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FROM NARRATIVE TO THEATRE: LIVING HISTORY THEATRE

City University of New York

PH.D. 1985

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FROM NARRATIVE TO THEATRE:
LIVING HISTORY THEATRE
by
CHRISTINE ELIZABETH HOWARD BAILEY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City
University of New York.

1985

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty
in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

April 18, 1985
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PREFACE

This treatise is an historical, critical, and descriptive study of Living History Theatre as it derives from Oral History Theatre, a form of Senior Adult Theatre. My interest in this topic developed from studying historical drama and from working in developmental drama with senior adults. I had conducted workshops for seniors in various types of centers and was impressed by the power that drama had for them. Many of my own unconscious prejudices about the elderly were dispelled by these workshops. I found that seniors had a store of creativity, imagination, and experience that was readily engaged through the drama; and the most successful drama was that which allowed them to share some aspect or memory of their past lives. Most of the work I did involved improvisations based on the life histories of the participants. It was an informal drama; no performances were given, no scripts were developed. The response of the participants was always enthusiastic.

No doubt the enthusiasm was partly therapeutic, but a question that always arises when one employs drama with a special interest group is whether or not it is used for instrumental or aesthetic purposes. With a group like the elderly, which is traditionally, in our culture, considered "disabled," then that use is often assumed to be solely a therapeutic one. The drama is seen as a means to occupy people who have a good deal of time to spare, or it is seen as a means to better personal well-being. All of these benefits

may exist, but my work with seniors has suggested other possibilities. The drama need not simply be something that is "done" to seniors to make them feel better. Seniors are capable of creating a work of art and presenting that work to others, not as an apology or as an example of how they have increased their sense of well-being, but as an assertive act: This work of art is what I/we created, and this act of creation has many implications.

My experiences were reinforced when I read two works that proved important to me: A Stage for Memory: Life History Plays by Older Adults by Susan Perlstein¹ and Number Our Days by Barbara Meyerhoff.² Perlstein had developed with senior adults in New York what she called "Living History Plays." These plays were based on the oral histories of the group members and had a particular social and/or political theme. Once developed, the performers took their plays to other senior audiences and, through different audience participation techniques, invited the spectators to share the memories and thoughts the play stimulated. Thus the plays became, in part, an educational forum. Seniors took works they had created and invited audiences to share in the performance experience, not simply to make them feel better

¹Susan Perlstein, A Stage for Memory: Life History Plays by Older Adults--The Work of the Hodson Senior Center Drama Group (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1981).

²Barbara Meyerhoff, Number Our Days (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

feel better but to encourage them to participate in an activity that had many ramifications. Perlstein's account was a moving one, and I wanted to learn more about her work.

Meyerhoff's account of an anthropological study she conducted at the Aliyah Senior Center in Southern California was also moving.¹ Meyerhoff's purpose was to study the process of aging by studying the lives of the predominantly East European immigrant Jews, survivors of the Holocaust, who frequented the center. In order to achieve her goal, Meyerhoff started what she called a "Living History" class where members who joined the group discussed the memories of their lives. She also conducted many interviews with the members and, as observer/participant, recorded the events that happened at the center during her study period. In part, she said that these people had been so close to death that the experience had enlivened them. They had become, like many elderly, more afraid of oblivion than death. Many sought ways to become visible. By telling their stories in the Living History classes, they were able to witness their own lives and become subject and object at the same time. From my own work with seniors, I knew that this exchange does indeed take place, and consequently I wondered what factors affected the ways groups dramatized the exchange. Meyerhoff's Living History classes were discussion groups

¹Unfortunately (and ironically), Barbara Meyerhoff died in early 1985 at the age of forty-eight.

No drama was developed from them. However, there were obvious parallels between her work and Perlstein's. They were working in the same area but were apparently doing so independently of each other. In any case, the nature of their work was different. Meyerhoff was a social scientist, Perlstein an artist; and while their work overlapped, it was approached from a different perspective.

I contacted Susan Perlstein and, in the spring of 1983, we met to discuss her work--thus began my specific study, which would not have been possible without the input of many people who generously provided me with information about their life and work. I am sorry, however, I was not able to include all the information that was sent to me or to record the work of people like Maria Lehnert in Baltimore or Joyce Pendery in Connecticut who, although working in oral history with seniors, did not produce live theatre but, rather, videos and radio dramas.

I am particularly grateful to those seniors who shared their life histories with me and gave me permission to write about them. Some allowed me to use their real names; others preferred that I use fictitious names. I have honored their requests.

I am especially thankful to Susan Perlstein for sharing her work with me and allowing me to interview her for many hours. I appreciate her reading my manuscript and suggesting revisions. I am also thankful to Sally Charnow, Marion

Stanton, and Sarah Safford for permitting me to witness their workshops and for sharing their views with me.

I am grateful for the assistance and inspiration Dr. Vera Mowry Roberts has given me. I appreciate the time she spent editing my manuscript and the wisdom and knowledge she has shared with me. I am indebted to Dr. Charles Gattnig for all the encouragement and assistance he has given me throughout my doctoral education. With his characteristic warmth and generosity, he managed to make my most difficult obstacles seem surmountable. I would also like to thank Professor Pat Sternberg for all the advice she has given me.

Many other people have contributed in some way to this study, and I would like to thank them all, but most especially my family which initially encouraged me to pursue this research.

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From THE TOWER
SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

I

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
--Those dying generations--at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

W. B. Yeats, 1927

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of the Study

By the year 2000, thirteen percent of the population--roughly thirty-five million people--will be over the age of sixty-five.¹ Obviously, this is a significant political constituency and one that has gradually emerged since the Depression years when federal programs were first instituted to protect older citizens from some of the vagaries of life.² Much was done to improve the financial and medical circumstances of the elderly and to enhance their ability to contribute to society. By the 1970s, a variety of programs were, in addition, introduced to improve the quality of their life. Some of these programs were arts programs that were seen as a challenging means to foster creativity and develop such qualities as self-esteem. They aimed to do so, in part, by countering negative assumptions about what the elderly can or cannot do. One such arts program was Senior Adult Theatre (SAT), which utilized existing types and styles of theatre--

¹U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census Publication, 1983 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 12.

²W. Andrew Achenbaum, Old Age in a New Land: The American Experience since 1790 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp.143-164.

some groups put on traditional, formal presentations, others did variety shows or revue sketches, while others worked with creative dramatics. The methods of working and the presentations performed were simply adapted to suit an older constituency.

One particular type of Senior Adult Theatre to develop during this time was Oral History Theatre. Oral History Theatre was an amalgam of three disciplines: oral history, theatre (particularly people's theatre), and gerontology. Its general approach was to base dramatic presentations on the life histories of senior adults. Its purposes were either to entertain, advocate, educate, or function as a therapeutic vehicle for the senior adult.

One specific type of Oral History Theatre was Living History Theatre, which was developed by Susan Perlstein of Elders Share the Arts (ESTA), a New York arts organization. Perlstein based dramatic presentations on the life stories of her senior adult drama participants, toured the productions to locations where seniors congregated, and encouraged audience participation. Often her plays had a social and political theme; their artistic base emphasized process rather than product, and the effect at times was therapeutic: it authenticated a people.

The purpose of the present study is to outline the development of Oral History Theatre in the field of Senior Adult Theatre, and to examine in detail one particular form of Oral History Theatre--Living History Theatre--and to

evaluate it as an artistic form. It is my contention that Oral History Theatre emerged at a time when advocacy of the elderly was popular and such theatre was consequently a form most suited to a group that is traditionally disenfranchised. As Achenbaum has noted, although great improvements have been made in the conditions and quality of life of many elderly people, further changes are still needed to be made:

. . . despite all the positive and encouraging changes, serious difficulties remain. A significant number of older men and women are impoverished, and the economic resources of an even larger percentage are barely adequate. Furthermore, most Americans ignore more recent findings and continue to subscribe to wornout, negative conceptions of old age.¹

Oral History Theatre was particularly suited to the elderly because it embraced disciplines that took the advocacy of a people as their central concern. And, interestingly, each of these disciplines was in a period of growth at the time Oral History Theatre developed. Consequently, an interdisciplinary theatrical form evolved that addressed the needs of a people emerging as a political entity.

Some leaders who were working in the field of Senior Adult Theatre simply used traditional theatrical forms in order to entertain seniors or to involve them in an enjoyable activity. Others, however, felt the need to advocate for a group of people whose voices were not normally heard and who were often the victims of discrimination by the members of mainstream American society. These socially and politically

¹Achenbaum, p. 143.

conscious Senior Adult Theatre leaders saw theatre as a means to educate its participants and audiences to the qualities and attributes of a people whose lives, contrary to popular belief, were of some significance. Theatre was a way of making the elderly feel proud of who they were and of sharing with others--young and old--their collective wisdom. If this activity had a therapeutic effect, then so be it. Different leaders had different approaches to the form and emphasized different purposes. Yet all were committed to a single goal: the advocacy of senior adults.

The focus of this study, then, is on Living History Theatre as a unique type of theatre that combines an artistic form with humanistic disciplines. It is dependent for its success upon enactment because it lacks a stable text, and it is dependent as well upon an audience which is able to interact with the performers, to, in a sense, "become" the performers. But it is theatre, and its emphasis on process rather than on an historically locatable product--a text--contributes significantly to its considerable aesthetic merit. This study aims to show that Oral History Theatre, as a type of Senior Adult Theatre, is being developed by different leaders and groups throughout the United States and that Living History Theatre, as a manifestation of this phenomenon, is an evolving art form that is an integral part of the community that created it and, as such, has social, aesthetic, educational and therapeutic values.

Oral History Theatre and the Senior Adult: Some Definitions

"Oral History Theatre" as a label may appear, however, to be quite misleading. H.G. Jones, the Curator of the famous North Carolina collection of oral history has pointed out to me, for example, that Oral History Theatre is a misnomer "inasmuch as oral history is an accepted scholarly discipline now in the field of historical research, whereas . . . dramas incorporate non-factual conversation and events that place them in the field of fiction rather than history."¹ To a certain extent this statement is true but only as it applies to those dramas that are based loosely upon oral history source material. Some oral history plays are based verbatim on oral history source material, and no fictional elements are added whatsoever. And in between these two extremes there are plays that balance pure oral history and fiction to varying degrees. In order to describe a development, one has to give it a name, and "Oral History Theatre" seems appropriate, although it might be best considered, as Martin Esslin has said about the term "Theatre of the Absurd," "as a working hypothesis, a device to make certain fundamental traits which seem to be present in the works of a number [of theatre practitioners] accessible to discussion by tracing the features they have in common."²

¹H.G. Jones, Curator, North Carolina Collection, personal letter, 28 November 1984.

²Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), p. x.

By Oral History Theatre I mean theatre that involves dramatic presentations that, in varying degrees, are based on the oral testimonies of living people about life conditions or issues or trends and events in history. Such a definition would include dramatic presentations derived from existing published oral testimony, as is Foxfire by Susan Cooper and Hume Cronyn¹ (based on Eliot Wigginton's Foxfire books which concern the oral testimonies of Appalachian people),² or Quilters by Molly Newman and Barbara Damashek³ (based on Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Allen's The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art, which contains the oral histories of quilters who were pioneer women from Texas and New Mexico),⁴ or Do Lord Remember Me by James de Jongh⁵ (based on the oral testimonies of former slaves recorded in the late 1930s under the Federal Writer's Project).

In its broadest sense, the definition would also include such pure documentary dramas as Peter Weiss's The

¹Susan Cooper and Hume Cronyn, Foxfire (New York: Samuel French, 1983).

²Eliot Wigginton, ed., The Foxfire Book (New York: Anchor Books, 1972).

³Molly Newman and Barbara Damashek, Quilters (Denver, CO: By the Authors, 1050 13th Street, 1982).

⁴Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Allen, The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

⁵James de Jongh, Do Lord Remember Me (New York: Samuel French, 1983).

Investigation,¹ or such semi-documentary dramas as Donald Freed's The Inquest,² although these dramas are based on oral and written source material and use techniques from the media and journalism. They tend to deal with recent history, however, and, like other oral history presentations, are usually political or ideological or educational. The Investigation, for example, implies that the refusal on the part of some Germans to acknowledge the existence of the concentration camps was fostered by German capitalists. The play is presented in the form of a trial of the murderers of Auschwitz and suggests that capitalism leads to the blindness and greed that resulted in Auschwitz: the capitalists profited at the expense of the majority. Weiss did not invent any of the characters or dialogue. Instead, he condensed and revised the transcripts of the Eichmann and Frankfurt Trials in the 1960s. Freed's The Inquest, which concerns the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, is not pure documentary; instead it combines excerpts from the trial transcripts and quotations from contemporaries like Albert Einstein with reconstructions from actual events. Freed suggests that the Rosenbergs were framed, and he indicts those who did not, at the time, speak up to defend them.

These types of dramatic presentations are not to be confused with autobiographical plays like O'Neill's Long

¹Peter Weiss, The Investigation (New York: Atheneum, 1966).

²Donald Freed, Inquest (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970).

Day's Journey into Night, or memory plays like Williams's The Glass Menagerie, or historical and topical plays like The Crucible, which are either based on one person's experience or on a dramatist's interpretation of historical events. Neither are they to be seen as a new breed of nostalgia plays. Instead, the emphasis in Oral History Theatre presentations is on the collective, authentic first-hand testimonies of living individuals who directly experienced the event or period or conditions in history that are being dramatized and who together have a collective perspective on it--it is in their collective living memory.

The tendency in such presentations is to shift the focus away from the "great men" in history to that of the common man, the ordinary people. And in so doing, such plays articulate the experience of those who are not normally represented: those who are often considered by many in society to be inarticulate or unimportant.

Oral History Theatre as it applies to senior adults is a further expression of this tendency. By Oral History Theatre for, by, and with senior adults specifically, I mean that the Oral History Theatre presentations are either based on the oral testimonies of senior adults, who may or may not act in the productions; or the presentations are performed by senior adults; or they are presented to audiences of senior adults. Sometimes, however, the productions may involve seniors in every aspect of the presentation's development and performance, or in some aspects and not others.

Some Oral History Theatre presentations are intended for a general observing audience, but senior adult Oral History Theatre presentations are intended for a specific experiencing audience. Their emphasis is consequently on community. Plays like Do Lord Remember Me and The Investigation are derived from oral materials but have a carefully selected structure that has been superimposed by the dramatist. The dramatist may have collaborated with others while defining that structure, but ultimately the plays stand on their own as plays created by a specific artist.

In contrast, senior adult Oral History Theatre presentations need an interaction between players and a participating audience for their effectiveness. They are often a collective creation and are different, therefore, in kind from other Oral History Theatre presentations.

The relationship between players and audience in senior adult Oral History Theatre is a very special one. The performers invite the audience to concur with their collective historical perspective. The actual performance is consequently an integral part of the Oral History Theatre process. Indeed, many senior adult Oral History Theatre scripts seem, as Herbert Lindenberger has said about documentary drama generally, "dead on the printed page, for they depend for their effects on their ability to establish a sense of community with their audiences."¹ It is perhaps for this reason that

¹Herbert Lindenberger, Historical Drama: The Relation of Literature and Reality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 21.

the very structure of many oral history presentations--short scenes presented in narrative style with usually little emphasis on plot or character developed in a traditional way, but much emphasis on theme and the collective experience--is not well-received by an audience unless the audience can relate to that collective experience.

The aim in senior adult Oral History Theatre presentations, therefore, is not so much to get an accurate historical record (for one can never be sure of that as respondents might lie, misrepresent, distort, or inaccurately recall their experiences), but to determine the truth of their experiences, to get to a common truth that can relate to the truth of experience in both the lives of the performers and the audience members. The audience, however, has to be willing to assimilate what is portrayed. As Lindenberger has said of historical drama, " . . . in publicly known matters, reality or plausibility exists essentially within the consciousness of the audience."¹ If the audience does accept and verify what is presented, then performers and audience authenticate the truth of their collective experience. Consequently, in the performance of the oral history presentation, we get what Ronald Grele has called "an idealogical and mythic matrix of cultural consciousness"¹ of a society

¹Lindenberger, p. 2.

²Ronald Grele, "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History," in Envelopes of Sound: Six Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory and Practice of Oral History, ed. Ronald Grele (New York: Precedent Publishing, 1975), p. 143.

through the participants' joint view of their history. And in our witnessing their history, we see what it was like for senior adults, the elders of our society, to live the lives they have. Through them, we see into the past in a way very different from reading written historical source material. We learn more acutely of the throb of existence and, in so doing, come to understand something more of our own lives.

The terms "senior adult" and "elders" here are used to describe those members of our society who are over the age of sixty-five; i.e., those who were born prior to 1920. Other terms are used for this cohort--senior citizens, the elderly, the aged. Some are considered more flattering than others. The assumption is that comfortable euphemisms are better than labels that suggest "old," which is considered pejorative in some way. Such attitudes may be changing and although it is now fashionable to refer to those over sixty-five as "elders," I chose "senior adults" because that is the term applied to this age group by the American Theatre Association, and consequently "Senior Adult Theatre" is a nationally recognized form of theatre. On occasion, throughout this study, however, I use one of the other terms whenever it seems more appropriate to do so.

Senior Adult Theatre: Arts and Aging

Senior Adult Theatre developed as a specific form of theatre, and was recognized as such by the American Theatre Association (ATA) in the early 1970s. However, some groups

of seniors had been presenting plays together prior to 1970. Dina Reese Evans Shaw formed the Youngtown Players of Arizona in 1959, for example, and the Pohai Nani Players were established in Hawaii in 1966.¹ The need to recognize Senior Adult Theatre as an entity separate from other theatre paralleled the developments in arts and aging that were occurring in the United States simultaneously during the 1970s. A number of federal institutions that began in the 1960s expanded in the 1970s to meet the growing needs of an aging population, which was increasing partially due to better medical care. Amendments to the Older Americans Act authorized states to develop their services for the elderly, and many consequently initiated departments designed specifically to meet the needs of their elderly citizens. In addition, as W. Andrew Achenbaum notes in Old Age in a New Land, a number of private organizations like the National Retired Teachers Association, the American Association of Retired Persons, and the Gray Panthers were developed, to lobby politically for the millions of voters they claimed to represent.²

¹Roger Cornish, Older Americans on Stage: A Report to the Alliance for Arts Education of the American Theatre Association Senior Adult Theatre Project (Washington, D.C.: American Theatre Association, 1979), p. v.

²Achenbaum, p. 147. See also Robert N. Butler, Why Survive: Being Old in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

Concurrent with the elderly's emergence as a powerful political group was an increase in gerontological studies that challenged many of the myths concerning aging:

Not only has research published since World War II undermined the empirical basis for assuming that older people invariably are physically incapacitated, but it also has overturned all previous justifications for believing that learning and creativity inevitably cease with advancing age.¹

The fact that there were large numbers of seniors with time for leisure activities (and studies which confirmed they were capable of creativity²) encouraged the focusing of national attention on arts and aging. In 1973, for example, the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts and the National Council on Aging sponsored a prospectus edited by Jacqueline Sunderland, the then director of the Washington, D.C. Center for Older Americans, entitled Older Americans and the Arts: A Human Equation.³ It described some of the arts

¹Achenbaum, p. 154; See also Erdman Palmore, "Facts on Aging: A Short Quiz," Gerontologist 17 (August 1977): 315-20; Thomas R. Cole, "The Prophecy of Senescence: G. Stanley Hall and the Reconstruction of Old Age in America," Gerontologist 24 (1984): 360-66.

²See Sidney Levin and Ralph Kahana, eds., Psychodynamic Studies on Aging: Creativity, Reminiscing, and Dying (New York: International Universities Press, 1967); Harvey Lehman, "The Creative Production Rates of Present Versus Past Generations of Scientists," in Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology, ed. Bernice Neugarten (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 99-105; Wayne Dennis, "Creative Productivity Between the Ages of 20 and 80 Years," in Neugarten, pp. 106-114; Robert Havighurst and Kenneth Feigenbaum, "Leisure and Lifestyle," in Neugarten, pp. 347-353.

³Jacqueline T. Sunderland, ed., Older Americans and the Arts: A Human Equation (Washington, D.C.: National Council on Aging, 1973).

programs in existence for the elderly throughout the United States and suggested others that might be applicable. The following year Sunderland published "Include the Elderly In" in which she called for more arts programs for seniors.¹ The National Council on Aging and other national coalitions for the elderly responded to this and other such calls and prevailing trends by organizing conferences and encouraging research in this area. In October 1976, the first national conference on arts and aging was held in Minneapolis. A collection of papers presented at the conference² shows that it had focused on how the arts could foster a more positive image for aging and the aged in American society. They also suggested that older Americans were an important constituency for arts programs both as participants and consumers.³

As a response, in part, to the national attention given arts and aging, government agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts provided financial support to encourage such endeavors.⁴ Later in the 1970s the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) funnelled additional monies into this area, and theatre leaders who might normally

¹Jacqueline T. Sunderland, "Include the Elderly In," Parks and Recreation (June 1974), pp. 41-44.

²Jacqueline T. Sunderland, ed., Arts and the Aging: An Agenda for Action (Washington, D.C.: National Council on Aging, 1977).

³See Alton Johnson and A. Prieve, Older Americans: The Unrealized Audience for the Arts (Madison: University of Wisconsin - Madison Center for Arts Administration, 1976).

⁴Sunderland, "Include the Elderly In."

be unemployed were granted funds to start Senior Adult Theatre groups--either to simply employ themselves or to train seniors for possible careers in theatre. Grants were more easily awarded, however, if deserving projects aimed to counter ageism in some way. Between 1973 and 1980, therefore, Senior Adult Theatre flourished.

Senior Adult Theatre: Review of Literature

Many new Senior Adult Theatre groups were started between 1973 and 1980 by various leaders, but the pioneers in advocacy for the use of drama with seniors came initially from the social services field and later from higher and elementary education. Most suggested how to adapt traditional formal theatre to suit older participants or borrowed techniques from the educational drama movement and advocated using creative drama with seniors. Much of the literature on drama and the senior adult has been written by leaders of drama groups who report on how they have used drama successfully with older populations.

One of the earliest such guides was written in 1963 by a social worker, Florence Vickery. In How to Work with Older People¹ she stressed the need for leaders to be interested in working with older populations and outlined some of the possible programs that could be implemented with them--and she included drama. Perhaps the first important book to address

¹Florence Vickery, How to Work with Older People: A Guide for Professional and Volunteer Leaders of Social Activity Programs for Older People (California: State Division of Recreation, 1960).

the topic, though, was Susan Kubie and Gertrude Landau's Group Work With the Aged.¹ Written in 1969, it was an inspirational book in many ways. The authors described the development of the Hodson Day Care Center, which was started in 1944 when a recreation center for the elderly was a new idea.² In the chapter on Theatre Arts, they described the introduction and development of a drama group at the center and how the members, although eager to be involved in drama, had few dramatic concepts. The leaders guided them in shaping together some scripts and eventually performing them. The authors then described some of the problems involved with such work as well as the long-term rewards. Interestingly, they pointed out, as gerontological studies were confirming, that as a group the elderly were no different from the rest of society:

Above all the staff members came to see that old people react in the same way to gratifications and frustrations, to needs and to opportunities for social development as do all human beings whatever their age. This latter observation, that old people react on the same principles as all people may hardly seem a major discovery. Yet it is significant of the specific factors which affect their status in our culture that this obvious fact has not been clearly anticipated.³

Indeed, it is a fact that has to be continually emphasized.

¹Susan Kubie and Gertrude Landau, Group Work With the Aged (New York: International Universities Press, 1953; reprint ed., Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1969).

²For a discussion of drama at Hodson Senior Center see pp. 212-235 below.

³Kubie and Landau, p. 11.

Another early work was Martin Nolter's "Dramatics for the Elderly: They Can Do It."¹ He simply said that seniors were capable of doing drama--specifically creative drama--and described how a leader might implement a drama program in a nursing home or other institution for seniors. He looked at some of the potential problems and how they might be overcome and concluded that drama should be fun, not therapy.

In 1973 a Senior Adult Theatre Committee of ATA was appointed to study Senior Adult Theatre in the United States. The establishment of the committee enhanced the legitimization of the growing art form and encouraged research in the area. The committee was initiated by Dr. Vera Mowry Roberts, a member of the theatre faculty at Hunter College and the then president of the American Theatre Association. In the late 1960s she had developed a drama program for seniors at the Presbyterian Senior Services (PSS) in New York City. With a little funding from the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, she and a staff colleague from PSS developed a four-part drama program whereby, in one part, they took their seniors to see different kinds of plays in New York; in another, they did physical exercises and improvisations; in another, they read various modern plays; and in another, they actually put on plays and programs. Eventually, the group

¹Martin Nolter, "Dramatics for the Elderly: They Can Do It," Gerontologist 13 (Summer 1973): 153-56.

became a traveling theatrical troupe. After three years Roberts left the group, but when she became president of ATA in 1973 she was interested in exploring this field further. She called a meeting for those who were similarly interested:

. . . there were just a handful of folk who were at all interested in this kind of thing. We sat around and talked about my experience. [There was] Dina Reese Evans Shaw, and Wally Smith of Chicago who is always interested in new kinds of things in theatre. We decided to put together a program for senior adults. Well, we argued about the name--what are we going to call it? And the name we finally hit upon was the Senior Adult Theatre Program. And then as time went on from that point, numbers of other folk got involved and it just grew--Paul Kozelka, Bob Kase, Horace Robinson came in. Roger Cornish from Penn State, Paula Gray, Jack Morrison, and well, numbers of other folks. So that by now it's a sizable operation and a great many things are going on.¹

Indeed, the people Roberts names have done much to generate research and national interest in Senior Adult Theatre. Under the editorial leadership of C. Robert Kase, the Senior Adult Theatre Program (SATP) periodically distributes, for example, a newsletter, SATIN (Senior Adult Theatre Information Network), that outlines some of the activities occurring in Senior Adult Theatre across the country; Kase, Isabel Burger, and Victoria Coffman developed the "Syllabus for Continuing Education Courses or Workshops in Senior Adult Theatre,"² and, as we shall see later,³ the Program conducted

¹ Interview with Vera Mowry Roberts, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 19 June 1984.

