Stagebridge comes to Santa Cruz to offer classes in performing arts

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The stage of life over 50 looks a lot different today than it used to. Advances in medicine and maintaining health, as well as cultural changes, has meant that today's 50-plus adult will often have a much different lifestyle and set of attitudes than his/her parents.

When Stuart Kandell started his Stagebridge program in the late 1970s, the "senior" generation was steeped in the big band culture of the 1940s. Today's older demographic is, instead, often children of the peace-and-love 1960s. But one thing that has remained consistent in the 35 years of the program is that people over 50 have always been interested in starting something new with their lives, or picking up something they had abandoned in their youth.

Stagebridge, which was founded in Oakland, is now forming a satellite base in Santa Cruz. Next week, the successful program will be, for the first time, offering classes in the performing arts in Santa Cruz for people at 50-plus.

"The idea is to give people over 50 opportunities to be involved in the performing arts," said Kandell, "by offering classes taught by professionals in their field. It's for people who have never performed. And it's also for people who may have done some performing - maybe they were in a play in high school or college, sang in the choir, or performed with a band, before families and careers and their lives got underway."

The classes will be offered at Cabrillo College the week of June 20-26, and will feature classes in storytelling, Broadway musicals, dance, acting, stand-up comedy and improv. The teachers include such well-known Santa Cruz County artists as Karin Babbit, Erica Lam-Clark, Dixie Cox & Clifford Henderson, Yasmina Porter, Lynn Knudson, Alice Hughes, Sarah Albertson and Kathryn Adkins.

Kandell, 64, models the Santa Cruz sessions after the long-standing program he founded in the East Bay, currently the oldest theater program for older people in the country, designed to teach students performance skills and, at the same time, to get the rust out of their own self-image as performers.

"The thing a lot of people have to deal with is self-consciousness," said Kandell. "It's natural to wonder, 'Do I have the ability to do this?' or 'Do I still have the ability to do this?' Performing arts are a risky business, and it's scary for a lot of people."

When he first started the program, said Kandell, there were very few resources for older people. "You'd go to the local senior center at that time and there was maybe a knitting class and slideshows of Europe after lunch." From there, he established classes for older folks based on performance fundamentals.

Kandell said that his training programs often lead to performances in front of community audiences, and that his students will play to audiences of about 25,000 per year.

"This isn't a recreation program. It's a real oppor-

The Oakland-based Stagebridge has been offering professional training in the performing arts for 35 years.