Pacific Coast Manor in Capitola. "The whole idea of developing Stagebridge for seniors is truly life-affirming." KATHRYN ADKINS, Stagebridge Santa Cruz teacher who also teaches voice and acting for the Cabrillo College Theater Arts Department.

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Santa Cruz and credentialed soloist Lynn Knudsen for taking the necessary first steps toward establishing an affiliation. "Lynn had heard about Stagebridge and came to our camp last summer and just really hit it by the concept and wanted to bring it to Santa Cruz," Kendall said. "We have guided them on how to get started and provided our help. We're doing this work for a longer time now — we have to be on the way to it and we want people to succeed." Knudsen and a number of fellow seniors involved in Stagebridge recently performed "Here's Off to Broadway!" at the Pacific Coast Manor in Capitola as a preview of the kind of community outreach Stagebridge intends to do. "There isn't anything in this area like Stagebridge," said Knudsen, the producing director for Stagebridge Santa Cruz. "When I moved to this area, I started performing in the Santa Cruz Follies, but there were no classes geared specifically toward seniors where we could learn a new theater discipline." For Adkins, who recently directed Knudsen and other Stagebridge founding members in the Follies this past September, she said she's looking forward to seeing other seniors in the area put their talents on display. "Performing on stage in front of people is on the bucket list for many people," Adkins said. "It's a very exciting thing to do, but it can be scary. Stagebridge will be a safe environment for seniors, who often need validation that what they do is good and worthy. "I really believe that performing arts are for everyone at every age and at every stage of their lives."