² This syllabus was distributed in 1983.

³ See p. 22 below.

the only national research study to date on Senior Adult Theatre groups in the United States. In addition, the current leader of the SATP, Patricia Royston Sawyer, has developed a Senior Adult Theatre bibliography and compiled a list of national practitioners.¹ Sawyer is presently trying to update this list and further encourage research in the field. Unfortunately, although there is evidence of a great deal of activity in Senior Adult Theatre (as suggested by new ATA members who express an interest in the Program), lack of funds prevents more research from being conducted. It hinders other aspects of SATP functioning as well: the immediate past-president of the Program, Thom Hitchell says lack of funds also prevents, for example, scheduling meetings for those involved in the Program so that more ways of finding funding sources can be sought.² When the Program was first started, however, this was less serious a problem, and the interest generated in the new venture promised much for the success of Senior Adult Theatre.

In 1974 one of the original members of the Senior Adult Theatre Program, Paula Gross Gray, published an adaptation

¹This material appears in the appendix to Cornish, Older Americans on Stage.

²Thom Hitchell, Senior Adult Theatre Program Committee Review Form, 1981. Similar sentiments and concerns were expressed by the current co-chair of the Senior Adult Theatre Program, Patricia Royston Sawyer, personal letter, August 18, 1984.

of her doctoral dissertation, Dramatics for the Elderly.¹ Essentially, it was simply a report on drama groups in senior centers and residential care centers in New York. Gray sent questionnaires to centers to find out if they had drama programs and, if so, how they were run, and what problems they had. She compiled the results and offered possible solutions to problems such as deafness, poor eyesight, and the lack of mobility. Most of the programs that were in operation were based on traditional formal theatre techniques that emphasized performance. Gray's work was essentially a survey, but as such it was seminal and laid the groundwork for a number of studies that followed.

In 1975 Richard Fallon wrote an M.A. thesis at Pennsylvania State University on "Ageless Theatre: Drama With the Senior Adult."² It was a case study of the Autumn Players, a now-defunct suburban Baltimore group of senior adult players. Directed by Paul Boxell, a faculty member of the sponsoring agency--the Catonsville Community College--the Autumn Players were formed to tour traditional theatre to

¹Paula Gross Gray, "Dramatics for the Elderly: A Survey of Characteristics, Problems Encountered, and Solutions Suggested in Dramatic Programs in New York Senior Centers and Residential Care Settings" (Ed.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1972); this work was later published as Dramatics for the Elderly: A Guide for Directors of Dramatic Groups in Senior Centers and Residential Care Settings (New York: Columbia Teachers College Press, 1974).

²Richard W. Fallon, "Ageless Theatre: Drama with the Senior Adult" (M.A. thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, 1975).

senior audiences. Fallon described how the group came into being, how it rehearsed, what it performed, and how it toured.

The first collection of plays specifically for senior adults was written in 1976 by a faculty member at Fallon's university, Roger Cornish. Cornish and his friend, John Orlock, collaborated on Short Plays for the Long Living,¹ a series of one-act plays that were developed out of workshops on playwriting for the elderly.

In the spring of 1976, an innovative program in drama and the elderly was started at the Brookdale Center on Aging at Hunter College. Dr. Vera Mowry Roberts, who had been involved with starting the Brookdale Center, was the project director:

We set up what we called the Brookdale Drama Project. I designed it. It was primarily creative dramatics. Milton Polsky, who was on the staff of the theatre department at that time was a creative drama specialist, and he ran the project and actually did the work. We had students who worked with him, graduate and undergraduate students. Various groups did various things.²

Eight students went to seven sites for seniors in New York City and implemented drama programs. Most were creative drama programs, but a few worked with traditional scripts and

¹John Orlock and Roger Cornish, Short Plays for the Long Living (Boston: Baker's Plays, 1976).

²Interview with Vera Mowry Roberts, Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 19 June 1984.

used improvisations as a bridge to them. Essentially, the program was designed to achieve three research goals.

1. To discover what dramatic activities elderly people like and respond to;
2. To determine what backgrounds, bodies of knowledge, and competencies are necessary for student leaders to work with the elderly in drama;
3. To record and evaluate the interaction of leaders and participants, their outcomes and to discern the implications of the Pilot Project for future curricula development.¹

Generally, what they discovered was that the elderly participants were stimulated by competent leaders whether they were working with creative dramatics or traditional scripts, but that more creative dramatics should be incorporated into drama programs for the elderly than had been commonly used. The project leaders saw creative drama as a means for "opening-up" the self by "giving people the freedom to express untapped feelings and ideas with each other, and to discover so much about the self."² And Polsky, based on the results of the project, urged more colleges and universities to offer training programs for leaders in the field of Senior Adult Theatre.³

¹Milton Polsky, "The Magic of Creative Drama," New York, 1976. (Mimeographed.)

²Ibid., p. 24.

³See also Arthur Geller, "The Brookdale Drama Project: Play's the Thing for Elderly," Perspectives on Aging (March/April 1977), pp. 12-15.

Based on her experiences in the Brookdale Drama Project, one of the graduate students at Hunter College, Abbe Raven, was motivated to write her M.A. thesis on creative drama and the senior adult. Entitled "Handbook of Creative Drama Activities for the Senior Adult,"¹ it examined the value and use of creative drama with elderly participants at New York City's Katherine Engel Center for Older People. She concluded that based on her research, the elderly have untapped sources of creativity, can remain productive in later years, and that creative drama can help foster self-expression and self-confidence.

Perhaps the most penetrating of the scholarly work conducted in the field was done by a research committee of the SATP. In 1978, Jack Morrison of ATA received a \$5,000 grant to study Senior Adult Theatre throughout the United States. Because of the vastness of the task, the research was designed as a probe. Initially questionnaires were distributed to locate Senior Adult Theatre groups. Then Horace Robinson and his wife visited many of the senior adult groups west of the Mississippi. C. Robert Kase and Roger Cornish observed other groups east of the Mississippi, and Patricia Royston Sawyer visited groups in the East. The final published report, Older Americans on the Stage, written by Cornish, provided the first glimpse of what was happening across the country in Senior Adult Theatre. Data was

¹Abbe Raven, "Handbook of Creative Drama Activities for the Senior Adult" (M.A. thesis, Hunter College, 1977).

gathered through further questionnaires and interviews, and additional money for the research was procured from the researchers' own personal funds.¹

The Report examined the different types of SAT groups, their goals and objectives, their working principles, and their techniques. It also spotlighted some of the key variables in SAT and called for research in the area. What the researchers found generally was that there was a great deal of activity in SAT, of varying quality, occurring throughout the United States. Some was formal drama, some informal, and most of it was sponsored by an institution of some kind.

Perhaps because of his work on the Report, Roger Cornish wrote an article for Theatre News in May 1978 calling for research in Senior Adult Theatre and specifically describing the kind of investigations needed. Overall, he felt that more research should be conducted on the value of SAT and on the techniques used in it. He also felt that comprehensive SAT case studies were needed and that, as a research area, Senior Adult Theatre was underinvestigated.²

A number of research projects were then undertaken--perhaps in response to Cornish's request. In 1978 Patricia Atchinson Clark wrote her M.A. thesis at Virginia Commonwealth University on theatre arts and aging. She examined

¹Patricia Royston Sawyer, personal letter, 18 August 1984.

²Roger Cornish, "Senior Adult Theatre--The State of the Art and a Call for Research," Theatre News 8 (May 1978): 1-2.

some of the myths of aging and then outlined three drama practicums she conducted at different settings for the elderly. She concluded that through the drama programs, she had dispelled many of the myths of aging.¹

In 1979 Victoria Tait Coffman, a student of Horace Robinson's, wrote her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Oregon. Entitled "Creative Drama and the Elderly: The Use of Reminiscence and Role-Playing with Nursing Home Residents," it outlined a two-year workshop she had conducted in drama with the elderly at a nursing home. She comprehensively reviewed all the literature on creative drama and the processes of reminiscence, life review, disengagement and self-actualization, and showed how creative drama was a useful vehicle for these processes. She concluded that creative drama was a constructive, therapeutic tool for the elderly.²

Another academic study appeared in 1979. Joyce Chambers Selber produced her M.F.A. thesis at the University of Texas on "A Touring Production and Production Book of George Latshaw's Pinnochio: An Intergenerational Approach with Senior Citizens, University Students, and Marionettes"³

¹Patricia Atchinson Clark, "Theatre Arts and Aging" (M.A. thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1978).

²Victoria Tait Coffman, "Creative Drama and the Elderly: The Use of Reminiscence and Role-Playing with Nursing Home Residents" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1979).

³Joyce Chambers Selber, "A Touring Production and Production Book of George Latshaw's Pinnochio: An Intergenerational Approach with Senior Citizens, University Students, and Marionettes" (M.F.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1979).

She outlined her work as director of Pinnocchio and concluded that the intergenerational project benefited all parties involved: each was able to learn something from the other.

In 1980 one of the leading exponents of creative drama for children, Isabel Burger, published Creative Drama for Senior Adults: A Program for Dynamic Living in Retirement. In this book she outlined her involvement in drama for the elderly and showed how she adapted the principles of creative drama for children to senior adults.¹ Also in 1980, another dissertation appeared. Barbara Davis, a psychology major, tested the benefits of creative drama on elderly participants. "The Impact of Creative Drama Training on Psychological States of Older Adults" showed that generally creative drama workshops were perceived positively by participants but that the benefits of the life review process were important irrespective of the drama sessions.²

The following year, 1981, a number of works appeared. Ann Thurman wrote "Creative Drama for the Able and Disabled Senior Adult," in which she described her work with the elderly in various settings.³ Also, another descriptive

¹Isabel Burger, Creative Drama for Senior Adults: A Program for Dynamic Living in Retirement (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1980).

²Barbara Davis, "The Impact of Creative Drama Training on Psychological States of Older Adults" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 1980).

³Ann Thurman, "Creative Drama for the Able and Disabled Senior Adult," in Perspectives: A Handbook in Drama and Theatre By, With, and For Handicapped Individuals, eds. Ann Shaw, Wendy Perks, and C.J. Stevens (Washington, D.C.: American Theatre Association, 1981), pp. 17-34.

work soon appeared--Claire Michaels's article "Geriadrama^R." Michaels's aim, she said, was a therapeutic one: through the fun of the drama, the elderly participated in a process which engaged their creative abilities, thus making them feel of some value.¹ Yet another work that year was Senior Adult Theatre edited by Cornish and Kase. Basically it was a collection of "how-to" essays published by practitioners in the field.²

In 1982 Marcia Telander, Flora Quinlan, and Karol Verson wrote Acting-Up! Their book outlined their approach to drama with a senior acting troupe, Acting-Up! Generally, they used creative drama and toured many of their improvised shows to local centers.³ Likewise in that year, Robert Landy produced his Handbook of Educational Theatre and Drama. In it, he included an article entitled "Drama and Theatre with the Disabled and Elderly," in which he discussed the work of Paula Gross Gray and interviewed her.⁴

¹Claire Michaels, "Geriadrama^R," in Drama in Therapy: Volume 2, Adults, eds. Gertrude Shattner and Richard Courtney (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1981), pp. 175-192.

²Roger Cornish and C. Robert Kase, eds., Senior Adult Theatre (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981).

³Marcia Telander, Flora Quinlan, and Karol Verson, Acting-Up!: An Innovative Approach to Creative Drama for Older Adults (Chicago: Coach House Press, 1982).

⁴Robert Landy, "Drama and Theatre with the Disabled Elderly," in Handbook of Educational Theatre and Drama (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 154-180.

Two papers were presented the following year at different conferences: one in the United States, the other in Vienna, Austria. Nancy Osgood presented a paper at the 1983 Gerontological Society of America's Annual Conference called "The Impact of Creative Drama on Black Elderly." She reported the work she and Patricia Atchison Clark had done with groups of elderly black participants. This constituted the first systematic, controlled study on the effects of participation of black elderly in creative drama workshops. The results showed that at the end of the ten-month workshops, the participants revealed increased happiness, less loneliness, and they perceived themselves to be younger than they felt themselves to be at the beginning of the workshops.¹

That same summer, C. Robert Kase presented a paper, "Senior Adult Theatre in the U.S.A." to a Bilateral Conference on Arts Education and Cultural Development held in Vienna. He briefly outlined the state of Senior Adult Theatre in the United States.² Also in 1983 another handbook on the use of drama with the elderly was published, Drama Activities with Older Adults: A Handbook for Leaders. Written by Ann Thurman and Carol Ann Piggins, it described

¹Nancy Osgood, "The Impact of Creative Drama on Black Elderly," paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Gerontological Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1983.

²C. Robert Kase, "Senior Adult Theatre in the U.S.A.," paper presented at the Bilateral Conference on Arts Education and Cultural Development, Vienna, Austria, 1983.

improvisational drama and creative writing exercises suitable for seniors.¹

Nineteen eighty-four saw the publication of Creative Arts with Older Adults. Edited by drama therapists Naida Weisberg and Rosilyn Wilder, it contained a series of essays written by practitioners in the field of creative arts therapy. The section on drama included articles by Wilder and Weisberg, Don Laffoon, Victoria Bryan, and Carol Caven Sinatra of the Stop-Gap Theatre Company of Laguna Beach, California, Rose Pavlow of Improvise!, Rhode Island, and Paula Gross Gray. Each described the nature of their theatre work with seniors.² In the upcoming year, 1985, Patricia Atchinson Clark and Nancy Osgood will publish Seniors on Stage: The Impact of Creative Dramatics on the Elderly. This text will elaborate on the work Osgood described in the paper she presented at the 1983 Gerontological Conference.³

Most of the literature, then, is written by practitioners in the field who describe their work or, based on their experiences, offer ways of implementing drama programs for

¹Ann H. Thurman and Carol Ann Piggins, Drama Activities with Older Adults: A Handbook for Leaders (New York: Haworth Press, 1983).

²Naida Weisberg and Rosilyn Wilder, eds., Creative Arts with Older Adults: A Sourcebook (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1985). This book was first released in 1984 although its publication date was 1985.

³Patricia Atchinson Clark and Nancy Osgood, Seniors on Stage: The Impact of Creative Dramatics on the Elderly (Virginia: Praeger Press, 1985).

senior adults. There has been only one probe into the nature of Senior Adult Theatre activity across the United States; only one scientific study on the potential impact of drama on the elderly, and only one case study. There have been no historical or critical studies.

Scope and Limitations of this Study

This study will be an effort to address the present void in Senior Adult Theatre scholarship. Initially, the research for the study was conducted via letters of inquiry and questionnaires. In order to determine which Senior Adult Theatre groups and leaders were using Oral History Theatre, letters of inquiry were sent to eighty-two practitioners whose names were culled from the directory of Senior Adult Theatre practitioners listed in the appendix to Older Americans on Stage, and from personal referrals from leaders who knew of other leaders working with Oral History Theatre in some form. Fifty replies were received, and thirty-two of them reported some involvement in Oral History Theatre. The thirty-two leaders were asked to discuss their involvement in such a theatre and describe the nature of their work: all responded. Such a number, of course, does not qualify necessarily as a movement, but it does signify a trend; and it is certainly indicative that this form of theatre is more widespread than has been previously recognized.

One of the leaders who responded was Susan Perlstein, and I arranged with her to follow the work of the four directors at Elders Share the Arts for a period of one academic

year (1983-84). Three of the directors were working with Senior Adult Theatre groups in the Bronx, and one was working with a group in Brooklyn. Each group met once a week for a period of an hour. For the fall sessions I attended periodically as this was an important time for leaders and groups to establish or re-establish trust and rapport, and the presence of an outsider present tended to hinder this process. During the spring sessions I went every week to two of the groups (those at Hodson Senior Center and the Bronx Y--both in the Bronx) and every other week to the remaining two. My period of observation ended after the groups had presented their year's work at an annual festival in May. Before and after each workshop session, I conducted personal interviews with group participants, and at periodic times throughout the year interviewed the directors of the specific groups. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

The background reading and general library work was conducted in libraries in both Connecticut and New York City. And a number of personal interviews were conducted with practitioners who had responded to my initial letter of inquiry. These interviews were also tape-recorded and transcribed.

This study, however, is not without its limitations. I have had to make generalizations about developments in Senior Adult Theatre based on the thirty-two responses I received. I know that some of those leaders who did not respond are actually working in Oral History Theatre. Given, however,

that there are a minimum of thirty-two practitioners working in the field, it can be determined that there is, at the very least, an emerging art form.

Another limitation of the study is related to the problems any observer has in viewing any cultural group as I viewed the Elders Share the Arts groups. By observing, the observer becomes a participant to a certain extent. This is obviously the only way to learn about what is going on in the group process. The observer becomes part of the community and as such enjoys a certain status. This status will vary depending on how the particular cultural group views the observer. In any event, whichever way the observer is viewed will affect the kind of interviews given and the nature of the work shared. Ultimately, the results depend on the personality of the group members, the directors, and the observer.¹ Of course, once one does establish a rapport, it is then often difficult to maintain objectivity. Nevertheless, in my account of the work of the Elders Share the Arts groups, I tried to be as objective as I could.

Review of Chapters

In the following chapters, Chapter Two, "Oral History Theatre and the Senior Adult: Its Roots," I show how the roots of Oral History Theatre as it applies to the senior adult are in oral history, people's theatre, and gerontology.

¹See L. L. Langness, The Life History in Anthropological Science (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1965), p. 23.

In Chapter Three, "Oral History and the Senior Adult," I consider the development of senior adult Oral History Theatre and examine the techniques various leaders use in transforming oral histories to theatre. In Chapter Four, "Living History Theatre: The Background to Elders Share the Arts," I discuss the definition, nature, and roots of Living History Theatre, the development of the first Living History Theatre group at the Hodson Senior Centre in the Bronx, New York, and the process Perlstein advocates for transforming life histories into theatre. In Chapter Five, "Living History Plays in Performance," I reconstruct a performance of each of the plays developed by the four groups and analyze the nature of the process of Living History Theatre. In Chapter Six, "Living History Theatre: The Process of Creation," I present a case study of each of the four groups and show how each of the plays, whose performances were earlier reconstructed, were created. In Chapter Seven, "Living History Theatre: An Evaluation," I examine some of the values and problems inherent in Living History Theatre and draw some general conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO

ORAL HISTORY THEATRE AND THE SENIOR ADULT: ITS ROOTS

Oral History Theatre as an art form that applies to the senior adult emerged during the 1970s but has its roots in disciplines that have a much longer history. Essentially as mentioned above, it is an amalgam of three normally quite separate subjects. Each focuses on a particular group of people in relation to their society, and each, as a discipline, was flourishing, as previously indicated, during the 1970s when senior adult Oral History Theatre first developed.

Oral History

Oral history is primary source material that is collected from the oral testimonies of individuals--usually by means of a tape-recorded interview. The purpose of recording such interviews is to gather information that is considered worth preserving but is not available elsewhere. The record of the testimony, either in the form of the tape-recording or in a typed, verbatim transcript of the recording, then becomes historical source material.

There has been some debate over the value of oral as opposed to written historical source material. Some historians feel that because oral history is based on recall

it is less reliable than its written counterpart.¹ However, as Louis Starr points out, the problems of evaluating oral history are similar to those of evaluating written history:

Yet problems of evaluation are not markedly different from those inherent in the use of letters, diaries, and other primary sources. With caveat emptor ever in mind, the scholar must test the evidence in an oral history memoir for internal consistency and, whenever possible, by corroboration from other sources, often including the oral history memoirs of others on the same topic.²

It is now generally agreed that oral history is a bona fide historical approach. It is not a new approach. Indeed, it has been with us since Herodotus, but in the United States, since the work of Allan Nevins at Columbia University in the 1930s and 1940s, the discipline has increased in favor and use so that the extent of oral history projects today is widespread--as the editors of the first anthology have said:

The eighties may become the decade of the public program in the oral history profession. Museums increasingly incorporate oral materials into exhibits to add a "living dimension" to presentations of research and artifacts. Libraries are reaching out beyond the stacks to establish educational programs with schools and community groups; some are midway through the transition from depositories to collecting centers generating new materials. Arts, humanities, and historical commissions are funding innovative projects involving public use of previously collected interviews: drama, multimedia exhibits, and popular publications.³

¹For a detailed discussion of various aspects of oral history, see David Dunaway and Willa Baum, eds., Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Approach (Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1984).

²Ibid., pp. 4-5.

³Preface to Oral History, p. xiv.

The reasons for oral history's current popularity in the United States can perhaps be linked to the nature of present American life with its emphasis on technology and material values, and the general desire for immediacy. History for many Americans is what happened yesterday. They have no real sense of the past. Their generational memory--their memories of their family's life histories--as Tamara Hareven has noted, is brief.¹ Such a phenomenon, however, is not solely American, but seems to apply to industrial society generally. Richard Hoggart, for example, in 1957, had noticed a similar tendency among working-class people in England:

. . . a great many people, though they may possess a considerable amount of disconnected information, have little idea of an historical or ideological pattern or process. Their minds rarely go back beyond the times of their own grandparents; before that it is a darkness out of which one or two items emerge, not usually in proper order or with a supporting background Similarly, there can be little real sense of the future. Such a mind is, I think, particularly accessible to the temptation to live in a constant present. If the temptation succeeds, a condition may be induced in which time has been lost: yet time dominates, because the present is forever changing, but changing meaninglessly Since the world is assumed to be one of constant change, in which the future automatically supersedes and is preferable to all in the past, the past becomes laughable and odd.²

¹Tamara K. Hareven, "The Search for Generational Memory: Tribal Rites in Industrial Society," Daedalus 106 (Fall 1978): 137.

²Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy (London: Essential Books, 1957; reprint ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 158-59.

It is an urge on the part of some to counter both this lack of a sense of past and the past's denigration that has rekindled an interest in oral history. Of course, as Hareven emphasizes, a sense of history does not "depend on the depth of generational memory, but identity and consciousness do, because they rest on the linkage of the individual's life history and family history with specific historical moments."¹ It is a concern with the establishment of individual and ethnic identity in today's multi-ethnic society that has prompted many people, therefore, to make an effort to preserve the life stories of individuals who are not normally recognized as historical subjects: Black, Asian, and Native Americans, women, the elderly, the rural poor.

Oral histories, of course, can be taken from any person from any social class or ethnic background. Indeed, Nevins's work centered on "famous" people like Henry Ford. But the current interest in oral history involves those people who do not usually appear in the "official" history books which tend to reproduce the perspectives of the ruling, white, male elite. The preservation of alternative voices, views, and experiences is seen as a means of counteracting the perpetuation of one group's myths. Such a preservation was made popular by such phenomena as the Bicentennial celebrations, the television series, particularly, of Alex Haley's book

¹Ibid., p. 137.

Roots,¹ Studs Terkel's books², and the film Reds. These, however, were not isolated phenomena. They were manifestations of a concern, in the 1970s and 1980s, for a "new ethnicity."³ A concern for the strengths of the rich cultural heritage of the ethnic groups in America: a recognition by many that individuals could be proud of their roots, and that they did not have to sublimate their ethnic background to mainstream American culture. Partly, this attitude was a result of the Vietnam war and its effects on the American psyche: Americans were confronted with questions about their own identity in relation to their society and the aims of that society. Partly, it was the result of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and the consequent raising of the consciousnesses of minority groups. Partly, it was the impact of increased immigration in the 1970s and 1980s of Asian and Hispanic groups: ethnic consciousness was a means of restoring identity and integrity

¹Alex Haley, Roots (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976).

²Studs Terkel, Division Street: America, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967); Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970); Working, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); American Dreams Lost and Found, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); "The Good War": An Oral History of World War Two, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

³For a general discussion of this phenomenon, see Maxine Schwartz Seller, ed., Ethnic Theatre in the United States, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp. 3-14; and Hareven, p. 139.

to those people isolated from their homeland, their roots, their past. A recognition and celebration of who one was and where one came from authenticated experience. As Hareven says:

Oral history and the search for roots . . . also fit into the effort of recent scholarship to integrate the experience of large segments of the population into the historical and sociological record. On a more popular level, the oral history revival is connected with an effort to authenticate the experiences of different ethnic groups in American culture. It thus represents a commitment to pluralism and expresses the reemergence of ethnicity and its acceptance as a vital aspect of American culture.¹

Oral history helps the less privileged, the ordinary folk, tell their stories. And in so doing, it gives them dignity and gives them a sense that their experiences matter, and consequently bolsters their self-esteem. Some leaders hoped that with increased self-esteem such people would be more willing to challenge the accepted notions of history, and, similarly, their present everyday social and political conditions.² For many, honoring one's history and being proud of one's history meant that one might be less willing to accept a secondary position in American society. So that in the late 1970s and early 1980s the social concern of recognizing and celebrating one's heritage has often been

¹Hareven, p. 145.

²See especially Paul Thompson, Voice of the Past: Oral History, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Staughton Lynd, "Guerilla History in Gary," Liberation 14 (October 1969): 17-20; and Gary Okihiro, "Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History," Oral History Review 9 (1981): 27-46.

closely associated with a particular political goal: to change favorably the social, economic, and political circumstances of minority groups. As Gary Okihiro has said:

Oral history is not only a tool or a method for recovering history; it is also a theory of history which maintains that the common folk and the dispossessed have a history and that this history must be written [Oral history] has a potential for raising social consciousness and can provide strategies for social change In short, oral history proposes nothing less than the writing of a people's history, liberated from myths and imbued with humanity.¹

Oral History in People's Theatre

Oral history has usually been used in theatre in the United States for such social and political ideals as Gary Okihiro expresses. The type of theatre it has generally been associated with is what has been termed "people's theatre," which, as its name implies, is a theatre for the people --in some cases, for, by, and with the people. As such, it tends to be associated with egalitarianism in some way. As David Bradby and John McCormick say:

The most significant development in the theatre during this century has been the broadening of its social base. At the turn of the century, serious theatre was, by and large, the exclusive privilege of the middle class. Today it is available in some form to most people, and its uses in educational and political life are manifold [T]he idea of a theatre for the people has been expressed in many different forms and for different motives, but a common starting point has been

¹Gary Okihiro, "Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History," Oral History Review 9 (1981): 46.

the desire to extend a renewed and revitalized theatre to all classes of society, especially the working class.¹

Bradby and McCormick also state that in general there are four basic categories of people's theatre:² that which functions as a substitute for religion where the performance becomes a rite in which celebrant and congregation become one; that which functions as political theatre; or as decentralized theatre--that is, where theatre is made available to as large a group of people as possible; and people's theatre that functions as community theatre which:

. . . instead of starting with the theatre and moving out towards the people, begins with a particular group of people and tries to foster a type of theatre suitable to them and their concerns, often drawing them in as actors, not just as spectators.³

The idea of a people's theatre, designated as such, probably originated at the end of the nineteenth century in France.⁴ Maurice Pottecher first developed a Theatre du Peuple in 1895 at Bussang, France. He wrote plays which local residents presented in outdoor productions. But it is with Romain Rolland that the term is more commonly

¹David Bradby and John McCormick, People's Theatre (London: Croom and Helm, 1978), p. 11.

²Ibid., p. 18.

³Ibid., p. 13.

⁴Oscar G. Brockett and Robert F. Findlay, Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Drama Since 1870 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 224.

associated. In 1903, in The People's Theatre¹ Rolland suggested that each community write and perform plays about its own local and national history. He hoped that such productions would inspire the folk of the present to greater achievements.² This idea was taken up in other countries like England, Germany, Austria, and Russia, but was more often linked with the rise of socialism as a political force. The theatre was seen as a means of educating the working class to its social, economic, and political conditions.³ In some cases, leaders hoped that the raising of the consciousness of a worker to his condition would lead to a demand for change in that condition.⁴

In the United States, people's theatre has long been associated with the perpetuating of democratic ideals, educating the masses, and agitating for social changes. And oral history has often been used in some form in the work of some of these people's theatre groups--most especially in some of the groups involved in the American pageant movement, those involved in the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers, and those that have emerged since the 1960s.

¹Romain Rolland, The People's Theatre, trans. Barrett H. Clark (New York: H. Holt, 1918).

²David James Fisher, "Romain Rolland and the French People's Theatre," The Drama Review 21 (March 1977): 75-90.

³František Deák, "Blue Blouse" The Drama Review 17 (March 1973): 35-46.

⁴Bradby and McCormick, p. 29.

One of the earliest attempts at a people's theatre in the United States was the pageant movement of the first twenty years of the twentieth century. This movement was the result, as Dr. Martin Tackel has shown,¹ of a great deal of hard work on the part of a few women who were all involved in little theatres across America.² And, as in Europe, these theatres sought, as Tackel comments, "to redefine the purpose of the drama," and place "a new emphasis upon the theatrical event as an outlet for community involvement and artistic expression."³ Communal drama was seen as a means for educating, socializing, and acculturating. Some of the pageants celebrated democracy, the American people and their history; others advocated social change. And many, as Dr. Tackel has suggested, used as source material first-hand accounts of life; that is, the oral histories of the local inhabitants.⁴

All pageants were intended as a people's art, and as such they were greatly to influence later proponents of folk

¹Martin S. Tackel, "Women in American Pageantry: 1908-1918" (Ph.D. dissertation, The City University of New York, 1982).

¹Most notably, Margaret Eager, Lotta Clark, Constance D'Arcy Mackay, Hazel Mackaye, Virginia Tanner, Ethel Rockwell, and Mary Porter Beagle.

²Tackel, p. 1.

³Tackel, p. 38. See also Ralph Davol, Handbook of American Pageantry (Taunton, Massachusetts: By the Author, 1915), p. 15; Margaret Eager, "The Building of the Pageant," American Pageant Association Bulletin 25 (September 1, 1915).

drama like Frederick Koch, Paul Green, and Percy Mackaye who often based their plays on native materials.¹ Indeed, pageants have remained, to some extent, a characteristic of American theatre even though the pageant movement itself died out during the First World War. Communities still periodically put on pageants--usually to celebrate some aspect of community life or American history--and many continue to be derived from oral history, especially those in the West which tend to deal with pioneer history.²

Another type of people's theatre in the United States that used oral histories to a degree was the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers of 1935-1939.³ These productions were similar to the Russian socio-political Blue Blouse productions of the 1920s which combined two documentary theatrical forms, the "literary montage," and "living newspapers." In the "literary montage," a topic or an historical event was presented through a variety of techniques. Short scenes

¹See Archibald Henderson, ed., Pioneering a People's Theatre (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1945); Hallie Flanagan, Arena (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), pp. 107-13; Mel Gordon, "Percy Mackaye's Masque of Caliban (1916)," The Drama Review 20 (June 1976): 93-107; Percy Mackaye, The Civic Theatre in Relation to the Redemption of Leisure: A Book of Suggestions (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1912).

²Horace Robinson, personal letter, 20 September 1984. Robinson, himself, directed The Oregon Trail every third year from the late 1920s to early 1950s, and he based his pageants on oral history source materials.

³See Flanagan, Arena; and Arthur Arent, "The Technique of the Living Newspaper," Theatre Arts Monthly (November 1938): 820-25; Elmer Rice, The Living Theatre (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959).

were developed from such source materials as letters, memoirs, official documents, and poetry. The scenes, which were bridged by pantomime, songs, and dances, were sometimes serious, but mostly comic. The "living newspapers" used a similar approach only they dramatized a current news event.¹

The American Living Newspapers had a similar cinematographic form, and initially they, too, dramatized news events. Later, however, they dramatized topical issues like the slum problem, and examined its effects on the average man and woman. The material was developed from information researchers and journalists culled not only from such sources as letters, memoirs, and official documents, but also from interviews with people; in other words, from oral testimony. The most important aspect of the Living Newspaper scripts was their content, not their form. The emphasis was on the reliability of the information presented, and some productions, like Ethiopia for example, consisted solely of direct quotations juxtaposed with each other.²

The Federal Theatre Project and its Living Newspapers were terminated in 1939, but, as Karen Malpede Taylor has shown in People's Theatre in Amerika, the Living Newspapers of the 1930s were later to influence, along with certain working class theatre groups of the 1920s and 1930s, the work of people's theatre groups that emerged in the United States

¹See Deák, "Blue Blouse."

²See Arent, p. 821.

in the 1960s.¹ The Bread and Puppet Theater, and El Teatro Campesino, for example, both incorporated, to some extent in their productions, the oral testimonies, songs, traditions, and experiences of working class people of different ethnic origins.

These performing groups of the 1960s, in turn, seem the immediate forerunners of a current development in people's theatre which has been termed "grassroots theatre."² There has been some debate over the exact nature of such theatre,³ but all "grassroots theatre" groups share certain characteristics. They are politically conscious and many are socialist in outlook. They are educational in aim and they tour productions which present the lives and experiences of ordinary people in those communities depicted. Many perform their plays in non-traditional settings--streets, parks, fields--and invite discussions after the performances. Most present original material that is developed by a playwright associated with the group, or by the director, or by the group as a collective, and is acted by a group of young professional actors and actresses (although some local amateurs

¹Karen Malpede Taylor, People's Theatre in Amerika (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972). See also David Bradby, Louis James, and Bernard Sharratt, eds., Performance and Politics in Popular Drama: Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film, and Television, 1800-1976 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

²See the "Grassroots Theater" edition of The Drama Review 27 (Summer 1983).

³Ibid., p. 2.

might also be asked to participate in the performances.) The production's content is often derived from oral history--from interviews with the local inhabitants. The inhabitants' reminiscences, recollections, might be rearranged and used in the script verbatim, as Garry Lyons did for the Iron Clad Agreement's production of Echoes from the Valley, (1983), a play that concerned the memories of people who lived in a textile town;¹ or the oral history is merged with fictional material created by the playwright or director or group members, as The Dakota Theatre Caravan's Dakota Roads: The Story of a Prairie Family (1977).² The written material is often juxtaposed with music of some kind, or mime, or juggling, but mostly the emphasis is on the people, their stories, and their history.

Groups that use such an approach currently exist all over the United States. The emergence of a strong people's theatre movement at this time is perhaps not surprising.³ The impetus for it is the same impetus that stimulated interest

¹Interview with Julia Royall Swoyer, producer of Iron Clad Agreement, Fairfield, Connecticut, 5 September 1984.

²Douglas Paterson, "Theatre for a People: The Dakota Theatre Caravan," The Drama Review 27 (Summer 1983): 3.

³For a description of the groups currently working in this field, see Susan R. McCann, We Will Not Be Disappeared: Directory of Arts Activism (New York: Cultural Correspondence, 1984); and Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, We Are Strong: A Guide to the Work of Popular Theatres Across the Americas, vol. 1. (Mankato, Minnesota: Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, 1983).

in oral history in the 1970s and 1980s--namely, a disillusionment on the part of many with the nature of our materialistic society, and a consequent rejection of its commercial theatre as epitomized by Broadway; an advocacy of the "new ethnicity," and a desire to celebrate and improve the lot of the masses. The people's theatre of today, therefore, is similar to people's theatres in the past in that its leading practitioners want to tell the stories of ordinary people not only to simply celebrate these people, but also to educate and entertain their audiences in such a way as to perhaps stimulate them to social and political action of some sort. As Douglas Paterson says in his "Manifesto for a People's Theatre":

Working people want labor's untold story told. Women want their history explored and given voice. Blacks want to see their strength. Latinos want their language on the stage. Native Americans want justice, middle-class people want more than Neil Simon, rural people want the respect they deserve, third world people want to be equal partners in this world's life, and all people on the planet want to know about this changing time and the forces that come to bear on them. The work of people's theatres is to entertain and explain, salvage and forge, invent and discover, teach and be taught, tell the old and urge the new.¹

Such sentiments, of course, are not entirely new, and much of Paterson's work--indeed, much of the work of leaders of most current people's theatre--can be traced not only to antecedents in American and European and Russian theatre, as we have seen, but also to the work of one man in particular,

¹Douglas Paterson, "Manifesto for a People's Theatre," The Drama Review 27 (Winter 1983): 73.

Bertolt Brecht, who, of course, was part of this people's theatre tradition. Bradby and McCormick feel that of all the twentieth-century people's theatre theorists, Brecht is the most important:

The reason for Brecht's importance in the development of people's theatre is that his work attempted to bring about a change in the whole relationship between the actor and audience, the purpose of which was to broaden the social basis of the theatre and to set it once more in its proper social context. What Brecht most disliked and reacted against was the professional's view of the theatre as an end in itself. He wanted the theatre to accept its responsibilities as the social art, with the utilitarian purpose of communicating with ordinary people about the matters that most concern them.¹

And, indeed, this is what the present people's theatre seeks especially to do--to address the people about matters that most specifically concern them. To find out what these matters are, people's theatre leaders have gone directly to the people and asked them to make their life experiences public, and through the dramatization of the people's testimonies, through their stories, audiences are made witnesses to lives that are rooted in a history long established but newly shared.

Oral History in Gerontology

Oral history essentially involves a recall, a remembering of past events and experiences. This process has been traditionally associated with the elderly in the form of reminiscence and often it has had some negative connotation--

¹Bradby and McCormick, People's Theatre, p. 111.

suggesting that it might, for example, be connected with a wish to escape present realities, or a desire to compensate for a seeming loss in prestige and power and, therefore, to result in a retreat into wishes and dreams.

Recent studies, however, have shown that reminiscence and day-dreaming are not the prerogative of the old--that younger individuals reminiscence too.¹ Further, they show that there is a great deal of disagreement over the value and purpose of reminiscing.² Some, like McMahon and Rhudick,

¹See Leonard Giambra, "Daydreaming About the Past: The Time Setting of Spontaneous Thought Intrusions," Gerontologist 17 (January 1977): 35-38; Leonard Giambra, "Daydreaming Across the Life Span: Late Adolescent to Senior Citizen," International Journal of Aging and Human Development 5 (1974): 115-40; Virginia Revere and Sheldon Tobin, "Myth and Reality: The Older Person's Relationship to His Past," International Journal of Aging and Human Development 12 (1980-1981): 15-26.

²See especially William Boylin, Susan Gordon, and Milton Nehrke, "Reminiscing and Ego Integrity in Institutionalized Elderly Males," Gerontologist 16 (February 1976): 118-24; Penny Brennan and Laurence Steinberg, "Is Reminiscing Adaptive? Relations Among Social Activity Level, Reminiscence, and Morale," International Journal of Aging and Human Development 18 (1983-84): 99-110; Robert N. Butler, "The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscences in the Aged," Psychiatry 26 (February 1963): 65-76; Robert N. Butler, "Successful Aging and the Role of the Life Review," Journal of the American Geriatric Society 22 (December 1974): 529-35; Robert N. Butler, "The Life Review: An Unrecognized Bonanza," International Journal of Aging and Human Development 12 (1980-81): 35-38; Peter G. Coleman, "Measuring Reminiscence Characteristics from Conversations as Adaptive Features of Old Age," International Journal of Aging and Human Development 5 (1974): 281-94; R. D. Fallot, "The Life Story Through Reminiscence in Later Adulthood" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1976); Myrna I. Lewis and Robert N. Butler, "Life-Review Therapy: Putting Memories to Work in Individual and Group Psychotherapy," Geriatrics 29 (November 1974): 165-69, 172-73; A. W. McMahon and P. J. Rhudick, "Reminiscing in the Aged: An Adaptational Response," in Psychodynamic Studies on Aging: Creativity,

found it had some adaptive function and was associated with good adjustment; others like Brennan and Steinberg that it was not necessarily adaptive. Some of the disagreements resulted because the researchers were testing different kinds of people in different settings, and using different testing methods. Yet despite the incongruencies, most practitioners using reminiscence with the elderly have reported beneficial effects.¹ Such effects vary, of course, from individual to individual, and from group to group, and on the type of reminiscence used. Marianne Lo Gerfo has categorized and described three types of reminiscence--informative, evaluative, and obsessive--and most senior adult Oral History Theatre involves one or more of these categories.² Consequently, it has, to varying degrees, a therapeutic effect.

The main function of "informative reminiscence," as Lo Gerfo has described it, is "to provide pleasure and to enhance self-esteem through reliving and retelling past

Reminiscing and Dying ed. Sidney Levin and Ralph Kahana (New York: International Universities Press, 1967), pp. 64-78; Peter Perrotta and John A. Meacham, "Can a Reminiscing Intervention Alter Depression and Self-Esteem?" International Journal of Aging and Human Development 14 (1981-82): 23-30.

¹See, for example, Barbara Meyerhoff and Virginia Tufte, "Life History as Integration: An Essay on an Experiential Model," The Gerontologist 15 (December 1975): 541-43.

²See Marianne Lo Gerfo, "Three Ways of Reminiscence in Theory and Practice," in Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Approach, eds., Dunaway and Baum, pp. 314-323.

events. Gratification comes not only from remembrance itself, but also from the tribute to longevity and mental soundness that memory of the distant past celebrates."¹ The second type of reminiscence, "evaluative reminiscence" is based on Robert N. Butler's concept of "life review." Butler based his work on Erik Erikson's theory of adult development. In Childhood and Society,² Erikson had postulated that there were eight stages in human development. Each stage involved a dialectical struggle between opposing inclinations that the individual experienced, and the synthesis of the resulting crisis produced one of eight positive human characteristics. The last stage, triggered by the proximity of death, he called the struggle between integrity and despair; the synthesis of which was wisdom. During old age, Erikson says, one evaluates one's life and one's accomplishments. One makes an effort to confirm that what one has done has been of some significance. If one feels it has been significant, then the result is a sense of integrity. If not, the result is despair, because one would feel one's life had been completely meaningless. The resolution of this struggle produces wisdom: that one knows life has some integrity despite physical and mental decline.

Butler elaborated on this point of view and in his work suggested that in the face of a universal need to achieve

¹Ibid., p. 315.

²Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963).

integrity rather than despair, one engages in a process of "life review," where one reexamines past unresolved conflicts:

I conceive of the life review as a naturally occurring universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated. Presumably this process is prompted by the realization of approaching dissolution and death, and the inability to maintain one's sense of personal invulnerability. It is further shaped by contemporaneous experiences and its nature and outcome are affected by the life-long unfolding of character.¹

Through life review, then, one might come, in Erikson's terms, to achieve "ego integrity." Butler emphasized, however, that life review was not simply reminiscence; rather, it was a looking-back process that involved some value judgments--evaluations--about one's past:

In its mild form, the life review is reflected in increased reminiscence, mild nostalgia, mild regret; in severe form, in anxiety, guilt, despair, and depression. In the extreme, it may involve the obsessive preoccupation of the older person with his past, and may proceed to a state approximating terror and result in suicide.²

This "extreme" type of reminiscence is what Lo Gerfo called "obsessive reminiscence."

The first kind of reminiscence, the "informative," is usually employed by most sensitive, trained drama leaders

¹Robert N. Butler, "The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence . . . ," p. 66.

²Ibid., p. 68.

who, indeed, might not intend its use as therapy, but such a use has a therapeutic effect. Leaders might, for example, ask participants to talk about simple past experiences--their funniest event, schooldays, their first ride on a subway, and so on.

The other types of reminiscence, "evaluative" and "obsessive," are usually elicited by trained dramatherapists or psychodramatists, or drama leaders who have some training in therapy and are skilled at leading individuals in an evaluation of their past life, or out of obsessive memories. Their Oral History Theatre work is intentioned, therefore, to some degree, as therapy.

Oral history, then, by its very nature involves reminiscence, recall, and to varying degrees such reminiscence has proved to have, at the least, a beneficial effect. Certainly, there is some question as to whether reminiscence is adaptive for the older adult, yet, as Lo Gerfo has commented:

The hope is always that a descent into memory will change and heal It may be that most older people do not reminisce significantly more. It is certainly true that all reminiscence is not healthy or functional. But through creative attention to its content and function, reminiscence can become fertile¹ ground for a new growth in confidence and energy.

* * * * *

Thus, Oral History Theatre, as it applies to the senior adult, has its roots in the disciplines of oral history,

¹Lo Gerfo, p. 320.

people's theatre, and gerontology. The degree to which each of these disciplines is emphasized in any particular group's work depends primarily on the director. The directors tend, for the most part, to belong to one of three major professions; either they are performing artists, or educators, or social workers. Performing artists usually see their work as an art for the people, and although they might recognize its educational component, they resist any suggestion that it is connected with therapy. Educators, however, are often primarily interested in Oral History Theatre as an educational tool, and consequently borrow many techniques and approaches to their work from the educational theatre movement. Social workers are often only interested in the therapeutic effects of such theatre. Some practitioners, of course, refuse to assign one particular function to their Oral History Theatre work, but such leaders tend to be performing artists who have had training as both educators and social workers, and are therefore more able to perceive the differing ramifications of this particular art form.

CHAPTER THREE

ORAL HISTORY THEATRE AND THE SENIOR ADULT

The Origin and Development of Oral History Theatre

Oral History Theatre in Senior Adult Theatre originated in the 1970s. The reasons for its development relate, in part, to those for the development of Senior Adult Theatre generally and, in part, to those for the increased popularity of both oral history and people's theatre.

As we have seen,¹ when the number of elderly people in the American population increased, the government initiated programs to serve their needs. Initially these programs dealt with such concerns as health and welfare, but later in the 1970s, the government turned to the social and leisure needs of this developing cohort. Most of the Oral History Theatre groups and projects started around this time. The oldest, that I can identify, the Tale Spinners of San Francisco, started in 1975, for example, and the most famous, Free Street Too of Chicago, in 1976.

The Tale Spinners is a multi-ethnic, multi-generational group that performs original plays about issues that specifically relate to the elderly. The company's artistic director, Barbara Graham, researches and writes most of the

¹See pp. 11-14 above.

plays, but she relies on information supplied to her from her company's seniors and local senior and community-based organizations. Like most senior groups, they tour their productions to various settings and after the performances encourage the audience to join in discussions relating to the topics of the plays presented.¹

Free Street Too is an offshoot of the Free Street Theatre: it started initially as a pilot project of the parent organization. The project proved successful and has continued ever since. Free Street Too is dedicated to involving the older person in the arts, and its ensemble consists of eight people whose ages range from sixty-seven to eighty-one. Their plays tend to concern issues related to aging and are all based on the life stories of the participants. Free Street's artistic director, Patrick Henry, makes each play an intergenerational production, and many of the younger performers from the parent organization participate in the productions. Their initial play, To Life!, toured to thirty-five communities in seventeen states² and was a celebration of the lives of the senior players. Like the Tale Spinners, Free Street Too encourages discussion after the performances and, in addition, their director and players (who are paid for their work) give lectures and run workshops for interested groups. They have been featured at many

¹See We are Strong, pp. 144-5.

²Ellen Williams, personal letter, 26 November 1984.

conferences on arts and aging, have been written about in numerous newspaper articles, and have starred in a one-hour documentary television program that showed their rehearsal process.¹

Since 1980, however, public funding for such groups as The Tale Spinners and Free Street Too has gradually diminished, and many have consequently ceased to exist. The Third Age Theatre of Montgomery, Pennsylvania, was one such group. It was begun in 1977 as a CETA project for part of the Ambler Area Arts Alliance's offerings to the people of Montgomery. In the first year of the project, seniors were offered classes in theatre arts taught by William Bauman, the director, and David A. France, the associate director. In the second year, they wrote plays based on the performers' life stories. The plays were then produced and toured to senior centers throughout southeastern Pennsylvania, and the audiences were invited to discuss the presentations. The group was just beginning to audiotape and videotape the group members' oral histories when funding was abruptly cut off.² So, as a project, it never really developed as fully as planned.

Other Oral History Theatre projects with seniors achieved their grant goals but were never repeated--as, for example, Dr. Leighton Ballew's Oral History Theatre project in Athens, Georgia, and the State of Maine's Department of

¹Ibid.

²William Bauman, personal letter, 14 December 1984.

Human Services' production Old Age: Tradition Shelved or Shared? Under a grant from Title 1A of the Higher Education Act of 1965, Ballew developed two productions with the assistance of Marietta Suhart and members of the University of Georgia's Department of Gerontology. The plays were based on the life stories of participants from the Oconee Senior Center in Athens, Georgia. Each production was performed by a different group--one predominantly Black, the other white. The participants first wrote on such topics as "My funniest event in childhood," or happiest, or unhappiest. Then with the help of Ballew and Suhart, the narratives were turned into Readers Theatre scripts, rehearsed, performed, videotaped, and shown as "I Remember . . . I Remember."¹ Once the tapes were completed, the project ended.

The State of Maine's Committee on Aging sponsored a similar project in 1977. Under a grant from the Maine Council for the Humanities and Public Policy written by Trish Riley, director of Maine's Bureau of Elderly, a play, Old Age: Tradition Shelved or Shared?, was produced by ten senior citizens. It was based on the life stories of the seniors and explored how age bias and discrimination affects us all. Directed by Barbara Clark and scripted from the oral histories by two theatre students, it toured to various sites, and discussions about the play then followed the

¹Leighton M. Ballew, personal letter, 12 July 1984; and Oconee Senior Center Members, "I Remember . . . I Remember: Dramatizations of Life Histories of Older Adults" (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia, Department of Gerontology's Videotapes, 1978).

performances. The following year, Riley secured an additional grant, this time from the Maine State Arts and Humanities Council, to televise the production, but the project was not repeated again.¹

The groups that have survived, like The Tale Spinners and Free Street Too, have done so by being connected with a larger, financially stable institution or organization or by securing private funding along with the limited public funds still available for such projects. The successful College Avenue Players of Berkeley, California, for example, started in 1978 as a course taught by its now full-time director, Stuart Kendall. The course was given at the College Avenue Adult Activity Center in Oakland and was funded by CETA. Today, the College Avenue Players continue to operate but is funded by Vista College of California and a variety of private sources.

The reasons theatre leaders have chosen to use Oral History Theatre with seniors are varied, but generally they either have seen the theatre as a means of advocacy of some sort, or they have felt it to be therapeutic. Some, of course, have felt that it was both. None of the practitioners involved in Oral History Theatre, however, have seen the function of the theatre as being purely passive entertainment. Like Brecht and other advocates of people's theatre, they have thought that it should be fun but that it should also be educative in some way.

¹Trish Riley, personal letter, 7 May 1984.

Oral history, as we have seen,¹ is a history most closely associated with ordinary people. By presenting dramatically the life stories of seniors, many theatre leaders felt they could destroy some of the myths and stereotypes of aging--that they could be advocates, in other words, for the elderly. Those leaders who felt such, often tried to develop intergenerational projects so that they did not have seniors playing for seniors. They wanted to mix the seniors with younger people in order to educate the young about being old and in order not to perpetuate what they saw as the isolating of the aged from youth. The Tale Spinners concentrate solely, for example, on presenting plays that shatter the stereotypes and myths of aging. One of their plays, Elderly Gentleman Seeks . . ., for instance, is an intergenerational piece written by Barbara Graham that concerns the ability of the elderly to share houses. Free Street Too also concentrates on breaking stereotypes and myths of aging, as Richard Driscoll, its technical director in 1977, said:

[Free Street Too] grew out of our interest in breaking down barriers--racial, economic, or age-related. We want to take theatre to people regardless of their reason for not taking themselves to theatre.²

And Patrick Henry corroborated:

¹See pp. 33-39 above.

²Richard Driscoll, "Theatre Arts," in Arts and Aging: An Agenda for Action, ed. Jacqueline Sunderland (Washington, D.C.: National Council on Aging, 1977), p. 36.

But I am concerned [Free Street Too] not become a project for aging Americans only. Our whole purpose is to continue an intergenerational communication. We're anxious to perform in environments that are not specifically limited to the aged. The most warming response has been from university audiences.¹

The College Avenue Players also attacks old-age stereotypes. Their plays are written by their resident playwright, Linda Spector, but are based on the life stories of the players--most aged over sixty. Purse Snatch, for example, concerns mugging and how it affects the elderly, whereas Health: Lost and Found is a comedy about depression:

If it does not attack stereotypes, it is not a College Avenue Players production. Of the false images we expose these three may be the most important: that seniors can't memorize, that they don't have fun, that they lack energy. The energy of these people is probably the thing that these kids in the audience respond the most to.²

Another group to similarly battle age stereotypes is Acting-Up!, an improvisational group sponsored by the Oakton Community College of Des Plaines, Illinois. Their current director is Karol Verson, but previous to that it was Flora Quinlan, and the founding director, in 1978, was Marcie Telander. All have been committed to addressing the problems of ageism, as Telander remarks in the Preface to the directors' joint book Acting-Up!:

¹Ibid., p. 37.

²Stuart Kendall, quoted in Michael Robertson, "Battling Old-Age Stereotypes: You Don't Have to be Young to Have Energy and Talent," San Francisco Chronicle, 23 March 1983, p. 37.

. . . everyone had rigid inhibitions and fears about the idea of "performing" and "acting." Our first meetings were given over to discussions in which we talked about retirement, family, society and politics and discussed at length the dangers of stereotyping older people and the cultural short-hand which is often applied to people over sixty-five.

We listed many of the myths of aging that affected us. It was then that they agreed that "bursting the myths of ageism"--ageism as it affects younger people as well as the older generation--would be the main focus of our dramatic work.¹

Most of Acting-Up!'s productions have been a series of humorous improvisational pieces and, like other groups, they tour their performances to various sites and conduct discussions after the performance about their productions and the topics covered.

Such advocacy for the aged stemmed, in part, from the realization of those associated with seniors that most did not conform to stereotypes. As the proportion of those over sixty-five increased in our society, so, as previously mentioned, services and organizations to meet the needs of this developing cohort increased. Powerful organizations like the Gray Panthers and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) became advocates for the elderly and helped make them a significant political lobby. The American Gerontological Association became an increasingly significant association--organizing yearly conferences, among other things, where

¹Telander, p. 5. See also Acting-Up! Members, Writing-Down: A Collection of Oral Histories and Memories from Acting-Up! (Des Plaines, Ill.: Oakton Community College, 1983).

practitioners and scholars in the field could discuss issues and share experiences. But perhaps the most significant development in the advocacy for seniors was the scientific studies that proved that many stereotypes were, in fact, just that--stereotypes. Bernice Neugarten, one of the early pioneers in the gerontological field, had predicted in the 1960s that attitudes towards the elderly would change. In "The Changing Age-Status System," which she wrote with Joan W. Moore in 1968, she said that there were different systems of age-status in plural American society depending on socio-economic status, ethnic background, and sex. She felt that such age-status systems were changing then and would continue to change as more aged people populated the society. She further anticipated the consequent development of a sub-culture of leisure for the aged.¹

In another major work, Neugarten discovered that as individuals age they become more aware of constraints in regard to age appropriate behavior and, consequently, they became increasingly aware of age discrimination.² She was also one of the first to suggest that the biological theory of adult personality might not be the only way of looking at personality. She suggested that the various changes that

¹Bernice Neugarten and Joan W. Moore, "The Changing Age-Status System," in Middle-Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 5-21. Although this book was written in 1968, the article was written in 1963.

²Bernice L. Neugarten, Joan Moore, and John C. Lowe, "Age Norms, Age Constraints, and Adult Socialization," in Middle Age and Aging, pp. 22-28.

occur in adult life might not necessarily occur because of a correlation between biological and psychological changes. Instead, she called for a new framework for understanding timing patterns which occur in adulthood and suggested the age-status system--age-norms, expectations, appropriate behavior.¹

One of her most important studies, conducted with Robert J. Havighurst and Sheldon Tobin, concluded that the two major theories of aging--the disengagement theory (i.e., that individuals and society disengage from each other as individuals age) and the activity theory (i.e., the individual's contentment with activity decreases as activity decreases) were unsatisfactory because they did not address the question of personality. Not everyone, obviously, does everything in the same way, so a theory that assumes they do, is an unsatisfactory one. She and her co-authors made a further observation that while the individual may disengage from the society s/he never disengages from its values which s/he has long internalized.²

¹Bernice L. Neugarten, "Adult Personality: Toward a Psychology of the Life Cycle," in Middle Age and Aging, pp. 137-147.

²Robert J. Havighurst, Bernice L. Neugarten, and Sheldon Tobin, "Disengagement and Patterns of Aging," in Middle Age and Aging, pp. 161-172. Compare this idea to Robert W. Corrigan, "Engagement/Disengagement in the Contemporary Theatre," in The Theatre in Search of a Fix, by Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Delta, 1974), pp. 269-300. Corrigan says, in part, that although the avant-garde may reject established society, it can never escape its values.

The same group of authors went on to show, in an additional article two years later in 1965, that personality is an important fulcrum in a theory of optimal aging, around which other variables are organized:

People, as they grow old, seem to be neither at the mercy of the social environment nor at the mercy of some set of intrinsic processes--in either instance, inexorable changes that they cannot influence. On the contrary, the individual seems to continue to make his own "impress" upon the wide range of social and biological changes. He continues to exercise choice and to select from the environment in accordance with his own long-established needs He ages according to a pattern that has a long history and that maintains itself, with adaptation, to the end of life.¹

The work of Neugarten and her colleagues was to become more accepted in the 1970s; and, in addition to their research, studies were conducted that showed that as individuals age, their intellectual, physical, and sexual capacities did not necessarily dissipate.² Unfortunately, what was proposed in the scientific community was not necessarily accepted in the world at large. Advocacy was, and still is, needed for the elderly as stereotypes and myths are slow to change. Indeed, Neugarten herself angrily denounced the current spate of popular literature³ that has suggested that

¹Bernice L. Neugarten, Robert Havighurst, and Sheldon Tobin, "Personality and Patterns of Aging," in Middle Age and Aging, pp. 176-177.

²For a detailed description of all the studies, see Douglas C. Kimmel, Adulthood and Aging: An Interdisciplinary, Developmental View (New York: John Wiley, 1980).

³See especially Daniel L. Levinson, The Seasons of a Man's Life (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978); and Gail Sheehy, Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life (New York: Dutton, 1976).

individuals neatly pass through various developmental states as they age. She called for a less simplistic approach to the study of adult development. Instead, one should consider, she argued, that in an increasingly age-irrelevant society like ours, the life cycle is in a constant flux, fluid, ever-changing, and should not, therefore, be conceived of like childhood development, as a succession of definable stages.¹ Neugarten has always been in the forefront of gerontological thought, however, and it may be some time before most members of society agree with her--hence the need for advocacy of the elderly continues.

Another major area of advocacy that those involved in Oral History Theatre and seniors address is the advocacy of a particular ethnic group. Many of the senior centers, community centers, and other centers where seniors congregate are located in particular ethnic neighborhoods. Therefore, many leaders find themselves working with groups that are predominantly Black, or Hispanic, or Asian, or working class Jews or Italians, and so on. Traditionally, these groups have not belonged to the mainstream of American culture. As a result, their voices, their stories, their experiences are not well-known beyond the particular ethnic community. To tell their history dramatically, therefore, is to tell the history of people long unheard. In addition, most of the participants

¹Bernice L. Neugarten, "Time, Age, and the Life Cycle," The American Journal of Psychiatry 136:7 (July 1979): 887-95.

in the drama groups tend to be women, so there is an added dimension to that history--that of women's history. Furthermore, many of these ethnic groups have experienced social injustices in American society, and the drama leaders seek to present and expose many of these injustices by dramatizing them. Patch Clark, for example, worked in Northern Virginia developing intergenerational oral history plays in the form of "Living Newspapers" with troupes of elderly participants and children. The stories they dramatized concerned the experiences of the older participants as they grew up during the Depression in the Rural South and were designed to show the youngsters what life was like then--the hardships and the joys.¹

Many of the leaders who dramatize women's ethnic history are politically motivated to some extent. They see the theatre as a political and educational tool. They want to encourage the seniors to find the artist in themselves and in so doing speak out about their experiences and, in some cases, perhaps, agitate for social change. In order to place the individual's experience within a larger historical context, many leaders will educate the groups about the topic they are exploring, whether it be the Depression or health care since 1920. They will show films, bring in books and other educational materials to show what the "official" view

¹Patch Clark, personal letter, 23 November 1984; see also Nancy Osgood, "The Impact of Creative Dramatics on Black Elderly."

of the topic might be and compare it with the participants' own experiences. Such techniques encourage discussion, and often the plays they create will juxtapose some of the "official" history with their own view of that history.

Such advocacy relates, in part, to the interest in "new ethnicity,"¹ in part to the influence of the women's movement and, in part, to the predilections of the group leaders. The interest in the ethnic roots of all groups in the United States, as we have seen, was popularized during the 1970s. Of course, those who provided the most recent links to the past were the elderly of a community. Through oral history, one could learn of past experiences and events that were not recorded in official documents or letters or diaries. The aged were the voices of the past. Through them one made a link with one's forebears. To dramatize that link was to authenticate it.

The women's movement provided another reason for advocacy. Most of the Oral History Theatre group participants were women, and with the developing strength of the women's movement in the 1970s, more efficacy was placed on the experiences of women. It was considered important, therefore, to hear what it was like to be a woman in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and so on, especially as the majority of the participants were from a working-class ethnic background

¹See p. 37 above.

The group leaders, of course, had a tremendous effect on the type of theatre produced. Those interested in Oral History Theatre with seniors, as noted above, tend to be politically and socially conscious people. Many were involved in the people's theatre movement of the 1960s and viewed their work as an extension of their earlier commitment. For indeed, to see theatre as a means to celebrate a people, advocate for their rights, and educate them is to place that theatre within the tradition of people's theatre. And, certainly, Oral History Theatre is people's theatre. All the Oral History Theatre groups with seniors tour their productions. They take their stories of their people to the places where people like themselves meet, and they all encourage discussions after the performances. Often the audience's experiences are incorporated into the text. The Playback Theatre, for example, of New York simply goes to a site (not all their audiences are seniors, however) and asks for volunteers from the audience to tell of an experience they have had in their lives. They then enact that experience for them and collectively the group builds a play around the audience's life stories. As they do so, discussions concerning the topics raised are carried on, and arguments and debates are encouraged. The theatre is seen as a vital force in externalizing the experiences of individuals not usually accustomed to being listened to.¹

¹Jo Salas, "Culture and Community: Playback Theatre," The Drama Review 27 (Summer 1983): 15-25.

Not all leaders who work in Oral History Theatre with seniors are interested in social advocacy. A number are, instead, interested in the direct therapeutic effects the use of oral history has on their senior participants. Those interested in such effects tend not to develop plays for performance. Mostly they engage in creative drama exercises that involve oral history in some way. The nearest they come to public performance is to share the workshops with other members of the same community--usually such practitioners work in nursing homes. The techniques they use for their creative drama exercises include movement, pantomime, improvisation, and puppetry; sometimes they combine these with music and art. "Creative drama" itself (a term thought to be first coined by Winifred Ward, a leading exponent of educational drama¹) is defined by the Children's Theatre Association of the American Theatre Association as:

. . . an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centred form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact and reflect upon human experiences. Built on the human impulse and ability to act out perceptions of the world in order to understand it, creative drama requires both logical and intuitive thinking, personalizes knowledge, and yields aesthetic pleasure.²

¹Winifred Ward, Creative Dramatics (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1930).

²Jed H. David and Tom Belim, "Terminology of Drama/Theatre with and for Children: A Redefinition," Children's Theatre Review 27 (1978): 10-11.

"Improvisational" in this context is spontaneous, unscripted, unrehearsed dramatic activity. Usually a leader will give some initial directions and the participants will then spontaneously develop an unrehearsed scene based on their own experiences. Leaders such as Claire Michaels of New York, Bonnie Vorenberg of Portland, Oregon, Stephanie Williams Schleicher of Decatur, Georgia, Rosilyn Wilder of New Jersey, Naida Weisberg of Rhode Island, Marilyn Richman of Winnetka, Illinois, and Victoria Tait Coffman of Billings, Montana, all base most of their creative drama exercises with seniors on oral history--on the participants' reminiscences of past experiences. They encourage the participants to share and enact such life experiences, but their use of oral history is not so much on overcoming age stereotypes or eliciting an unheard history, or agitating for better social conditions, as on making the individuals involved feel better about themselves: to help them improve their self-esteem or reconcile themselves to death. Most base their justification for such work on the life-review theory of Robert N. Butler.¹

The difference, however, between oral history per se and oral history as therapy is, perhaps, a matter of intent. Those practitioners who engage in Oral History Theatre with seniors as a form of advocacy tend to deny being interested in therapy at all. But most would agree that their work has

¹See pp. 50-52 above.

a great therapeutic effect on those involved. It is the goals of the different leaders that are important. As Cullom Davis, a noted oral historian, has said about his own colleagues, those leaders concerned with advocacy "are seeking information by tapping a precious historical source,"¹ and they are presenting that information in some way that advocates for the participants. Whereas those concerned with oral history as therapy hope to serve their participants by taking the information the participants give them in order to help them integrate it into their views of themselves. Of course, a few leaders claim their work involves both advocacy and therapy, but most try to keep the two quite separate. Often, however, this is difficult because the work does have a therapeutic effect on those involved.

The Transformation of Oral History to Theatre

Those leaders who are involved with advocacy, and consequently performance, use a variety of techniques to transform the raw material of the oral history into performance material. Many leaders initially begin with creative drama exercises to both develop trust and group cohesiveness and to elicit stories. Other leaders, however, begin with an initial group or individual interviewing session or series of sessions and then base the scripts on the transcripts of the sessions. Sometimes the scripts are used verbatim and, at

¹Cullom Davis, "Oral History: Accounts of Lives and Times," paper presented at the S.S.U. Gerontology Institute, 26 April 1980, p. 6.

other times, fictional elements are added. The actual process and presentation of the material then depends on the director and group. As far as I can determine, there are six basic methods of transforming the oral history into performance material and a variety of techniques of presentation. The style of the productions, however, tends to be either traditional realistic productions with costumes, props, and set, or minimalist productions with hardly any costumes or props and no set to speak of. Some groups, of course, do not fit neatly into a specific category because they use different approaches at different times--Patch Clark, for example, sometimes writes scripts and sometimes has her group improvise their plays. Most groups, however, tend to stay with an approach they have found works for them.

One method, the prevalent one used by well-established Oral History Theatre groups like Free Street Too and The College Avenue Players, is to have a script written by a professional playwright. The script is based on oral histories which are elicited from both group and individual interviews with the group members and is acted by them and presented as a traditional play. Often the plays developed this way are given a realistic production with costumes, props, lights, and in some cases, set, although as most groups tour their productions, set and lights are kept to a minimum. Usually the professional playwright is part of the group, either permanently so or as an artist-in-residence.

Apart from those groups mentioned that use this method, it has been used by a number of others, including The Guthrie Theatre. The Guthrie Theatre's Outreach Department¹ developed in 1978, for example, a production entitled Flashbacks: A Scrapbook of Personal Portraits which was toured to seniors in the Minneapolis area. Flashbacks was written and directed by the Guthrie's Gail Smogard and Scott Rubsam who based their script on the memories of certain aspects of the past lives of the senior players involved in the production. It also included the seniors' comments on what they thought was the significance of their lives. A videotape was made of the production which simply involved the individuals telling their stories against a backdrop of slides made from personal photographs of them as younger people and of some of the places where they had lived and worked.

Another method of developing oral history plays is to take recollections concerning a particular topic from seniors in a particular community, then to have a professional playwright write a script about the topic based on the oral histories and to have a community theatre group comprising younger as well as senior players, perform the scripted material. (Many of the current grassroots theatre companies like the Iron Clad Agreement use this method, although they tend to use only young professional players.) The oral histories, then, are from one group of people but are performed by a

¹Lois Vessen, Outreach Assistant at the Guthrie Theatre, personal letter, 26 June 1984.

different group of people, although sometimes an individual who has contributed some oral testimony for the script might also act in the production. Maryat Lee's "Ecotheatre" in South West Virginia uses such a method:

Lee creates indigenous theatre for a rural, isolated people of restricted means that explores and validates their life occupations, values and speech. Virtually all the material originates in oral history: taped conversations, gossip, local newspaper items, folklore, and¹ written reminiscences that townspeople give her.

She then turns the material into a script which local amateurs perform:

It could be said that I "wright" the plays about this place in Southern West Virginia, and I work with untrained local actors when I can persuade them to act. This has been one of the hardest struggles, very time-consuming and frustrating, because the words "acting" and "actor" have a definitely negative association with pretension for most people outside the theatre. But it has been worth the effort of redefining acting, or proving that I want something different from what they think is required. I just want² them simply, and not so simply, to be themselves.

And hence the term "Ecotheatre"--"eco" from the Greek for "home," and "theatre" (also from the Greek), meaning a place for seeing: a place for looking on oneself: "a mirror and a window, and sometimes a door."³

One such play which Lee developed in this way was A Double-Threaded Life which presented the inner lives of some

¹William W. French, "A Double-Threaded Life: Maryat Lee's Ecotheatre," The Drama Review 27 (Summer 1983): 27.

²Maryat Lee, "To Will One Thing," The Drama Review 27 (Winter 1983): 47.

³Ibid.

rural South West Virginians and showed how they related to their community. It is presented as a series of monologues and short scenes that culminate in several voices "weaving phrases that recall the most significant event in their recent history; namely, a day in the 1950s when the last steam engine clanged through the town."¹ The cast of young and old present their play at various sites both in and out of doors and with few visual effects: a minimalist production.

Another group to use such an approach is a community group in Oakridge, Oregon. A two-act play, Oakridge Yesterday, written by Dorothy Velasco and based on the memories of two long-time residents of Oakridge, Lawrence Hills and Hallie Huntingdon, traced the life of a family from Oakridge through various generations:

Through them I could reach so far back into time, Velasco says, adding however that she diverged from their memories slightly because they didn't always match accounts obtained from other people and from city records. That's the problem with local history. People remember things in their own way.²

Local residents, young and old, played the characters, and the play was performed in September 1984 in the local school auditorium. The production was minimalist although costumes and props were used--some clothing was used that was actually worn by early settlers in the area--and there was a backdrop

¹French, p. 28.

²Martha Kerns, "Oakridge Plays Itself," Eugene (Oregon) The Register-Guard 23 August 1984, sec. D, p. D3.

which depicted the mountainous regions of the district. Lawrence Hills and Hallie Huntington, both in their eighties, attended the performances and witnessed some of their memories enacted: "Some of it isn't right," says Hills, "but who's going to know the difference? I was pretty well pleased to have them pick my family."¹

A third method of transforming oral histories into theatre is to have the senior group members write their own plays based on their own life experiences and then present them themselves. This has been done in a variety of ways. Dr. Leighton Ballew, in Georgia, used this method and turned each narrative into a reader's theatre script which the whole group performed sitting on chairs on stage and reading the scripts which were balanced on music stands in front of them. Ballew, as narrator, was center stage and standing behind the seated players.²

William Bauman's group members in Third Age Theatre also wrote their own scripts, but they did not perform each person's narrative; instead, they decided as a group who had an interesting story to tell and collectively worked on developing a script based on the story. The script was then given a minimalist production and toured to local sites.

Another group to work this way is Ruth Tate's Drama Group at the White Plains Senior Center in New York.

¹Kerns, p. D3.

²Leighton Ballew, personal letter, 12 July 1984.

Instead of developing a play collectively, however, the individual group members wrote plays about their life histories after they had group discussions concerning various topics. One woman, Helen Johnson, wrote a short scene "At Grandfather's House," which was about her particular Scottish roots. It was to be included with a series of similar scenes written by other group members about their own nationality. Unfortunately, the woman was killed in the Amtrak train crash of 1984 as she was on her way to Nova Scotia to learn more about her ancestors. The group included "At Grandfather's House" in their season's final production, however, which they entitled American Pageant. The play was given a traditional realistic production and presented at the White Plains Senior Center in the spring of 1984.¹

A fourth method of transforming oral histories into theatre involves immediate collaboration. Some groups are young presentors/actors/actresses who go to a particular site for seniors--senior centers, community centers and so on--and involve the audience in their own plays. The Playback Theatre does this, as we have seen.² So does the Living Stage Theatre Company of the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. The Living Stage is an improvisational outreach theatre company that works with people who are not normally exposed to theatre--prisoners, handicapped persons, seniors. Usually

¹Ruth Tate, personal letter, 27 August 1984.

²See p. 68 above.

they do a performance/workshop piece that involves an audience of, at most, up to twenty-five people.¹ With seniors they try, through various techniques--many of them borrowed from educational drama, especially from the work of Dorothy Heathcote²--to not only elicit life histories and incorporate them into a play that they have initiated but also to get the story-tellers to act in those plays. In one workshop, for example, conducted at the Anacostia Senior Center in Washington, D.C. in 1983, two members of the Living Stage Company acted as two nightclub performers, one cynical and an alcoholic (Foxy), the other an energetic, hopeful singer (Roxy). They performed for a while and then the audience was asked to recreate the lives of these two characters (Heathcote's "adult in role" technique):

This gave rise to a journey through the past Memories of World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Depression were all brought into play. Audience members became characters out of the lives of Foxy and Roxy.

The room was alive with discussions about the issues that were raised in dealing with the lives of Foxy and Roxy! Racism, War, Competition, Childrearing, Creativity, Old Age, and Death were all among the topics dealt with Though they did not know each other, their life experiences were similar, /and/ they talked feverishly about the national attitudes toward the aged. They talked about their families and children and the atmosphere in which their grandchildren were growing up . . . the

¹Gena Pepich, Assistant to the Director of The Living Stage Company, personal letter, 9 May 1984.

²For a fine description of Heathcote's work, see Betty Jane Wagner, Drama as a Learning Medium (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1976).

tension and threat of nuclear war, inadequate education and rampant divorce. We listened and learned. They seemed to feel better having a place and time to voice these feelings.¹

A fifth method of transforming oral histories into theatre is used when a particular performing artist incorporates or blends oral histories into or with some aspect of his/her art. Usually the artist will create scenes or tableaux vivants that he or she either performs personally or has seniors perform in some way. Judy Sloan, a stand-up comic from New Haven, Connecticut, for example, collects the oral histories of local Jewish people and uses them for material for her monologues.² Her most famous sketch is called "Sophie" a sad and humorous depiction of an elderly Jewish grandmother:

Sophie represents a complex view of Jewish tradition and Jewish family life. She brings traditional values to bear on contemporary issues, ranging from the dangers of nuclear power to the sexual revolution--and she does this with ironic wit which has been a survival tactic in Jewish culture. For instance, she can't understand the problem of nuclear waste: "I always told my son, if he makes a mess in his room, he should clean it up. So now are going to make a mess into everybody else's room. It doesn't make sense.³ They should ask me what to do. I would tell them."

Sloan's approach is unique in that instead of transcribing oral history interviews she enacts them, and part of her method is to encourage discussions with her audiences

¹Rebecca Rice, "Living Stage Theatre Company-Senior Citizens 1982-83 Evaluation Report," Washington, D.C., 1983 (Mimeographed), pp. 3-6.

²Judy Sloan, Interview, 20 January 1985.

³Judy Butler, "Looking and Laughing at Life," Soujourner: The New England Women's Journal of News Opinions and the Arts (July 1983), p. 11.

after performances and, when she can, incorporate some of the new oral testimonies into her pieces. Not all of her act includes monologues of older Jewish characters, but she plans on developing more. She feels that by preserving the oral histories of people from her own ethnic background, she hopes she is doing something to help ensure that another Holocaust never happens:

What Judy Sloan wants is to continue the fine old tradition of oral history. She wants us to remember the cultural roots of American Jews, and at the same time, to understand that the elderly have a real place in our lives, as historians as well as other productive roles. She feels that many of us allow age to be a barrier when it shouldn't be, and that through Sophie, she can help to remove that barrier and return the memories of the elderly to their rightful place in our awareness.¹

Sloan tours her act to various senior centers, community centers, and other such institutions and uses different costumes, make-up and a large bag of props which also includes her juggling equipment--Sophie starts to juggle, for example, to show she can do it still at her age.²

Another artist who merges oral history and theatre with seniors in a unique way is Suzanne Lacy, a performance artist from La Jolla, California. Lacy believes that art should not be a private affair, that it should be moved to public

¹Elizabeth Drake, "Sophie: A True Juggler," New Haven County Woman 5 (November 1984): 5.

²Presently Sloan is involved in a project called "Preserving Jewish Theatre Through Oral Histories" which is an attempt to preserve the reminiscences of elderly Jews in the New Haven area. She is also working with May Sarton on a dramatization of some of Sarton's autobiographical writings.

"places and involve the lives and experiences of 'ordinary' people."¹ To this end, Lacy has created a performance piece based on the oral histories of elderly women from the San Diego area. Her aim has been to attack the stereotypes that are associated with the elderly, especially elderly women. The piece, entitled Whisper, the Waves, the Wind, was performed by seniors on May 19, 1984 and involved 135 women over the age of 65. They were all dressed in white and seated at tables--as if talking at a picnic--on a beach at the Children's Pool in La Jolla. Way up high on top of the cliffs, the audience looked down on the women who were talking about their special problems, but the audience could not hear them. Instead, the audience heard, through a multi-track sound system, a collage of the pre-recorded voices of the women discussing such aspects of their lives as religion, sex, illness, and death. At the conclusion of the sound track, audience members were invited to descend the cliff steps and join the women on the beach. As they did, the women on the beach slowly and individually left their tables and climbed back up the cliffs until only the audience members in their brightly colored clothes remained.

Lacy and the seniors had worked a year on developing the project. Most of that time was devoted to discussions about their experiences, and through a process of collaboration they decided which stories or fragments of stories

¹Julie Dunn, Publicity Director for The Whisper Project, "Whisper Project Fact Sheet," Spring 1984, p. 1.

to include on the tape. Lacy then rehearsed the women over a period of many months, and the eventual performance event was regarded as a great success:

Whisper's atmosphere was at once very real and utterly dreamlike. The tableau was surrounded not only by sea and sky but by more mundane reminders of mortality. Healthy, tanned, well-dressed and undressed young bodies contrasted eerily to the voices whispering around them about death and decay The whole piece created an extraordinary intimacy. We saw the faces of the performers up close, one by one as they proceeded down to the beach . . . wearing everything imaginable from formal gowns to ethnic dress to slacks and sandals. When they settled at the tables we began to know their postures and gestures. And when we crowded around the speakers to listen to their disembodied voices, the striking visual image below almost receded into memory because the conversations were so compelling.¹

Lacy and her supporters are currently seeking funds to videotape the performance and are planning to find ways to continue involvement with the group in some way.²

All of the groups or directors mentioned so far have worked from written scripts--with the exception of the workshops of the Living Stage Company of Washington, D.C. The sixth method of transforming oral histories to theatre for, by and/or with seniors is based on improvisation. With this approach, the director and senior participants collectively develop scenes or plays based on the oral histories of the group members and perform them improvisationally. Acting-Up! uses this approach, as do Patch Clark and Jim Kaufman of the

¹Lucy R. Lippart, "Time Will Tell," Village Voice, 19 June 1984, p. 102.

²Dunn, p. 3.

Theater of Living History of Present Stage/The Actor's Space. The Theater of Living History is a theatre group from Cambridge, Massachusetts, which was developed by Kaufman and Mark Samuels in 1979. They work with a core group of eight senior actors and musicians who are residents of the Kit Clark Senior House, Field's Corner, in Dorchester, Massachusetts. To date they have created four plays and produced a documentary videotape. They usually start off with an idea and then brainstorm the idea, incorporating the experiences of the players. Some of their plays are performed in a traditional manner only improvised with costumes, make-up and certain visual effects; others use story-telling, puppetry, vignettes, and stylized movements. These shows are then toured to local sites, and discussions are encouraged after the performances.¹

Another organization to develop oral history plays with seniors and present them improvisationally is Elders Share the Arts (ESTA), an arts organization located in New York City, and the subject of the following chapters.

¹Jim Kaufman, personal letter, 16 January 1985.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIVING HISTORY THEATRE:

THE BACKGROUND TO ELDERS SHARE THE ARTS

Living History Theatre: Its Definition, Nature and Roots

Living History Theatre is an emerging art form whose emphasis is on process. As a type of Oral History Theatre for, by, and with senior adults, it is a term that specifically describes the work of Susan Perlstein, Sally Charnow, and other artistic directors of Elders Share the Arts.

Living History Theatre is a type of community theatre which develops plays collectively, as some other Oral History Theatre groups do, from the life histories of the group's members, who then perform the play. Usually, the play will concern an historical topic that has a particular social or political theme, and will be presented via various dramatic techniques--pantomime, movement, improvisation, song--many of which are reminiscent of the Living Newspaper. The plays often have a cinematographic structure--short scenes interspersed with song and dance, and are given a minimalist production that is toured to various senior audiences.

An integral part of Living History Theatre's theatrical process is audience participation. The performing group encourages audience members to share with them the memories

that their play stimulates. The director and performers then lead small group discussions based on the audience's oral testimonies. So the whole performance event is an occasion for active involvement.

As an amalgam of art and humanistic disciplines, Living History Theatre embraces, as other senior adult Oral History Theatre does, three disciplines: oral history, people's theatre, and gerontology. The aims of the artistic directors of ESTA vary somewhat, but generally they are committed to advocacy for the elderly. Through their plays and theatre work, they hope to counter age-stereotypes, elicit the untold history of specific ethnic groups, and address such social and political concerns as racism, sexism, and social injustice. Their theatre is a people's theatre. Their emphasis is on telling the stories of elderly ethnic groups, most of whom are women, as a means of celebrating the lives of their people. Part of their process involves education: education about themselves--developing self-awareness, and individual and group identity--and education about the particular historical, social, and political topic they address.

The process of Living History Theatre is often more important than the product. This is not to say that the directors and groups do not strive to make their performances as fine as possible, but they consider the means of developing Living History plays to be an end unto itself: to develop the artist within each individual, and to foster education about the participants themselves and their

historical, social, and political contexts. Sharing these things with an audience is their primary goal. And although the directors do not intentionally involve their participants in personal or group therapy, they all agree that their process has, to varying degrees, a therapeutic effect.

The Development of Elders Share the Arts

Elders Share the Arts was the brainchild of Susan Perlstein, its executive director. ESTA's assistant director, Sally Charnow, later collaborated with Perlstein, and together they have made ESTA a successful arts organization that functions as a model program for similar organizations across the country. The idea for ESTA stemmed from Perlstein's interest in social and political theatre. She had been a co-founder¹ in 1970 of the Mass Transit Street Theater, a group that performed improvisational social and political theatre pieces. Her first work connected with the elderly was on a play the Mass Transit Street Theater developed in 1971 called Tenants-Go-Round. It was a melodrama designed to dramatize the awful conditions that existed in public housing in New York City and the consequences of the City's Housing Department's decision to remove rent controls. Primarily, it focused on the implications of this decision

¹Perlstein co-founded the Mass Transit Street Theatre along with Laura Chenven, Lynn Pyle, Jerry Cofta, Eddie Israel, Sharon Lieberman, Debra Valentine, Chris Worland, Steven Sandler, and Tasha Simon.

for the tenants, many of whom were elderly.¹ The Street Theater performed the play in lobbies of apartment buildings, and those elderly tenants who saw it expressed an interest in developing their own plays. Perlstein was encouraged to pursue her work.²

Perlstein became artistic director in 1976 of Project SPEAR (Senior Program in Education, Art, and Recreation). Project SPEAR had been developed in 1975 by Richard Segal, who had run the Project from a base at the Bronx Community College. Project SPEAR sponsored workshops for seniors in the areas of education, art, and recreation. In 1976 the Bronx Council on the Arts took over Segal's operation. Segal left, and Perlstein, in addition to her work with the Mass Transit Street Theater, became the new artistic director of Project SPEAR. Under its auspices she ran, in 1976, a dance/exercise workshop at the Hodson Senior Center on Webster Avenue in the South Bronx.

Perlstein and her initial group of thirty-five seniors at Hodson finished their first workshop series in November 1977. They decided that it would be valuable to share their work with the Center's other members.³ They called the

¹For a transcript of Tenants-Go-Round and a discussion of Mass Transit Street Theater, see Henry Lesnick, ed. Guerilla Street Theater (New York: Avon Books, 1973), pp. 369-381.

²Interview with Susan Perlstein, Manhattan, New York, 27 September 1983.

³Susan Perlstein, "A Stage for Memory: Living Plays by Older Adults," Compass 1 (February 1981): 29.

exercises and dance improvisations Walking Tall and presented them to the audience in the form of an open workshop. The workshop was well-received, and the performers felt encouraged to continue their work.¹

Shortly after the November performance, one of the participants died. The group members remembered her desire to make theatre part of the Center's activities and decided to include drama in their workshops. They developed a series of improvisational scenes which represented aspects of their roots. Calling their presentation A Slice of Our Lives, they dedicated it to their deceased friend:

The prologue opened with each performer describing where she was born and raised. Act 1 was called "The Beginnings" in which three stories were enacted. The first about growing up in a fishing village on the island of St. Croix. The second showed a sharecropper family in South Carolina, while the third dealt with a young girl's journey north to New York City from Montgomery, Alabama to visit her Merchant Marine father. Act 2 brought things back home to Hodson Senior Center where the birthday-of-the month party took place. People looked back to where they had come from and looked forward² to learning new activities at Hodson Senior Center.

An important part of this production was sharing the play with the audience. Perlstein felt that this was a special moment for her. She saw the impact the play had on the audience; the audience members immediately identified with the stories being performed. They, too, had experienced

¹ Interview with Perlstein, 27 September 1983.

² Perlstein, "A Stage for Memory: Living Plays by Older Adults," p. 33.

something similar and were seeing their experiences verified.¹ Many of the audience members spontaneously stood up and shared aspects of their lives with the performers. Perlstein decided to tour the show to other senior centers and found that the reaction from different audiences was similar. Many audience members saw something of themselves in the players and their stories.

In May 1978, after repeated successful performances at the Davidson, High Bridge, and Bronx River Senior Centers, the Hodson Drama Group was asked to perform at "A Life Review Festival in Celebration of Aging" which was held at the Wave Hill Environmental Center in Riverdale in the Bronx. Seniors were bussed to the festival from the neighborhood, and their reactions to A Slice of Our Lives were similar to earlier reactions from other audiences. The performers were cheered, and Perlstein was asked to start drama groups at their centers. Shortly after this festival, the New York City Department of Aging gave an award for outstanding community service to Perlstein and her group.²

During the following year of her work with the Hodson group, Perlstein realized the potential of such a theatrical form for seniors. Each time the Hodson group performed, the audience members would contribute their experiences and make

¹Interview with Susan Perlstein, Manhattan, New York, 27 September 1983.

²Perlstein, "Stage for Memory: Living Plays by Older Adults," p. 34.

it their play.¹ If she could develop other drama groups in senior centers throughout New York, then perhaps she could establish a grassroots theatrical movement.

In 1978 she left the Mass Transit Street Theater and formed, in 1979, her own arts organization, the Performing Arts Exchange. Later in the year she met with some like-minded performing artists--Marion Stanton, Mario Giacallone, Karen Leiner, Barbara Baracks, Diane Fraher, and Paul Kreuger--and encouraged them to join her organization. Eventually, only Marion Stanton was to remain with Perlstein as the rest went on to pursue their own individual careers. Before Fraher left, however, she suggested that the organization call itself Elders Share the Arts, the acronym of which is ESTA, "to be" in Spanish. Perlstein agreed and, in 1981, changed the name of her organization to Elders Share the Arts; it was at this time that Sally Charnow joined Perlstein.

Sally Charnow, as a dancer, had already been performing for the elderly at various senior centers. She had felt during the course of her performances that the role of the audience was a passive one. She decided, therefore, to create an event that was more active--that was participatory in some way. When she went to perform at some senior centers in the Kentucky hills, she decided to experiment with some participation events. She started by simply giving the audience

¹Interview with Susan Perlstein, Brooklyn, New York, 14 February 1984.

a bag of props and asking them to choose three. She then conducted a series of creative movement exercises using the three props. She found this worked so well that when she returned to New York and was offered a job as an artist-consultant at a bilingual nursing home in Bedford-Stuyvesant, she was eager to accept. She wanted to experiment with various creative movement and poetry classes that emphasized audience participation. During the course of her work at the home, she saw how empowering the creative workshops were to the seniors. She saw people in her group get emotionally stronger, and she noticed that gradually people wanted to talk about their lives. Eventually, a number of her group became active in leadership positions in the home. Charnow tried through her classes to facilitate the programs that allowed participants to talk about their experiences. A lot of her work was with language and movement:

We did poetry; we did haiku and we set them to movement. We did nostalgia albums where you'd make pictures and poems. Most of our work had a movement base because I felt it really helped people get close to each other. We did activities of daily life. We did intergenerational programs with a local elementary school--singing and poetry writing.

Through her work at the nursing home, Charnow became convinced of the need to establish similar programs for seniors at other centers. So when Perlstein asked her to help develop ESTA, she was already committed to advocating arts programs for seniors.

¹Interview with Sally Charnow, Brooklyn, New York, 30 May 1984.

During the course of the next four years, ESTA was to become a significant non-profit arts organization. Initially, Perlstein as executive director worked on a voluntary basis, while the artists were paid under the auspices of Project SPEAR. What Perlstein envisioned for ESTA was an organization that would provide training and services for artists who were already running workshops for Project SPEAR and to establish special arts events based on music, dance, and theatre workshops. Perlstein wanted the theatre workshops to be Living History Theatre workshops where participants would develop plays based on some social or political theme from their own life experiences. Through ESTA, the participants in the workshops would be brought together each year for a festival where they would share their cultural heritages. Perlstein had already organized two small festivals in 1980: one at the Van Cortlandt Senior Center and another as part of the Senior Olympics and Recognition Day at the Bronx Community College. In 1981, though, ESTA secured funds¹ to enlarge the festival component of its work, and in the same year the first of these larger festivals was held in Brooklyn, but since then they have been held at the Hodson Senior Center.²

¹Funds were obtained from Consolidated Edison, Citibank, Chemical Bank, Chase Manhattan Bank, and the Brooklyn Arts and Cultural Association.

²The 1985 Annual Festival, however, will be held at the Bronx Settlement House at Pelham Park South in the Bronx, New York.

While the festivals were being funded, however, the money for the artists which came from Project SPEAR was exhausted. Perlstein ceased being the Project's artistic director, and ESTA was left struggling to sustain its commitment to the different centers. Some programs were, nevertheless, continued because the centers provided the necessary funds. The most publicly successful of such programs was Perlstein's at the Hodson Senior Center.¹ Other workshops were unfortunately ended, and ESTA was unable to expand or continue training staff in Living History Theatre techniques.

Perlstein's aim had been to secure funding from the City of New York. She felt that ideally a theatre movement for the City's aging citizens should be funded by taxes from the City. However, after a year of fruitless efforts working with the North Brooklyn Interagency Council, she shifted focus in 1982 to Charnow's suggestion that they concentrate on seeking funding from private sources. They did so, and in July of 1983 they secured a \$20,000 general support grant from the New York Foundation. This enabled them to hire Perlstein as Executive Director, Charnow as Assistant Director, and Linda Gaal as Administrative Assistant. In the fall of 1983, ESTA secured additional funding from the New York State Office of Parks and the Lucius and Eva Eastman Fund. The organization also at this time moved into an office in the Brookdale Center on Aging of Hunter College. It was then able to operate from a central base and, with

¹For a description of this work see pp. 212-235 below.

the new funding, initiate several more workshop programs and continue to fund those workshops previously started. In addition, ESTA began contracting with agencies such as the Brookdale Center on Aging, the Bronx Council on the Arts, the Brooklyn Arts and Culture Association, and the Workman's Circle to conduct staff-training workshops in Arts and Aging. The topics offered included techniques of life review, Living History Theatre, movement, and health concerns of the aging. Perlstein and Charnow were able to organize further workshops, establish staff-training procedures both for their own directors and for staff at various centers and homes, give lectures on their work, organize a yearly festival, and continue their fundraising efforts.

By 1984 ESTA had four artistic directors: Perlstein, Charnow, Stanton, and Sarah Safford, who had joined them in the fall of 1983. Safford had taken over the Hodson group and also was running a movement group at the Concourse YMHA in the Bronx and a traditional theatre group at the Dorchester Senior Center in Brooklyn. Stanton was directing a Living History Theatre workshop at the Bronxdale Senior Center in the East Bronx; Charnow was directing Living History Theatre workshops at the Bronx YMHA, Clearview Drama Group in Queens, and the Bedford-Stuyvesant Nursing Home in Brooklyn; while Perlstein was running a Living History Theatre workshop at the Shorefront in Brooklyn; Perlstein, as a member of the faculty of the Brookdale Center on Aging, also

taught a workshop in Oral History at the Flushing YW-YMHA in Queens. Both she and Charnow, in addition, lectured extensively on the value, uses, and techniques of Living History Theatre to such diverse groups as the staff at the Brooklyn VA Hospital, art students at the School for Visual Arts, and directors at various senior centers.

ESTA currently offers three types of programs: Exposure Series Workshops, Performance Series Workshops, and Staff Training Workshops. The Exposure Series Workshops are thirty weeks long (meeting once a week) and are designed to introduce participants to performing arts skills and to develop the trust necessary for an ensemble theatre group. At the end of the series, the group presents an open workshop to the particular center's other members who are invited to participate in the physical warm-ups and observe the group's improvisations. The aim of the open workshop is not only to share the group's work but to show other center members how improvisational techniques are readily accessible to most people, thereby, perhaps, encouraging other members to participate in the drama group.

The Performance Series of workshops is offered to those groups who have completed the Exposure Series of workshops. The exercises and improvisations in this series explore a theme for performance. The theme is developed from the life experiences of the group and often has a social or political focus. The group learns the skills necessary to create, rehearse, and present a play for performance.

The audiences for these plays are mostly other seniors at various centers and nursing homes, and they are invited to participate in the warm-up exercises and to share the life experiences recalled by the play presented.

The third service ESTA offers is staff-training workshops. These are primarily designed to educate community workers to the needs of the elderly and to give instruction in the techniques of Living History Theatre so that other centers can start programs modeled on ESTA's. ESTA also offers training for its own artistic directors who meet bi-weekly to share their experiences and discuss concerns. If one particular artistic director has a special problem, the others may be able to suggest possible solutions based on their own previous experiences. This is also a time when the artistic directors who are not involved with the administrative details can learn of developments and offer suggestions as to future directions.

Currently ESTA is a viable arts organization, and its administrators hope to secure and expand its funding base. This year (1985), Perlstein has organized a board of directors and initiated a "Friends of ESTA" program. Funds have been secured from organizations such as Exxon, American Express, and the Tuttle Foundation; contracts have been signed with the VA Hospital in St. Albans, Queens, and the New York City Department of Aging; two new workshop leaders (JoAnn Schultz and Emily Nash) have been hired; and three new Living History Theatre groups have been started in Chinatown,

at the Lenox Hill Senior Center, and at the Amsterdam House Nursing Home. The more finances ESTA is able to acquire, the more Senior Adult Theatre groups it will be able to develop. And the more Senior Adult Theatre groups there are that practice Living History Theatre, the closer to realization will be Perlstein's vision of a grassroots theatrical movement.

The Hodson Drama Group (1976-1983)

Much of ESTA's current success stems from the pioneering work Perlstein did with the Hodson Drama Group from 1976 to 1983. With this group Perlstein was able to achieve a high level of visibility for her Living History Theatre work. She was also able to develop her ideas concerning the process of Living History Theatre. She was able then to show funding sources that Living History Theatre was accessible to most groups of seniors and that the Hodson Drama Group offered proof of such. Funding sources were encouraged to support a program that had proven successful and valuable to many seniors.

As previously mentioned, Perlstein has outlined her work with the Hodson Drama Group in her monograph, A Stage for Memory--Life History Plays by Older Adults: The Work of the Hodson Senior Center Drama Group.¹ She describes the Senior Center, which is on Webster Avenue in the South Bronx, and the women who comprise the group. Most of them are

¹See Preface, p. v.

Blacks who originally came from the South or the Caribbean. She outlines how their drama group evolved from an exercise class she was giving at the Center and how, after the success of A Slice of Our Lives, the group went on to create two Living History plays each year. The plays they developed during the fall had a holiday theme and were performed at Christmas, while the plays they developed during the spring had various themes and were performed at an annual spring festival. Perlstein includes the scenarios for two of these shows: Three Generations (1979) and Holiday Heat (1979); as well as the script of Grandma's Home Remedy Show (1980). Three Generations shares aspects of the lives of the participants as they look back over three generations in their family history and describe how they remember growing up on farms in the South, then moving to New York City, becoming parents, and experiencing World War II. Finally they recall how the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties ushered in modern times for them and what has happened to them as grandmothers since then. Many of the scenes are connected by songs from the particular era--"We Shall Overcome" for the 1960's part, for example. From the scenarios, it is clear that Perlstein sought to connect the transitions of most of the women's lives (from daughter to mother to grandmother) with the major historical events of the day--the Depression, World War II, and the Civil Rights Movement--and to show how the women remembered living their lives through these times.

Similarly, in the holiday show of that year, Holiday Heat, Perlstein made a connection between the historical environment and the participants' lives--only this time the play was more issue-oriented. The content of the play was that of a holiday celebration--Christmas. But its central concern was whether tenants had to suffer in poorly heated apartments. Group members remembered past Christmas holidays --the cooking, the presents, the family gatherings, the general warmth of the occasion. They contrasted this with preparations for a present Christmas that was greatly marred by a lack of heat in the tenement building. As the central characters fondly recalled past Christmas celebrations and lamented the present, neighbors visited and urged them to join them in their protests against their landlords. The central scenes showed the protesters confronting anonymous, indifferent bureaucrats, and, in eventual frustration and rage, engaging in a sit-in, singing protest songs, and expressing determination not to budge until the landlords restored heat to their buildings. The play ended with the women winning their fight and returning to their homes to finish celebrating their Christmas in a warmth reminiscent of their past Christmas celebrations. The play concluded with the grandmothers telling stories of the toys they used to receive, the food they used to eat, and the decorations they used to make. In the finale, they invited the audience to join in singing, "We Wish You a Merry Christmas."

In Grandma's Home Remedy Show, performed in the spring of 1980, we can see how Perlstein combines approaches of the previous two plays. It is issue-oriented in that it concerns health care practices; but it illustrates such practices historically from the early 1900s to the present. The play opens with the women entering in single file. Each carries a branch of a forsythia bush, which she places in "a healing vase" center stage. They then join hands in a circle around the vase and sing an old gospel song, "There's a Tree on Each Side of the River":

There's a tree on each side of the river
 There's a tree on each side of the river
 There's a tree on each side of the river
 There's a tree on each side of the river
 And the leaves of the tree are good for the healing
 of the nation.
 There's a place for the worn and the weary,
 They shall never die
 Some black morning I'm going to go there
 They tell me I have a home there.
 There's a tree on each side of the river
 And the leaves of the tree are good for the healing
 of the nation¹

They then introduce themselves and remember the kinds of remedies their grandmothers and mothers had for various ailments--baths in solutions made from peach leaves to ease a cold, soursap bush tea and gin for stomach aches, heating cups to apply to congested chests, and so on. Following this, they enact a scene where a mother has a sick baby, and various relatives and neighbors come to offer different

¹Perlstein, A Stage for Memory: Life History Plays by Older Adults--The Work of the Hodson Senior Center Drama Group, p. 45.

"cures"--a peach leaf bath, a mustard compress, hot chicken soup, a fever song:

Ole mother feeble, how happy you'll be,
 When you sit under the apple tree,
 When you sit under the apple tree.
 Take this hat and keep your head warm,
 A couple of kisses will do you no harm.
 Will do you no harm today.¹

The next scene shows a bone setter at work. (A bone setter was a wise woman who had had no formal training but knew how to mend broken bones and bruised bodies.) A young girl is pushed by her sister and falls and hurts her leg. The girls' mother is a bone setter who learned her skills from her mother, and she shows her daughters how to gather clay from the river bank, mold it around the injured limb, and wrap it in bandages soaked in vinegar.

The final scene is set in the present at a hospital in the Bronx. It is staged in the form of a modern morality play and shows how patients like Ms. High Blood Pressure, Ms. Breathless, and Ms. Glaucoma have great difficulty receiving personal care and attention in a large, anonymous institution. If one is to stay healthy, it suggests, one must take care of one's self and one's neighbors--as one's mother and grandmother before them had done. The play concludes with the women dancing and singing to "Young at Heart." As in previous plays, they encourage the audience to join in with the singing.

¹Perlstein, A Stage for Memory: Life History Plays by Older Adults--The Work of the Hodson Senior Center Drama Group, p. 51.

Perlstein went on with her group to create The Inflation Show (1981), a play about inflation that later developed into The High Cost of Living (1982); and Working Hands (1983), a play about the different working roles the women had experienced. Although she does not write about them in her monograph, they all follow a form similar to those plays described. Each concerns an issue and contrasts memories of the past with present situations. Each has a three-act structure, begins in the present, moves to the past, and returns to the present. Each includes music, singing, and dancing, and involves the audience in some way.

Perlstein and her group toured their plays to other senior centers, nursing homes, and recreation centers. Often they would get press coverage of their performances, and gradually the group became well-known. A film, The Women of Hodson: Sharing Life Experiences Through Drama,¹ was made of their work by Josephine Hayes Dean. In it Perlstein conducts an open rehearsal with her group, and in voice-over describes the origin, nature, and development of Living History Theatre. Later the group appeared on local radio and television talk shows. The publicity brought added recognition to the women and their senior center and significantly substantiated the claims Perlstein and Charnow had been making to potential funding sources

¹Josephine Hayes Dean, dir., The Women of Hodson: Sharing Life Experiences Through Drama, Filmmakers Library, 1980.

about Living History Theatre. The plays created by the Hodson Drama Group were moving and significant. They appealed to a wide audience. Other seniors could identify with the universal concerns they depicted even though their own cultural background might emphasize different traditions or values. More importantly, perhaps, the participants were seniors themselves who were engaged in a creative act that obviously made them feel good about themselves. The reviews, the film, the talk shows offered tangible proof that this was so. Gradually the funding followed.

The Process of Transforming Life Histories into Living History Theatre

Perlstein had gone to great lengths to show that the Hodson Center women were not unique. Charnow had been developing similar plays with her group at the Bronx YMHA, as had Stanton at the Bronxdale Senior Center. They had done so by following a process that Perlstein had developed with her group at Hodson, a process she claimed could be used by most directors with most groups. She outlined this process in her monograph. Essentially she said there were six steps necessary for developing Living History Theatre:

1. Learning theatre skills.
2. Selecting a theme.
3. Collecting stories and other cultural and historical information.

4. Selecting the historical material.
5. Developing the scenarios, rehearsing the play, and setting it.
6. Performance.¹

The first step, she stressed, should take ideally a year but could be accomplished in three months. She calls this step the "Exposure Series" of workshops, and here the participants, many of whom might feel threatened by traditional theatre approaches, are trained in the techniques of improvisational drama. Perlstein advocated placing great emphasis on developing trust, lessening self-consciousness, and encouraging group identity. This objective can be realized by relating all of the exercises to the participants' life experiences and by establishing a ritualistic pattern for the structure of each workshop.

The initial phase for each of her workshops allows for a few minutes of general "getting together," and sharing news, comments on the previous session, and general discussion. The next phase is a physical warm-up period where she employs various yoga, meditation, and breathing exercises that she adapts to suit the kinds of physical problems of her particular group--bursitis, arthritis, poor circulation, and high blood pressure. Next follows voice warm-ups, which include singing and musical "jamming"--sounds matching movement, call and response, imitating musical

¹Perlstein, A Stage for Memory: Life History Plays by Older Adults--The Work of the Hodson Senior Center Drama Group, p. 28.

instruments, and so on. Sometimes the participants are asked to sing songs that they remember; some of these are later used in their play.

The central phase of the workshop involves theatre games and improvisations. These exercises vary according to the stage the group is at in their development. Basically, Perlstein follows the usual sequence for improvisational drama training--sense awareness, pantomime, movement, dialogue, improvisation, role-playing. However, she takes all the characters and situations directly from the life experiences of the participants. Character work involves remembering how relatives walked, talked, gestured. Improvisations concern family conflicts, memories of first jobs, disappointments, moving house--situations which are familiar to all participants. She uses various stimuli to encourage memories--records, clothing, letters, songs, dances, photographs. For example, she has participants bring in photographs and share them with the group. Some group members then form a tableau vivant from the photograph concentrating on how the photograph's owner said her mother, say, walked, talked, carried her baby. Some of these "pictures" are then improvised.¹

The final phase of the workshop is an evaluation of the session. Here Perlstein encourages the participants to discuss any problems they might have had with the work, share

¹Interview with Susan Perlstein, Brooklyn, New York, 30 May 1984.

comments, and make suggestions for follow-up work. Perlstein sees this step as an important stage in encouraging collective responsibility. Each is responsible for the work created.

Perlstein maintains this workshop structure for each step in the process of transforming life histories into theater, and the remaining five steps of her process are within the context of this pattern. A theme might be suggested, for example, by some of the improvised scenes or the discussions at the end of the workshops. The kind of theme obviously varies, but it will always be directly related to the concerns of the group. Perlstein never tells the group what the theme will be. Rather, the theme evolves from the group. In Grandma's Home Remedy Show, for example, the theme was suggested during the workshop's warm-up sessions. Each week when the group did its warm-ups, they would comment on their aches and pains. Some people suggested some home cures and compared them to some of the pills they received from busy doctors. Many thought the home cures worked better than the doctors' pills. Perlstein then took their individual stories of "health care" and helped the group put them into a historical context: health care practices from the early 1900s to the present.

The third step, that of collecting stories and other cultural and historical information, takes place once a theme has been decided upon. The stories or situations that initially suggested the theme might be included, but in

addition the participants are encouraged to share further stories related to the theme. The life experiences shared with the group are considered confidential even though some of the material may be dramatized later. Perlstein sets guidelines for the group concerning the confidentiality of the stories and facilitates these directives by encouraging members to make a commitment to the group. Once a theme has been decided upon and the group enters the story-collecting stage, no new members are allowed to join. The trust and group cohesiveness that have been a long time in the making are not then disturbed by new members, and personal stories are more likely to be freely shared.

Perlstein uses a variety of techniques to stimulate memories related to the theme. Sometimes she suggests improvisations that the group then discusses, which in turn stimulate further memories. At other times she will use some of the techniques she used for the general improvisations--playing music, choreographing dances, bringing in props or costumes, improvising stories from newspaper clippings, reading excerpts from diaries or letters of the time, and so on. Often Perlstein will use the technique of interviewing. One of the stories might be improvised, for example, and then the person who told the story is interviewed by a character from the improvised scene, say a grandchild or sister or aunt, who questions the subject about the setting, the clothes they wore, the relationship between the

characters, the attitude of the characters, etc. In Grandma's Home Remedy Show, a participant as a news reporter questioned the women as to how they kept healthy. Such techniques were necessary to encourage the sharing of stories. As the anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff has pointed out, the presence of another person when recalling memories helps "to assure a coherent flow."¹ The exercises Perlstein used helped the participants recall memories that might otherwise have lain dormant.

Perlstein encourages discussion of the stories. With some groups the greatest difficulty at this time is to ensure that participants listen to each other. Often in their eagerness to tell their stories, they all talk at once. Gradually, though, one story leads to another, so that collectively they re-evolve each other's past and develop a sense of what Perlstein calls "shared history."

Once Perlstein has collected her group's stories, she helps the group determine the underlying social, cultural, and political forces that influence individual life histories. She uses different techniques for this depending on the theme and the nature of the group. Sometimes she will simply ask the group to name the historical event that influenced them in some fundamental way or changed the way they felt about themselves. She found that for Blacks, for example, this tended to be the Civil Rights Movement and

¹Barbara Meyerhoff and Virginia Tufte, "Life History as Integration," p. 541.

for Jews, the Holocaust. She will then help the group see how their personal stories fit into a larger historical context: how relationships, say, with grandchildren were influenced by the music of the 1960s and how that, in turn, was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement.

Sometimes she brings in written material describing the particular era--textbooks, letters, documents, biographies --or photographs, music, speeches, films of or about the era. The extent to which she does this depends on the nature and abilities of the group. Some cultural groups tend to be more educated than others and respond enthusiastically to the more literary aspects of this stage; others tend to prefer the oral, singing and dancing aspects.

No matter to what degree the literary or oral aspects are developed, however, there is still a strong educational (and often political) element to selecting which stories best illustrate the theme given the historical context. In Three Generations, for example, the group decided to set the scene for the war years in a factory, because most of the women entered the work force as factory workers at this time. Up until then they had been at home, but with many men away at war, they had job opportunities in fields previously closed to them. There is a social, political statement here, and Perlstein leads them to understand some of the implications of such a phenomenon.

In choosing the stories, Perlstein may take one person's story as a whole and dramatize it as told. Or she

might take part of one person's story and part of another's and combine them. It is at this stage that the director and group begin collectively to create their drama. The extent to which the director chooses the scenes and the group chooses the scenes depends on both the director and group, but Perlstein says she always gets the group to make the decisions about such things. However, she acknowledges that she directs their choices by suggesting the consequences of their decisions.¹ If she feels that something will not work dramatically, then she will demonstrate why it will not work. Often though, what will or will not work is a matter of trial and error, and Perlstein and her group try collectively to determine which scenes play the best.

Once the stories or scenes from stories have been selected for dramatization, Perlstein sets up what she calls "committees" to develop the play. Specifically, the committee members rehearse their group scene and collect the required props and any necessary costumes. As is traditional in acting, each character is given a "who," "where," "what," "why," and "when" to develop. They improvise the scene and then play it to the rest of the group. Another "committee" then improvises the same scene. Perlstein calls this "instant replay." She finds this exercise particularly useful for senior adults because it gives them a chance to

¹Interview with Susan Perlstein, Brooklyn, New York, 30 May 1984.

see how they have performed. Many are often unsure of themselves as actresses and need to see how they look.

After each scene, the viewers suggest improvements, comment on parts well-acted, and generally discuss the scene. The original "committee" then plays its scene again, incorporating the agreed-upon suggestions. Perlstein feels that this back-and-forth process, which she calls "collective play creation," helps the players to:

. . . clarify the plot, and set the lines and characterizations in their scenes. While repeating their scene, each actor had the artistic liberty of adding her own touches. In this way, all the characters and their conflicts became clearer to everyone in the group. They all participated in developing every scene.¹

Another value of using this technique of collective play creation is that each member of the group comes to know the parts of the other members. Often in a group of seniors there will be one or two people absent each week, either because of illness or appointments that have to be kept. If each group member knows all the parts, then it is much easier for someone to play an absent member's character. Perlstein feels that by using this method of "story setting, the entire group takes responsibility for understanding the scenes."²

In the same way "committees" for props and costumes ensure more than one person knowing what props and costumes

¹Perlstein, A Stage for Memory: Life History Plays by Older Adults--The Work of the Hodson Senior Center Drama Group, p. 32.

²Ibid., p. 32.

are needed. Generally, though, Perlstein uses few props or costumes, and those that she does use are considered "emblems." The purpose of such "emblems" is merely to suggest an idea, to symbolize something--the branch of the forsythia bush in Grandma's Home Remedy Show, for example.

Perlstein uses no scenery and very little set--sometimes chairs and a table. She emphasizes a minimalist approach because she wants the focus of attention to be on the people and their stories. An important aspect of her work is to facilitate the audience's identification with the performers. She wants, therefore, to avoid elaborate theatrical effects that might alienate the audience from the performers and undermine the power and appeal of her group's plays.¹

Each scene is rehearsed separately each week, and gradually the play is developed block by block. The final weeks before performance are the same as for any acting group. The play is rehearsed as a whole with, if used, props and costumes. There are run-throughs and more run-throughs. The performance is a little different, however, from traditional performances. Perlstein says she structures her performances like a celebration. She warms up the audience as she does her group in her workshops--by engaging them in physical exercises. Perlstein sees these warm-ups as a ritual preparation for the event that is to be shared by all.

¹Interview with Susan Perlstein, Brooklyn, New York, 30 May 1984.

After the performance, Perlstein encourages the audience to share the recollections that the play stimulated. She calls this "public witnessing" or "giving testimony." Audience members are invited to stand up or come to the front of the acting area to tell their stories. Many do, indeed, come forward and share their experiences. On some occasions, audience members have stood up at this point and spontaneously re-enacted parts of the play: they had so completely identified with it.¹ After Grandma's Home Remedy Show, for example, members of the audience re-enacted the play and offered some of their own home remedies.² And when A Slice of Our Lives was performed at Davidson Center in the South Bronx, five people discovered during the public witnessing that they were all from Panama. They learned that their families had all been displaced while working on the Panama Canal and had moved to New York. They had been living near each other for years without knowing of their common history. The play and the public witnessing afterwards had helped bring them together.³

After the public witnessing, Perlstein and her performers move out into the group and collect stories more informally from the audience. This is when many people will talk

¹Interview with Susan Perlstein, Manhattan, New York, 27 September 1983.

²Perlstein, A Stage for Memory: Life History Plays by Older Adults--The Work of the Hodson Senior Center Drama Group, p. 33.

³Interview with Susan Perlstein, Brooklyn, New York, 29 February 1984.

freely about their own experiences connected to the play's theme. Perlstein sees this as a valuable time for both the audience members and the performers. They get a chance to compare life histories and to see that they often have much in common with each other. Perlstein has seen some audience members who often sit in centers not talking to each other, rarely knowing anything about the other, make an effort to connect with her performers so that they can tell their story. Sometimes audience members will just touch a performer on the arm and say, "That brought back so many memories," or "I understand how you felt." A sense of communion, a celebration of life, is the culmination of this aspect of the process.

Initially, the first performance of any play is given at the host center. The players can usually count on a receptive audience, and it helps prepare them for their first performance "on tour." Perlstein will make the arrangements to tour the play to other senior centers, community centers, or nursing homes. The host center provides the transportation, and the center receiving the free performance will often give the players lunch or refreshments depending on the time of the performance. The day of the performance is a big event in the players' lives.

From initial meeting to day of performance, Perlstein sees the six steps that transform life histories into theatre as part of a process. She does not suggest that such steps provide an instant formula for developing Living History

plays. Rather, she feels that they provide a framework within which the directors and their group members can develop the artists in themselves and engage in an educational, social and political venture. Each person develops differently, as does each group. Seniors new to this way of working have to learn to trust each other and find the extent to which they can develop their potential selves. This process takes time, especially as many seniors may feel that they have already reached whatever potential they have. Just as there are steps that are necessary for transforming life histories into theatre, so there are stages that each group as a creative unit must go through to develop significant, sophisticated plays. The directors of ESTA are all at different stages of evolution with their groups, and the kinds of plays they created over the last year reflect this.

Perlstein was working with a Jewish group at the Shorefront YMHA in Brooklyn, and their play, Blackout on the Boardwalk, was conceived as an examination of past attitudes of East European and American Jews towards Hitler's aggression as contrasted with the attitudes people have today towards the nuclear arms race. Charnow was working at the Bronx YMHA with another predominantly Jewish group on a play called Excerpts from Our Lives, which dramatized various loosely connected stories from the participants' lives. Stanton was directing Bronxdale Senior Center's The Days of the Nickel. In this play, her mostly Black group contrasted the cost of living today with the objects and activities that

used to cost only a nickel. At Hodson Senior Center, another mostly Black group, Safford was helping her group create Ready for Love, a series of scenes and songs contrasting present and past attitudes towards love.

In a period of two days this spring, all four plays were performed. On May 30, 1984, the Shorefront YMHA Drama Group presented Blackout on the Boardwalk to a group of disabled veterans at the VA Hospital in St. Albans, Queens. Then on May 31, 1984, Excerpts from Our Lives, The Days of the Nickel, and Ready for Love were presented at the Fourth Annual Living History Festival held at the Hodson Senior Center.

In the following chapters, we will see how these plays were presented to an audience, discuss their content and productions, then examine how they were created, and comment on the values and problems of such a process.

CHAPTER FIVE

LIVING HISTORY PLAYS IN PERFORMANCE

Shorefront YMHA Drama Group at St. Albans VA Hospital (Queens, New York), May 30, 1984

At 2:30 p.m. on May 30, 1984, the Drama Group of the Shorefront YMHA in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, New York, presented Blackout on the Boardwalk to veterans at the long-term care facility of the VA Hospital in St. Albans, Queens, New York. The Shorefront YMHA is a well-kept facility on Coney Island Avenue and the Boardwalk. Many of the elderly people who attend the Senior Center there are East European Jews, survivors of the Holocaust (1939-1945), who emigrated to the United States. Some are first generation American Jews. The drama group consists of eight members, one man and seven women. All are aged between sixty-five and eighty-two. On the occasion of this performance, one of the women was absent, and her roles had to be played by other members. They had been working on the play for two years under the direction of Susan Perlstein. Patti Paley, a student assistant director, had helped them for a few weeks.

On this occasion at the VA Hospital, the play was performed in a large, all-purpose hall. The players had

set up their acting space at one end near the only windows in the room. Their set consisted of a cloth backdrop depicting a young girl sitting on the beach under an umbrella, looking out to the ocean--the view from the boardwalk. On stage there were three chairs positioned close together, center stage. These were for the ladies who were to congregate and chat on the boardwalk at the opening of the play. A piano framed the right side of the set, and large speakers were on both sides of the acting space. A microphone lay on the top of the piano ready for those players who needed it. Six large sunhats and a few pairs of sun glasses lay next to the microphone. These were for the ladies in the boardwalk scene and were the only props and costumes apart from a few shawls and a baby doll.

The Hospital had provided a large mini-bus to transport the group from Brooklyn to Queens, and when they had arrived an hour before the performance, they had set up their acting space and quietly rehearsed exits and entrances. Some spoke to the assembling audience which consisted mainly of elderly disabled veterans. Many had limbs missing and were in wheelchairs. There were a few younger veterans who were also in wheelchairs and some wives of the elderly men. A number of nurses were interspersed throughout the audience.

Perlstein was busy directing her group, helping set up the scene, reminding them of entrances and exits, and talking to the Hospital's administrative personnel. She was as excited and nervous as the players. This particular perform-

ance had resulted from some research one of the members had done for the play. In order to find out about the United Service Organization (USO) during the Second World War, one of them had gone to the local Veterans' Office and interviewed a staff member there. She then went down to the Hospital and collected stories from the veterans about their experiences with the USO. In return, they asked her to bring the finished show to them, which they were now doing. Some Hospital administrators were viewing the show to see whether they would want a Living History Theatre group started at the Hospital.¹ So there were added pressures on the group to perform well--especially as they were particularly sensitive to how this audience of veterans might react to the topic of their play: war.

At 2:30 p.m., Perlstein welcomed the audience, told them briefly about the play and its creation, and asked them to join her and the players in warm-up exercises: leg and arm stretches, shoulder rotations, voice warm-ups. They enthusiastically joined in as best they could. After five minutes of warming up, the audience clapped loudly in anticipation of the show.

The play was a mixture of improvised scenes, songs, and poetry renderings. Its central theme contrasted the current powerlessness of many people in the current nuclear arms

¹Perlstein started a Living History Theatre Workshop at the Hospital this winter (1984-85).

race with the kind of helplessness many Americans, including American Jews, had to Hitler and his "final solution." The play urged the audience to overcome passivity and actively fight against anything that threatens the extinction of humanity.

BLACKOUT ON THE BOARDWALK in Performance

The performance opens with a series of monologues. The players introduce themselves and talk a little about their background. The male performer introduces himself by singing a song he remembers from his childhood that asks people to help a poor organ grinder in his fight to overcome poverty and live as best he can. The song sets the tone for the rest of the play.

The play itself opens with the ladies sitting on the boardwalk of Brighton Beach and is set in 1983. The ladies are all wearing their bright sunhats and some wear sun glasses. They comment jocularly on the people they see on the beach and compare the kind of beachwear the young people have today to that which they wore when they were young. The man enters and complains to the women that they talk about trivia when there are many more important things to talk about--like the possibility of nuclear war. Instead of idly chatting, they should do something about the nuclear arms race. The ladies comment on their fears about current world problems. Some feel they should try to do something about them; others feel they simply want to enjoy their retirement

and leave solutions to world problems up to the youth of the nations. The discussion reminds one woman of a similar discussion that was held on the boardwalk in 1939, when she and her neighbors discussed the beginning of the Second World War and the conflicting views at that time of the various political factions. This leads to the flashback of Scene Two: "The Coming of War--Hitler/Stalin Pact."

A woman is seated at the same bench on the boardwalk. She is joined by another who tells her of her fears for her family in Lodz, Poland, now that Hitler has invaded the country. She speaks of a letter she had just received from her father who cryptically talks of "dark times for the Jews." She leaves to listen for any news on the radio. Other players come and argue over the Hitler/Stalin Pact and the invasion of Poland, as well as Chamberlain and the other allies who "gave away" countries to Hitler. One says he does not care about what is going on in Europe, he has plenty of his own problems at home. He is lambasted by a woman who says that not one country alone can stop Hitler, that there should be a Second Front before it is too late, and Roosevelt should see that there is one. Others argue for the Monroe Doctrine, that there should be no American involvement in foreign wars. Others say that wars only make the rich richer while the poor get killed. Another does not want to get involved in the war but wonders what kind of responsibility she should have towards her fellow Jews. One cannot believe another war could happen. She is accused of being "Mrs. Chamberlain."

She says she is not, she is a mother, and she did not raise her boy to be a soldier--a statement that leads them into the song, "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier." The mothers then argue over why they should or should not send their sons to war. One woman says she has lost many members of her family in Germany, and she does not want now to lose her only son. She plans to tell him to say he is a homosexual when he is called for service. Another mocks her for this, and they fight.

The fighters exit as voices call "Sneak Attack on Pearl Harbor." This opens the next scene: "December 7, 1941--Where Were You?" In chorus the players, standing in a semi-circle, remind the audience of the events of December 7, 1941, and ask them where they were then. The players step forward singly and tell where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Some were in other countries, some were in America--at work or performing daily chores. One woman recalls that she got her first teaching job because of the war. The men were called up, and women were needed to fill the jobs they had left. Once she had a job, she needed a man, so she joined her friends at a USO dance in hopes of meeting one.

The next scene is a dance scene, "United States Officers Canteen--Brighton 1942." The group dances to "Begin the Beguine" and in between the dancing, the play focuses on various couples. One young couple is saying "Goodbye" to each other before the man leaves to return to the Front. She

promises to be faithful to him and send him parcels and knit him sweaters. Another couple promises to see each other again. The dance ends, and the men and women are reminded to go home separately.

A woman comes forward and introduces the next scene, "Blackout on the Boardwalk--February 1942." She tells of the submarines and troops that came to protect the East Coast and the mandatory blackouts that were instituted along the boardwalk. She asks the audience if they remembered those blackouts. Some did. The woman tells the audience that that particular winter the troops were sent to guard the coast without adequate clothing, and they were freezing. So committees were formed to knit sweaters and bring the boys coffee or candy. No civilians were allowed on the boardwalk, she says, as two women enter to give supplies to the troops. A captain and a sergeant discuss whether any U-boats had been spotted that day. They then clear the boardwalk of people, and a mildly humorous scene follows as they try to move an elderly lady and her dog who is taking his nightly walk. This episode contrasts with the serious tone of the next scene, "When Dreams Turn to Nightmares of Reality."

Perlstein steps in to say that one of the actresses will introduce this scene. The actress tells of how people used to get ready for bed each night and listen to the radio. An actress then sings a few bars from "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree With Anyone Else But Me," as they each sit on a chair placed in a semi-circle on stage. They cover them-

selves with shawls, and a narrator says they are asleep now and dreaming dreams of reality--nightmares. One calls out for her lost mother and father, another hums a Jewish lullaby. Perlstein steps in and says that at that time there was an uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto and that one of the group will read the poet Leivick's description of this. She translates the poem that the woman reads in Yiddish.

As soon as the woman finishes reading the poem, another enters walking in goose-step fashion. She wakes one of the sleeping figures and, in loud German, yells that all Jews are to go with her. The sleeping woman protests but is dragged off. She then comes forward and tells how her family had a guest house in Danzig, Germany, and the Nazis came and took many of her guests away. She and her family tried to escape to an uncle in the United States, but only half of her family succeeded. The rest were exterminated in the Nazi concentration camps.

In Yiddish a performer reads what a Jewish writer said of the Jews--how they picked themselves up and continued to struggle to survive; and how generation after generation, they proclaimed their presence. Another performer sings the song of the Polish Resistance, which echoes these sentiments. The rest join in the chorus as they sleep wrapped in their shawls on their isolated chairs.

A woman steps forward and says that the war went on, and eventually the Americans were victorious. She then reads a letter from her young son who was stationed on a ship

docked outside of Nagasaki. He tells of the horrors he saw when he and his fellow troops walked through the city after it had been bombed. He speaks of the utter devastation: the total destruction of the buildings and the starving, naked children who, in the middle of a freezing winter, begged for food.

A woman steps forward and says the next scene is "On the Boardwalk--Today" and wonders whether humanity has learned anything from the past. The women sit as before and comment on how the American government and many American people knew what Hitler was doing but did nothing about it. Similarly they argue, the world again closes its eyes to a possible future nuclear holocaust. One of the women stops them and asks them if the war was ever over. How could it be when there has been war in different parts of the world ever since. What can be done, she asks, when many powers have a nuclear toy and governments often gladly involve their people in conflicts. She reads a poem she wrote called "Hands" that questions the good and evil within man and wonders which ultimately will prevail. A performer then steps forward and calls for peace and asks the audience to join in singing "Let There Be Peace on Earth, and Let it Begin With Me." They teach the audience the chorus and in conclusion all sing a song for peace.

Perlstein then asks the audience for its reactions to the play. A number of veterans, speaking into a microphone, participate in the public witnessing. Most tell of their war

service, where they served, and the kind of action they were in. Perlstein moves in and out of the audience, getting testimonies from those who cannot leave their wheelchairs. She encourages their stories by sharing part of her life, telling them her father served in the Phillipines. This revelation in turn encourages others to say where they served and others to remember where they were when war was declared. One remembers he was watching a ballgame between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers, and the announcement came that all servicemen had to report back to their bases. He was one of them.

Perlstein then leads her performers into the audience to informally gather testimonies from them. Most audience members want to talk of where they served and what they did. Others comment on how they lived near the boardwalk and are now sad to see so many changes there. The performers share their experiences and they all talk together. One remembers how when she was a girl, the "El" ran on the ground. A veteran tells of how he earned six gold stars. Another tells how he remembers that everything Japanese became taboo during the war.

After coffee and cake, the players slowly pack up their gear and leave. Some veterans are reluctant to stop talking, and the players they are speaking to have difficulty leaving them. Eventually, all the players are back on the mini-bus, feeling good about their performance and wanting to hear what Perlstein thought of their efforts. Perlstein gives them

"after-performance notes," saying that she was pleased with their efforts and that she thought they did an especially good job taking on the absent member's parts and not "getting confused." She asks them to review what they think they learned from the experience.

One performer felt that after this experience, the group could cope with anyone switching roles because she felt they knew them all. Some responded that no one can take anyone's part, and Perlstein clarifies that they are all special and play their parts in a unique way, that no one is replaceable. They are all needed and wanted and important, but that they are an ensemble theatre group and as such, each can play a version of the other's role.

The group accepted that and started discussing some of the stories they had heard from the audience. One man had told one of the performers that he had escaped Czarist Russia and fought in two world wars and that his hearing some of the songs they had sung and that her name, Sonia, had brought many memories back to him. He had thanked her and leant forward from his wheelchair to kiss her. Another veteran kissed her and said, "So much pleasure you gave us." She was slightly confused by this sincere sign of affection because she had expected "a younger element that would contradict her" and she was ready to fight.

As the bus returned them to Brooklyn, the performers explained how the stories they had heard had moved them greatly. They hoped that they would never spend their last

days confined to a wheelchair in an institution, but they were all very glad that they had had an opportunity to bring pleasure to the lives of those who did. As they talked about what did and did not work well with their play, and the stories they had heard, the bus stopped. They had reached the Shorefront YMHA and would return to their homes. They were all very excited and looking forward to their next performance at a local senior center.

The Fourth Annual Living History Festival, Spring 1984,
Hodson Senior Center, Bronx, New York

The day after Shorefront's performance at the VA Hospital, May 31, 1984, The Fourth Annual Living History Festival was presented at Hodson Senior Center in the South Bronx. It was a rainy, gloomy day, but that had not stopped an audience of about two hundred and fifty people--a high school class and seniors from various local centers--from coming to watch the presentation of four plays. The festival began at 10:30 a.m. and ran until 2:30 p.m. In the morning the Bronx YMHA Drama Group, directed by Sally Charnow, performed An Excerpt from Our Lives. Then the performers and the Hodson Seniors had lunch, and in the afternoon a new group of seniors came to watch The Days of the Nickel performed by the Bronxdale Drama Group, directed by Marion Stanton, and Ready for Love, performed by the Hodson Senior Center, directed by Sarah Safford. Susan Perlstein was Master of Ceremonies for the whole event.

The performances were given in a large community room that had a stage at one end. The audience was seated on rows of straight-backed chairs. Most of the audience members were elderly women, and most of these were Black. The director of Hodson Senior Center, George Morfogan, welcomed them all and introduced the program. Perlstein addressed the audience and described the work of ESTA, saying that the plays they were about to see celebrated people as they had lived their lives. She asked the audience to join her in physical warm-ups. They obviously enjoyed this approach, and a sea of arms and legs moved in unison as Perlstein took them through joint and muscle exercises, touch/contact exercises (hugging oneself, blowing kisses to a neighbor), and finally voice warm-ups. By the time the warm-ups were finished, the audience was laughing and relaxed, ready for the performances.

EXCERPTS FROM OUR LIVES in Performance

The first play, Excerpts from Our Lives was introduced by its director, Sally Charnow, who told the audience that the group had been working on the play for a year. The Bronx Drama Group, seven Jewish women and two Black women, left the audience and set up the stage for their opening scene. They then introduced themselves by stepping forward and saying their names.

What followed was a series of scenes which depicted stories from various periods of the players' lives. Most looked at work experiences, but one depicted a memorable

event in a woman's early married life, and one woman spoke of her avocation, singing, and then sang. Most of the eight scenes were introduced by the woman whose story it was. Sometimes Charnow introduced a scene, and the story was then enacted by the group. Some scenes did not require all the members, and those not acting stood to one side.

In the first scene, "Welcome to the Bronx," a lady describes how she and her husband worked hard most of their lives running their delicatessen. The scene they enact depicts a typical busy lunch hour, when the couple made most of their daily money. Two women sit at the crowded counter, take out their own sandwiches and only order coffee. The proprietress gets very angry with them and in between taking many sandwich orders, argues with them and eventually gets them to leave. She then steps forward, welcomes the audience to the Bronx and tells them that this was a true story.

The next scene, "What's in a Name," is introduced by Charnow, who tells us that it takes place in 1920 in Manhattan, New York. A Jewish lady goes for an interview for a job as a stenographer which had been advertised in the local paper. The interview goes exceptionally well until the interviewer learns that the woman has a Jewish name. She then tells the applicant that there are no vacancies; an argument ensues and the boss enters to find out what the commotion is all about. The woman steps out of the scene and tells the audience that her story had a happy ending, because

on the following Monday the boss called her and offered her the job.

The narrator in the third scene, "Sophie's Monologue," tells of her experiences with a couple of men at a dance--how one was so tall and clumsy that she practically fell on her face with him and how another told her she was such a marvelous dancer. This leads into a group dance scene.

The next scene, "The Plumber," takes place in 1931. One of the women is at her first job, taking telephone orders for a plumber. What follows is a humorous play on words as the young innocent blushes to take orders for such things as "screws," "nipples," and "ballcocks." Confused, she calls her mother and is assured that people are not "talking dirty" to her. She is then able to continue with her work. The woman playing the young girl relishes the role, and her farcical gestures keep the audience--old and young--in hysterics.

In the fifth scene, "Maria's Song," one of the two Black women tells of her lifelong interest in singing, especially for her church. She then sings a hymn in a beautiful soprano voice.

The following scene, "My Son, Jerry," depicts an event which took place in 1938. The protagonist of this scene tells the audience that when she had her first and only child in January 1938, her father told her not to take the baby out until March. She thought that this warning had something to do with the Jewish calendar, but as she learned later, it was

because her father did not want the boy to catch a cold. This anecdote greatly amused the audience especially those from the Jewish Senior Centers. The woman then went on to introduce the scene that tells of the first time she ever took her son out. The son's first trip is to his grandmother's, but as he has grown so since his birth he has no clothes that fit him. The grandmother tells the mother how to wrap him in two sweaters and take him to a shop to buy some clothes on her way over to her. The woman obeys and leaves for her mother's, forgetting her son. When she gets to her mother's, the family chats for a while, and the grandmother asks after the baby. The anguished mother remembers what she has done and quickly, without telling her mother, rushes with her sister back to the shop. The boy is still lying in his stroller outside the shop. The woman is greatly relieved. She could never imagine what her father would have said had she lost his grandson!

Charnow introduces the seventh scene, "The Operators," which, she says, represents a jump in time to 1952. Apart from the Black woman whose story it is, the women in the scene adopt fictitious names. The scene represents the Black woman's experiences as one of the first Black telephone operators for a major New York telephone company. The scene shows how she overcame racist remarks and general disbelief that she, a Black, could perform her duties successfully. Once she proves to be better than most workers, her

white colleagues finally accept her and invite her into their group.

Scene Eight, "The Bronx Y," is a humorous scene set in the present that shows how people join the Y for various reasons, but it pokes fun at those people who join only for the trips that are offered. The finale has the whole group join hands and sing to the tune of "Tumbala":

We are the drama group of the Bronx Y.
 We've made a show from our own lives
 And we have laughed,
 And we have cried,
 Some of our memories have been revived.
 We hope you've enjoyed our little show.
 And if you have, please let us know.
 And we have laughed
 And we have cried.
 Some of our memories have been revived.

The cast then moves into the audience and asks them to join in:

Tumbala, tumbala, tumbala, li.
 Tumbala, tumbala, tumbala, li.
 Tumbala, lika, tumbala li,
 (Repeat.)

The audience joins in and sings loudly with the cast.

Perlstein then thanks the players and begins "public witnessing." She asks the audience whether they have memories of their first jobs. Ironically, the high school students from Satellite Academy in the Bronx push their young teacher forward, and she tells of her first teaching job with the students who are currently with her and how frightened she was on her first day. The students relish being spoken of and clap wildly when she finishes. An elderly man then

says the play reminded him of the "old neighborhood" and how it has changed since.

Perlstein has to end this discussion period as it is lunchtime. The audience members return to their buses, and the players and those from Hodson itself have lunch in Hodson's cafeteria. After lunch a new audience is assembled, and George Morfogan again introduces the program by talking a little about Hodson Senior Center, its drama program, and Perlstein, who then again welcomes everyone, talks of ESTA, warms up the audience, and introduces Marion Stanton and the Bronxdale Drama Group.

THE DAYS OF THE NICKEL in Performance

Stanton announces the play, The Days of the Nickel, as "a work in progress" and says they have two key members absent today and that their parts will be played by other members of the cast. The Drama Group consists of five Black women, one Black man, and two Italians, one male, one female.

The play opens with a grandmother sitting on one side of the stage, her daughter on the other. A woman, acting the granddaughter, enters dancing to loud music on the radio. The grandmother tells her to turn the radio down, which the girl does. She then asks her mother for \$5 to go to the movies. The grandmother is astounded that it would cost that much and remembers that it only cost her a nickel. She remembers some of the other things that cost a nickel, and

this, in turn, reminds her of when she came to New York from the South.

The next scene is a flashback to the early 1930s. It takes place on 112th Street and Lenox Avenue in New York, and the grandmother, as a young woman, is walking very slowly, lost amidst the fast-moving New Yorkers. A series of incidents then occur on this New York Street that show the objects one could buy and the activities one could engage in which used to cost only a nickel--buy a paper, for example, or apples or hot dogs, or ice from the iceman; or ride the subway, shine one's shoes, go to a dance. Some of the incidents recall activities which were free--like sleeping on the apartment roofs, or in the park on a hot night, or listening to street music. The group then sings "Put Another Nickel in the Nickelodeon" to the accompaniment of a woman playing a washboard.

The final scene returns to the present, with the young girl still arguing that she needs \$5 for the movies today. Grandfather then enters and when he hears what the girl wants, he says the young do not know how lucky they are. He talks of the things they have now that he did not have as a child. This leads him to reminisce about some of his hard times. He remembers, for example, scrounging up pieces of coal at a local coal yard to make a fire to warm his family and getting yelled at by strangers for doing so. The grandmother feels that children today need to work harder for all they get and help out with household chores. She feels that

she had a hard life, but she and many others survived. She asks her granddaughter to show her the dance the girl was doing earlier, and the group ends the play dancing to rock music, while grandmother sits in her chair tapping her feet and clapping her hands.

Perlstein thanks the players, moves into the audience, microphone in hand, and asks the audience what they remember from the 1920s and 1930s. An elderly man answers:

I remember when I put a 50-pound block of ice on my back, and I remember the quarters we used to put in the meters to get gas, and the pot-bellied stove we used to use for cooking, heat, and everything else. We were poor and we didn't know it. How true that was. We had a sense of value then. We were poor, but we didn't know it. Everything today is "poverty-stricken." You hear people say, "I ain't got this." We didn't have it either. We didn't have no good clothes. We didn't have steaks. But we did have something to eat.

("Amen" from audience.")

We were much more contented living those days. Not that I regret this day. I can appreciate both. But it was good days. And I remember that nickel days. We didn't have too much, but what we had we enjoyed. Thank you.

The audience claps; Perlstein thanks him. She then asks the audience whether they think that increased material benefits have impoverished people in any way. Another elderly Black man responds:

I think that in a lot of ways we have not appreciated what we have. I don't think there are too many youngsters here who can remember what we call . . . er . . . the radio . . . er . . . earphones . . . the crystal set. You put a little needle in this thing, and you put earphones on. It was the only radio we had. Today, all the kids, if you don't have a radio, big as you are, you're impoverished.

(Youngsters in audience groan.)

Really. But those were the good days. And something else. One day you will get where we got. You'll appreciate what you have. Now you don't appreciate it. You take it for granted. But there will come a time when you will appreciate the good times. And I do like to see these young folk here, enjoying what we have. Appreciate your mothers and your grandmothers, because one day, you'll be a mother and a grandmother. Remember that.

Perlstein thanks him, and so the public witnessing continues. One woman remembers her first subway ride and how she paid to get on and thought she had to pay to get off. Another remembers coming to New York from Atlanta, Georgia:

. . . and at that time, there used to be a place down Lenox Avenue where for a quarter you could get all the food you wanted to eat. You could feed your children; if you had a family of five, you could feed them for that quarter. If you didn't want to go there to dine, you could go to the store round the corner, and if you had yourselves \$5, you could buy yourself a whole meal for two weeks, or maybe a month, because I used to get food for a nickel, and I tell you I fed my family, and we had a good time. We wasn't hungry. We didn't have chicken every day. We ate. We had meat--two cents a pound. We was full. And believe me, I only had one child weighing under five pounds. And they did eat, and we had a good time. And we lived in a cold flat. We had to boil water on the stove. We lived in a house, you know. And the bad. We forget about the bad. There wasn't welfare then. They had to do work. There was the W.P.A., and everyone knew who was on the W.P.A. because of the children. The girls had on pink hats, and the boys had on blue. And everybody knows who was who. But you know you didn't starve on the W.P.A. You ate, because they gave you a chicken in a bag. They call it food stamps now. We'd go down and eat their chicken in a bag. We ate. And the whole time, I swear, I had good times and hard times. And thank God I'm here to talk about it.

(Audience cheers and claps.)

Perlstein thanks the speaker and says she wants to talk a little about what they do, in part, in Living History groups:

We collect oral histories, like you are doing. We like to look at the past in terms of the present. What does it mean to us in terms of the present. What do you think are the differences in attitude, in the way things are done, between the days of W.P.A., and the days of Reaganomics.

A number of hands are raised quickly. Perlstein takes the microphone to a Black woman sitting at the back of the hall:

Well the difference is now, in those days, they used to give them a job, dig, dig, digging ditches,--and you had something to do. Now today, they don't do no ditches. They don't do no nothing. They wait for you to go out, and get your nice clean collar job of work, and then they takes the money from you. They don't wanna work, all they do is go on welfare, and they give 'em a check. They don't have to work. That's the difference with today.

Perlstein thanks the woman and tells the audience that the woman said that one big difference between past and present governments was that past governments provided work for people who needed it. A man interrupts her:

One of those things they did, I remember very vividly: 3Cs--Civilian Conservation Corps. I travelled all over the West trying to revitalize the forests of Idaho. That was W.P.A. That was 1932. They took you off the street, they would give you a job. It wasn't a lot of money, but you did get a chance to eat, and live a clean life in the forest, restoring the forest. It was called the Civilian Conservation Corps. I also had the privilege of singing in the opera company. We did it in English. I didn't even know I liked such good music, because I told you, I was a forester. Those were the days. They didn't have a whole lot of money. They didn't have a whole lot of money to budget. Roosevelt said we'll balance the budget later on. Take care of the people's needs. And that is what he done. That's the difference between this administration and F.D.R. He didn't worry about no budget.

(Audience cheers and claps.)

"And now," Perlstein says, "we're ready for love." She introduces Sarah Safford and the Hodson Senior Center Drama Group.

READY FOR LOVE in Performance

Rock music is heard, and eight elderly women, all Black except one, dance onto the stage. They are wearing everyday clothes, but on their heads they wear headdresses--headbands with two antenna-like structures sticking out from behind. They look very funny, and the audience laughs loudly. The audience's laughter is further encouraged as each lady introduces herself by saying her name into a microphone and commenting on how ready for love she feels.

The tone of this introductory scene continues throughout the performance. The women, in a series of short scenes and songs, contrast love and young people in the 1920s to love and young people today. Throughout the play Safford takes on key parts and literally leads her actresses around the stage.

After the initial introductions, the group enacts a party, which from the rock music we know is set in the present. There is dancing and raucous partying. Safford, as the mother of one of the "girls," enters and tries to stop the party. She cannot, and in frustration she turns to the audience and says she does not know what to do with kids today. The rest of the cast then come to the microphone and make a brief comment on what they think of kids today--much to the great delight of the high schoolers in the audience.

Safford then steps forward and says they will take them back to 1919 when kids were supposedly different--or were they, she asks. The scene then portrays a young man walking his girl home and getting home late himself. His godmother is pacing the floor waiting for him. When he creeps into the house, she catches him and an argument ensues. Finally, the godmother threatens to whip the boy with a cherry tree switch.

Safford then introduces Scene Three, which is set at a dance in 1940. A man, played by a woman, has brought his girl to the dance, and when she speaks to another man, "he" gets very angry. They sing their feelings to each other. The "man" sings "I'm in the Mood for Love." The woman answers with "You Didn't Want Me When You Had Me," and the "man" rejoins, "Well Alright, Okay" They then walk apart from each other. Safford calls them back and says to the cast that she thought they were ready for love, not fighting. They all then find partners and together walk around the stage singing "Side by Side."

Safford announces that their production is formally over but that some of their performers would like to sing some songs for the audience. Safford and another lady tap dance to "Bye-Bye-Blackbird," another sings a strong jazz version of "Blue Moon," and a regal lady from the Caribbean sings a gospel song, "Number Nine." The cast, dressed in crepe shirts and hats, join her in the chorus. By this time, the audience is thoroughly enjoying itself and is joining in

the chorus--some singing, others clapping. When it is over, there is a standing ovation.

Perlstein and the president of the Hodson Senior Center thank everyone, and the crowd disperses. There is a lot of hugging and kissing, and everyone congratulates everyone else. The players and audience slowly leave. Many return to their apartments in the Bronx where they live alone. And as some of them expressed as they left, this event had been a joyous occasion for them, a chance to meet people and enjoy the performances given by people their own age.

Living History Theatre as Process:

The Plays and Performances

Living History Theatre is an artistic medium, but is difficult to appraise it according to conventional dramatic critical standards. Such standards usually involve an evaluation of both script and performance that is often based on how well competent (knowledgeable) spectators consider performing artists have interpreted a script. And the script, in turn, is frequently considered to be a self-contained system of formal relationships. Living History Theatre, however, does not easily accommodate such criticism; indeed, Excerpts from Our Lives and Ready for Love are not plays at all but a series of scenes, skits, and tableaux. The productions are often uneven and unsophisticated, and the acting is generally difficult to assess because usually the players

are not acting, but telling their own stories. When they do act, they often lack accomplished acting skills.

Yet to judge Living History Theatre by means of conventional standards of appraisal is to misunderstand its nature. For, by its very essence, Living History Theatre is a continually evolving process, a form of discovery for those involved--a discovery of themselves as individuals with both a unique and a collective history that is analagous to the individual and collective histories of those with whom they share their stories; and a discovery by the audience that it, too, has stories, different yet similar to those presented. Living History Theatre, then, is not a fixed entity. The "script" and the presentation of that "script" are continually being modified, although the core structure of each presentation remains the same from performance to performance. It is, therefore, best considered within the contexts of both its audience and its method of creation. To see how this is so, it is necessary to examine the plays, their methods of production, the audiences' responses to them, and later to see how the plays were created.

At both the production of Blackout on the Boardwalk at the VA Hospital and at the Living History Festival, the atmosphere was, indeed, as a festival. Refreshments were served, and whispering, commenting, responding vocally to the players' performances continued throughout the productions. The performances were, as Bradby and McCormick had noted in defining the different types of people's theatres, like rites

where players and spectators became one--a community sharing similar experiences.¹

The plays themselves had different subjects, yet they all concerned, in part, similar themes: loss of innocence, a struggle against adversity and discrimination of all kinds, and a celebration of the strength that comes from knowing one has survived. Generally, the images of life that these plays present suggest that life was not easy for any of the performers, but in the living of them they have learned certain truths the present generation would do well to recognize.

In Blackout on the Boardwalk, the most sophisticated of the plays, the women look back on the time when they were quite innocent about the nature and implication of the political events of their time and how gradually they came to understand them and how they coped with their personal adversity during this period--in many cases, extreme adversity: Some suffered under the Nazis, some lost their entire families in the Holocaust; others struggled during the Depression; while others watched their only sons go to war. Nevertheless, they had all survived and felt, therefore, qualified to warn the present generation against apathy toward social and political trends, especially in regards to nuclear proliferation. By sharing their wisdom, they were, in fact, achieving a sense, in Erikson's terms, of "ego integrity." Their play represented an assertion of identity: this is

¹Bradby and McCormick, p. 11.

who we were, this is who we are now, and this is what we have learned.

There was a similar truth expressed in Excerpts from Our Lives. Many of the skits concerned the loss of innocence that comes during adolescence and early adulthood: dealing with clumsy partners on first dates, coping with sexual terms on a first job, and not knowing how to take care of one's first child. Yet the implications of a number of the scenes suggested more political themes involving racial and sexual discrimination--one woman is nearly not hired for a job she is clearly qualified for because she is Jewish; another, as one of the first Blacks at her company, has to contend with prejudice. In another scene, a woman reveals how women had to be subservient to the men in their life. If, for example, their father told them to keep their baby in the house for three months, then that is what they did--no arguments, no discussion. Nevertheless, the scenes show how the women managed and how their children survived and how now they find new activities, new roles, to occupy them. They had one identity, then another, and now another. In their ordinariness, the scenes strike a chord of universality.

The Days of the Nickel suggests simply a comparison between times present and times past in terms of the value of money and the quality of life. Yet it, too, involves themes similar to the previous two plays. A woman tells of her first journey to New York. She came "green" from the rural South to seek better living conditions in the City. A series

of experiences that follow initiate her into a different life, but a life no less difficult than her former one. Nevertheless, despite continued economic hardships and racial injustices, she survived and is proud she has survived. In retrospect, the little things in life--not material things--were important: like being able to sleep out on the roof of her apartment or in the City's parks on a hot summer's night. The wisdom she wishes to share with the present generation is that as a survivor she knows that one should try to enjoy what one has before it is gone.

In Ready for Love, the collection of skits, tableaux, and songs echo a similar view of life to that presented in The Days of the Nickel. The images indicate what it was like to grow up Black in the South during the 1930s and relocate, as many Blacks did, to urban New York to find work. Their courting days and early sexual encounters were experienced during times of great economic depression and racial discrimination. Even so, they say, they made the best of what they had: they created their own fun and although the young may consider them "old fashioned" and "out of touch," the little rebellions they had with their parents were, in many ways, no different from the conflicts young people today presently have with their parents. And the joy in love they experienced as youths has not diminished, with age, only changed in nature--and opportunity.

While the themes are generally the same, the actual experiences are different--not only individually but collec-

tively, for collectively the experiences are the specific experiences of a particular culture. Blackout on the Boardwalk and Excerpts from Our Lives represent primarily the Jewish experience; whereas The Days of the Nickel and Ready for Love primarily represent the Black experience. Two different cultures, but as outsiders to mainstream American culture, they share much in common. It is, perhaps, for this reason that even though the predominantly Jewish plays were better received by the Jewish members of the audience and the predominantly Black plays by the Blacks in the audience, they were nevertheless responded to on different levels by all members of the audience. In part, this result occurred because of the content of the plays, but, in part, because of their structure and presentation. In other words, because of the nature of the interaction between performers, performance, and spectators.

The structure of each of the plays varies somewhat. Except for Excerpts from Our Lives which starts off in the past and proceeds to the present, the others begin in the present, move to the past, and return to the present. This structure best facilitates the sharing of a "wisdom" because it connects the individual's present to his/her past and suggests intimations for the future. In this way, such a structure parallels the development of "ego integrity." The participants can evaluate their lives and accomplishments and confirm to a certain degree the significance of what they have done and experienced. By beginning the plays in the

present, they indicate who they are now; then by moving to the past, they evaluate what they have done, and then the shift to the present again allows them to suggest the significance of their experiences for present and future generations

The style of production was similar for all the plays in that they used no scenery, no make-up, and few costumes or props. Their sets consisted of a table and a few chairs as needed. Their degree of sophistication, however, varied. Blackout on the Boardwalk was the most sophisticated in that it was presented via different dramatic techniques and had a developed plot. In many ways it was reminiscent of the Living Newspaper: it involved a topical concern--the nuclear freeze--and an historical event--the Second World War. It was developed from reminiscences, letters, official documents, poetry, and songs, and a series of narrators connected the selections, which were presented through a variety of techniques such as pantomime, movement, and improvisation, which juxtaposed serious with comic scenes.

In some parts of the play, the emphasis was too literary. The introductory monologues were overly long in proportion to the rest of the play, as were some of the discussions and poetry readings--especially as some of the readings were in Yiddish and then were translated into English. Yet there was a genuine attempt to present the complex material dramatically and there were moments of true poignancy--when the Nazis removed the Jews from the guest house, for example,

and when the mother reads her letter from her son who was at Nagasaki.

Excerpts from Our Lives did not have as complex a structure as Blackout on the Boardwalk and neither was it presented via as wide a range of dramatic techniques. The short, improvised scenes moved, as I have said, from the past gradually to the present. Most of the scenes involved direct role-playing. There was no use of letters or historical documents of any kind. There was a little music--a brief dance sequence, a song, and a sung finale. Some scenes were better developed than others. Pauline's scene, which concerned leaving her son at the store was well-developed, as was Ester's scene about her job interview. The lunch counter scene, however, needed more development, and the lead-in to the initial dance sequence was unclear.

The Days of the Nickel was, in some ways, more sophisticated than Excerpts from Our Lives; in others, less. The presentation was given in three scenes: the first in the kitchen of the grandmother's apartment, the second on a New York City street, and the third back in the kitchen. This is a more complex structure than a series of loosely connected scenes. Yet there was only one method of presentation used--improvisation, specifically role-playing. The only music was from a tape-recorder. There was no singing, although there was a little dancing at the end as the grandmother and granddaughter join together in a dance. There was no use of poetry or other literary devices such as letters or documents

of any kind. In this sense, it was a much less varied production than the others.

Ready for Love was the least developed of all the presentations. The skits and tableaux were brief. Only one skit was developed in any way--the scene where the young man returns home late from the dance. The others were sustained by Safford in the role of an authority figure against whom the players reacted. Most of the production consisted of a series of songs and dances with everyone seeming to have a good deal of fun being dressed in funny hats and scarves and telling the audience how ready they were for love.

From a conventional point of view, then, these productions were, at best, generally unsophisticated; and yet they were often, at times, for the audience, powerful and moving. Wherein lies their power? Primarily, it lies in the "characters" themselves. It is in the presentation of character and story and the responses to those characters and stories that Living History Theatre is unique and different from conventional theatre. In conventional theatre the characters in plays are agents of the dramatist. In Living History Theatre the characters, with a few exceptions, play themselves. They are their own story-tellers. They may not be playing themselves specifically in every scene--indeed, often are not--but they are enacting aspects of experience that they have collectively experienced. The stories they present have evolved from their own life stories, and as such we are witness to aspects of history not previously told. So

while the acting may not be terribly adept at times, the lack of skill is not especially detrimental to the scenes because there is a genuine, specific truth to each scene that rings true despite the acting. What the "characters" are saying and the fact that they are saying it seems more important than how they are saying it, although certain cultures tend to respond better to more oral presentations (singing, dancing, straight storytelling), while others respond better to more literary presentations (those that include poetry and letter reading, for example).

In part, the reason for the positive responses to what might appear by conventional standards to be bad plays acted poorly lies in the nature of Living History Theatre as art. It is an art that is not simply located in the object, as current structuralist criticism would have us believe, but in the interaction between performer, performance, and spectator. In Living History Theatre a group of performers speak to a group of spectators about their life histories. There are few barriers to that direct interaction. Indeed, any barriers that might exist are minimized, in part, by the production's ritual opening where the audience is asked to be part of the performance and engage in some movement exercises. The performance itself is only partly verbal, and the words are only part of what is communicated, because the words are interdependent with their method of presentation and the non-verbal aspects of their performance. The whole is presented to a group of spectators who, for the most

part, have experienced similar life situations at similar times. Black groups of seniors tend primarily to perform for other Blacks, and Jewish groups for other Jews, and so on. So they are of the same culture and peer-group. And given the modes of presentation of Living History Theatre--minimalist productions--the artifice of the theatrical event is not so sophisticated as to alienate the audience. Instead, emblems and symbols are used to represent certain objects or ideas: a cane for age, a branch of a tree for a bush, and so on. And these emblems and symbols are ones easily recognized by the audience. There is very little, therefore, to distance the audience from the emotional impact of the stories being shared. In some ways, it is more akin to tribal theatre than Western theatre: the audience participates throughout the performance, either by calling out responses or joining in the singing and dancing and sharing their own similar stories.¹

Those who feel the art object, then, is a self-contained entity separate from its extrinsic contexts will have difficulty seeing this form of theatre as an artistic medium. The script is not easily located. There is a physical artifact, a scenario, but this scenario, while its basic structure remains the same, changes from performance to

¹Of course, much of the theatre of the 1960s and early 1970s (like the Living Theatre and Richard Schechner's Environmental Theatre) experimented with this form, and perhaps it is not coincidental that Perlstein, Charnow, Stanton, and Safford, who presently use this form, were trained in theatre and dance during the 1960s and 1970s, and remain greatly influenced by it.

performance depending on who is present to act and the composition of the audience. Different actors/actresses improvise in different ways. Given a set situation, they will draw on different personal and cultural experiences in order to present that situation, and they will each have different verbal resources to bring to the roles they are playing. The actual dialogue of a scene will, therefore, change according to who is playing the part. In addition, the audience from performance to performance consists of different individuals, and as the audience members' testimonies are part of the whole theatrical event of Living History Theatre, the kinds of stories they share will influence that event. On some occasions audience members are more willing than on other occasions to share their experiences, so the actual length of the whole performance varies according to how many people from the audience decide to step forward and bear witness. Thus, the whole Living History Theatre event will vary from performance to performance.

There is also no identifiable controlling artist in a Living History play as there is, say, in Peter Weiss's The Investigation or Donald Freed's The Inquest. Living History plays are developed collectively. Each group member contributes some aspect of his/her experience for the play's content, and the form of the play is determined by the group as a whole. The director may suggest certain structures for the play, but the director and group together finally decide

which structure is best--usually such decisions are made by the group recognizing what actually plays the best. Nevertheless, the plays are not mere recitations of different things or vehicles for someone to simply get up and read an historical document or wallow in nostalgia. There is some design, and that design is perceived by a group of spectators who have a common understanding of the experiences presented and can authenticate them. The seeming banality, at times, of the presentation, therefore, is minimized because the audience is sympathetic to both the presentations and their sub-texts. As a result, an interaction takes place between performer and spectator that is an integral part of the process of Living History Theatre. For those involved it is an aesthetic experience. The intensity and degree of that experience varies from individual to individual and will depend on the degree to which performers can connect with the performance--whether they can recall a similar experience to that being presented, or whether the performance reminds them of some analagous experience of their own, or whether the performance teaches them something or simply delights them.

The integrity of the aesthetic experience, therefore, is achieved through the process of the production: the engaging of the audience before the production, the production that connects to the audience in some way, the responses of the audience to the performance, and the response, in turn, of the performers to the audience's responses. The "plays" themselves, as scripts, therefore, are of lesser

importance than the performance, although (especially in Blackout on the Boardwalk and similar productions) the content of the script has an undeniable social importance.

CHAPTER SIX

LIVING HISTORY THEATRE: THE PROCESS OF CREATION

To be considered as an artistic medium, Living History Theatre must be viewed within the contexts of its audience and its method of creation. As we have seen, the response of the audience to a Living History Theatre presentation is an integral part of the presentation's development: the audience interacts with the performers, authenticates their experience, shares stories of its own, and, based on the interaction, the performers modify their future performances.

The process of creating Living History Theatre, then, is a continuous one. The product, the presentations, is only a part of this process. The actual creation of a play is as significant as its presentation, for the participants are engaged in a creative act that is at once aesthetic, educational, and, at times, therapeutic. Involvement in a Living History Theatre project is, as we have said, a discovery of self and of self in relation to larger social, historical, and political contexts. Such a discovery takes time to develop, and then is only realized to varying degrees.

The four groups and presentations under discussion were all at different stages of development when the plays were performed. The Shorefront production was the most developed,

then the Bronx Y's, then Brookdale's, and lastly Hodson's. As groups, some were more stable and cohesive than others; and, as artists, some individuals were more accomplished than others. Perlstein believes that it takes a good three years to develop a stable, well-functioning Living History Theatre group that can present sophisticated plays.¹ She also emphasizes that each group and director will have its and his/her own identity and special set of values, beliefs, styles, and purposes.² The nature of the group will depend on the participants and the director involved. Yet all groups and directors tend to go through similar stages of development as they involve themselves in the process of discovery that is Living History Theatre. In the following four case studies, we can see how the character of each group is very different, how each is at a different stage of development, and how each arrived at that particular stage. Yet we can also see how there are similarities among the groups. The similarities lie in the process each group engages in. Each goes through similar stages at similar points in their development.

The Shorefront Drama Group

The Drama Group of the Shorefront YM-YWHA Senior Center meets every week in a small community room of the large facility. The group has been working together since 1981 under

¹Interview with Susan Perlstein, Washington, D.C., 9 November 1984.

²Ibid.

the direction of Susan Perlstein, and for the last two years they have been developing Blackout on the Boardwalk.

The Center attracts mainly Jewish clientele from the Brighton Beach area of Brooklyn, an area full of little shops that sell knishes, bagels, and other Jewish specialty foods. Many of the Jews are East Europeans who emigrated, during the 1930s and 1940s to the United States to escape fascism and poverty. The rest are mostly first generation American Jews. There are a few Blacks, and most of the members of the Center are women.

Perlstein began teaching a Living History Theatre group at the Center in 1981 under the auspices of the Brookdale Center on Aging. The class was initially offered as an oral history class, but later developed into a Living History Theatre workshop. At first, therefore, the group worked on interviewing skills, then they started developing theatre skills and participated in theatre games and improvisations. Generally, they learned to work together theatrically. Their first Living History play was entitled A Better Life and examined what it was like for many of them to emigrate to the United States.

When Perlstein first started at Shorefront, she was still working with the Hodson Group, so she had already had a good deal of experience developing Living History plays. In some ways, however, Perlstein had more in common with the Shorefront Group because her ethnic roots were similar. She, too, was Jewish and grew up in Brooklyn. There were many

bonds that connected group and leader, therefore, and she could easily empathize with their cultural priorities and preoccupations. Whereas most of the group was working class, however, Perlstein was middle class. Born in 1942, she had gone to Barnard College and Columbia University, where she received a B.A. and M.A. respectively. For a while she was a professional dancer, dancing at the Henry Street Playhouse and for Woman's Response, a dance collaborative and school. At the same time, she started to teach dance classes at local community colleges and dance schools. Eventually, in 1979, she founded ESTA¹ and has since become increasingly involved with the administrative aspects of developing the organization, although she also teaches part time at the Brookdale Center on Aging in the Institute of Humanites, Arts and Aging at Hunter College's School of Social Work.

The Shorefront Drama Group initially consisted of eleven members, but by 1984 the number had dropped to eight. One lady had died, and two had moved on to other activities. Of the remaining eight, four were from Eastern Europe, three were first generation American Jews, and one was from South America. The kind of cultural group to which they each belonged greatly influenced the development of their plays.

The idea for their second Living History play, Blackout on the Boardwalk, evolved from the anti-nuclear rally in Central Park, New York, on June 12, 1982. A number of the

¹For a discussion of how Perlstein founded ESTA see pp. 86-94 above.

group members had taken part in the rally, and they discussed their experiences at a drama meeting. All the members voiced their fears about nuclear war, and some expressed their concern over the passivity of many to the possible consequences of a nuclear conflict. This passivity reminded others of a similar complacency many in the 1930s exhibited towards Hitler and his Nazi party. Perlstein suggested that this could be the subject of their play. They could re-examine their responses to the Holocaust within the framework of their responses to a possible nuclear holocaust.

They started to collect stories from the group concerning their memories of World War II. Perlstein used various techniques to elicit response. Sometimes the group members would conduct in-depth interviews with each other. Sometimes they would simply tell their stories and then improvise them and discuss the improvisations. Often role reversal and other distancing techniques were used to generate discussion and develop detailed understanding of the situations and the participants' attitudes towards them. (For example, Perlstein often had the protagonist play a substitute role or a role very different from his or her own. Or she used mirroring or non-verbal exercises.)

What emerged as the group members told their stories was a sharp distinction between the attitudes of the East Europeans and the first generation Americans to Hitler and the War. In her article, "Breaking the Silence," Perlstein outlines these attitudes. The East Europeans had often

experienced great suffering in Europe. Many had left families behind, and a number of those families had been exterminated in the concentration camps. Generally, this group was more intellectual, literary, and politically aware. They could not understand, at the time, why the Americans were so slow to get involved in the War, and they especially could not understand the attitude of American Jews who seemed to ignore their brethren's plight. Three of these East Europeans, Sadie, Rachel, and Ira, were particularly vocal and angry about American non-involvement. Sadie had come to America in 1923 from Poland. She became a member of the Workman's Circle and fought hard for America's opening of a Second Front. She felt that if the United States had gotten involved sooner, there might have been fewer Jews murdered. Her talking of these matters stimulated discussion about anti-Semitic feelings at that time: that many people blamed their ill-luck on Jews who became everyone's scapegoat.¹

Rachel also came from Poland. She was sent by her family to make a better life for herself in America. During the thirties, she received ominous letters from her father about life in Poland. After the Germans occupied her country, Rachel received a letter from her father saying goodbye and talking of "dark times for the Jews." This was the last Rachel heard from her father. His letter is now in the

¹Susan Perlstein, "Breaking the Silence," New York, 1983. (Mimeographed.)

Memorial Museum in Israel.¹ Her whole family was exterminated, and her nightmares since then have concerned her survival and her lost family. She could not understand why she was the one to survive. Her anger was consequently directed towards herself as well as towards the world.

Another vocal East European was the Israeli, Ira. He had served with the British Intelligence during the War and had fought ardently for a Zionist state. His attitude was somewhat cynical. He could not believe that many people were willing to help Jews. They had other motives, he felt, for entering the War.

The other East European, Sarah, was quiet during the initial discussion periods, but as the talk and improvisations continued, she eventually revealed that her family had owned a guest house in Danzig, Germany, and that one day the Nazis had come and taken away their Jewish guests. Sarah's family knew it was simply a matter of time before they, too, would be taken. They had an uncle in New York, and they tried to secure American visas through him. Unfortunately, only some of her father's family were able to escape; the rest were exterminated in the concentration camps.

The first generation Americans had generally felt confused by what was going on in Europe. They read The Daily Forward and other Jewish newspapers, and some felt the news was exaggerated; others did not know what to believe. Most were willing to let Roosevelt and the government decide what

¹Ibid., p. 9.

was best, especially as they were suffering the severe hardships of a Depression. Whether they were going to eat and work was more important to them than a foreign war which they could not imagine entering.

As each faction told its stories, they came, Perlstein says, to better understand each other and were able to assimilate the other's experiences.¹ Many had expressed thoughts and feelings they had kept locked away inside them for many years. The talk and the drama was a freeing experience for them.

Once the stories had been collected, they had to find a framework for telling them. The Boardwalk seemed an ideal setting, as they all remembered how they used to sit on the seats, talk to their friends, and look out to sea, just as they still do. The Boardwalk had also taken on a special significance during the War, as Ethel comments:

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, America was at war. In the terrible, terrible winter of 1942 a shipment of Army soldiers were sent from the South to guard the Atlantic coastline so that no foreign boats could attack our shore. The soldiers attended the artillery. Cannons were aimed at the sea. No one was permitted on the Boardwalk; there was a blackout on the Boardwalk. It was a bitter winter. The poor boys were freezing. They didn't have the proper winter clothing. Committees were formed to help the soldiers. My neighbors and I organized the Brighton Committee. We collected money and brought coffee, cigarettes, and hot chocolate² to the boys. We were the only civilians permitted.

¹Ibid., p. 5.

²Ibid., pp. 8-9.

The "blackout on the Boardwalk" would provide the metaphor they needed.

They decided to have the beginning and the end of the play depict present concerns of nuclear war and the middle part to be a series of flashbacks to represent the years from 1939-45. The major problem was in trying to represent the views of such diverse factions. Perlstein's technique for achieving a solution was to suggest various dramatic possibilities and let the group decide which was best. Often they would enact the alternatives and see which was the most appropriate. Collectively, they would reach an agreement.

Great sensitivity was needed in handling the extremely painful experiences some of the participants had shared. Perlstein decided to use a distancing technique to present this material. If some of the women sat on chairs wrapped in shawls as if asleep, the material could be presented as nightmares of reality. For one woman, Sarah, this was not distancing enough, and Perlstein says Sarah informed her that she would have to leave the group. Her experiences were still too painful for her to enact. Perlstein asked Sarah if she would allow the group to tell her story. Sarah agreed, and Ethel, an American-born Jew, took her part:

No one knew German as well as Sarah, so in spite of her misgivings she offered to play the SS officer. With incredible strength, Sarah burst forward in goosesteps across the stage to the guest house and knocked on the door. With vengeance she yelled, "In the name of the Führer, open." She symbolically beat the guest (a chair) and dragged it off the stage, cursing in German, "Dirty Jew, swine."

Silence--fear--surprise. Sarah shocked herself as she relived those terrifying times.¹

From thenceforward, Sarah became a different person. In expressing her anger and frustration in the safe confines of the drama, she was able finally to come to terms with her experiences. And Ethel, who at the time of the War had been more concerned with her family's struggle to keep their bakery business going than thinking about her fellow Jews in Europe, had a greater empathy for the plight of those who had suffered in Europe. In the same way, Rachel, who had dreamed every day of her parents lost in the camps, was able to call out for them in the nightmare scenes of the play. Each came to a new understanding of themselves and each other.

The sharing and enacting of these painful life experiences had been a potentially dangerous situation. Perlstein, however, had the skill and sensitivity necessary to confront the situation and was able to use dramatic techniques to distance the explosive material. Collectively, she and her group put the stories within a dramatic framework and then rehearsed the emerging play as one would any other.

As the rehearsals and the discussions progressed, the participants brought in photos of their families, letters, newspaper clippings, and other memorabilia. They also sang songs they remembered from the past. Some of the documents and songs were included in their play.

¹Ibid., p. 11.

By the end of their first year of working on the play, they had a production which they were able to present to audiences. They found, however, that in performance the play was too serious for many people. They decided that during the following season they would work on a new scene which would lighten the play a little.

During the summer between their two seasons, Rachel died, and two other members left the group. When the group met again for their 1983-84 season, they were greatly saddened by Rachel's death. They decided, therefore, to dedicate their play to her. They also agreed to include a new scene--one which would be a little less intense than the others and which would speak more to the experiences of the Americans.

Someone suggested enacting a USO scene as a number of them had been active in that organization. All agreed. The first week they shared the stories of what they remembered about the USO--the services the organization offered, like encouraging the women to knit sweaters for the soldiers or arranging for women to take coffee and biscuits to the guards on the boardwalk. Then one woman said she remembered going to USO dances and meeting a boyfriend there. They decided to put their stories within the framework of a USO dance.

Before their next meeting, they interviewed their friends about their USO experiences. During her interviews, one woman discovered that her interviewee had been a hostess at USO dances. Another woman went to the VA Office in

Brighton Beach, talked with some of the staff there about what happened at USO dances, and brought back to the group a book, The Hostess With the Mostest, which described the duties of a USO hostess. She then went to the VA Hospital and collected stories from veterans about their memories of the USO. Other people went to the library and collected newspaper clippings from the period. A number of the group have poor eyesight, so it depended on how well each could read as to which particular approach they took. Those with poor eyesight elected to interview relatives, friends, and neighbors, so that their primary means of investigation, therefore, was oral history.

In order to investigate in this manner, Perlstein had taught them the techniques of interviewing prior to teaching them theatre skills. She reinforced these skills at this point in the development of their play by returning to some of their earlier exercises. Her approach was to tell the participants to act as if they were investigative news reporters. She had them improvise situations where they had to glean information from someone. Each pair would then act out their interview, and the group would critique them. By the time they conducted their interviews "for real," they had had much practice mastering the techniques. For this particular group, which Perlstein said was not an intellectual group, oral history techniques were especially suitable.¹

¹Interview with Susan Perlstein, Brooklyn, New York, 29 February 1984.

The second week of developing this scene involved the group sharing the information they had gathered and discussing and singing some of the songs from the period. Having decided to put the scene in the context of a USO dance and choosing "Begin the Beguine" as the music, they had to decide which stories to dramatize and how to put them together.

Collectively, they decided which stories best typified the experience of the USO and the dances. They eventually agreed that from their interviews most people remembered such experiences as dancing with men who were about to go to the Front, the organizers being very strict about any overt sexuality, and committees of women knitting sweaters and making up parcels.

At this point the group began to divorce itself from the material. Perlstein helped them choose the appropriate characters they needed for the stories they had selected. Some stories had to be merged with others. They then decided how to put the stories into a scene, and the next few weeks they rehearsed each segment of the scene individually until finally they had a series of run-throughs concentrating especially on switching the focus from one couple or group to another. Eventually they included the new scene in their play.

While Perlstein would argue that her group collectively develops scenes like the USO scene, her personal direction tends to be specific, and often she alone develops the scenes. She encourages the members of the group to talk with

each other and offer comments on the work. But finally it is she who shapes the scenes. She may do so not by telling her group what to do or where to move or how to say something, but by asking questions: "Should you move here or there? Why? Wouldn't it be better if?" Generally, she is very supportive of her group. She praises them for every accomplishment, however minor, and her criticisms are always kind. Consequently, her group responds to her. They are obviously very fond of her, and her continued energy and enthusiasm help foster similar qualities in them. Perlstein's belief in their ability to perform and to offer something to an audience encourages the group to believe in itself. This confidence was especially apparent, when shortly after they had developed the USO scene, they were scheduled to videotape their play at a local high school.

Some students at the school were to tape the show. Most of the students were Black, and the group wondered how they would respond to a group of elderly Jews who were presenting a play about war. They were also hesitant and concerned about being taped. Most of them had never seen themselves on film before. Perlstein had to assure them continually that all would go well, and eventually they were excited by the prospect.

The taping was a long and arduous task, but the group performed well and all were thrilled to see themselves on video. The Black high school students responded with great enthusiasm, much as those high schoolers present at the 1984

Living History Festival had. For many of the drama group members (some in their early eighties), seeing themselves on tape was a very moving experience. Mostly they commented on how they looked and how they did not think they looked that old. Yet they were all thrilled with their accomplishments, and when New York's Channel 2 News came to tape a segment on them and their play, their belief in themselves and in Perlstein had been greatly enhanced.¹

These positive experiences had happened to them shortly before they performed, as requested, as the VA Hospital in Queens. They had a fair degree of confidence, therefore, that their play worked. After their performance, however, they voiced some concerns over some aspects of it. They thought the introductions were too long and wondered how they could alter them. Various possibilities were suggested, and they planned to try some of them out.

Their play, then, is still in the process of evolution. After each performance, they modify some aspect. What eventually happens to the play will depend on how much more time they decide to spend on it. Each past modification has made a great improvement; therefore, they may decide to develop it for another year.

The Bronx Drama Group

The Drama Group of the Bronx YM-YWHA Senior Center meets once a week in a large building on the Grand Concourse

¹Interview with Patti Paley, Manhattan, New York, 17 May 1984.

by McClellan Street in the South Bronx. Drama is one of many activities provided for the neighborhood's elderly Jews, most of whom are first generation Americans or Eastern Europeans; and many of these are women who now live alone in this area which has become, over the years, predominantly Hispanic.

The drama group started in 1982. Its director, Sally Charnow, had been conducting dance classes at the Center, and Susan Perlstein suggested she start a drama group. Charnow was able to recruit members from her dance classes, and the first piece they worked on was an adaptation of The Sisters, a one-act play by I. L. Peretz about life in an East European shtetle (village) in the early twentieth century. They had such a good response to this play that when Charnow suggested they try a Living History play, they were eager to do so.¹

Charnow's interest in developing Living History plays started with her dance work in nursing homes. She found she really liked to hear people tell their stories. At first, she was not interested in why they liked to tell stories. She simply was interested in the tales: "Erikson's life stages came much, much later. What I was noticing was that people really wanted to tell me, and each other about their lives."² As she listened to their stories, she became increasingly fascinated by the history they told about

¹Interview with Sally Charnow, Bronx, New York, 26 January 1984.

²Interview with Sally Charnow, Brooklyn, New York, 30 May 1984.

people who are traditionally unheard: elderly working class women. As a politically aware person, Charnow was determined to make more such voices public.

Such determination has been characteristic of Charnow's life. She was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1955. Her family moved to Washington, D.C., and she spent most of her early life there. When she was five, her mother sent her to creative dance classes. By the time she was twelve, she was dancing professionally. She graduated from high school at seventeen and went to Europe. She lived mostly in Paris where she danced professionally. After Paris she moved to New York and studied dance, then went to Israel and started a small dance company.

After eighteen months in Israel, she came back to New York, worked as a free-lance dancer, and eventually received her B.A. from New York University. In 1977 she founded, with fellow soloist Martha Glenn, Women on the Move Dance Theatre. The two have since performed dances extensively throughout the United States and Europe. Charnow also ran theatre classes for Project SPEAR and in 1981 helped create and develop ESTA with Perlstein. Her duties included teaching classes and helping to organize ESTA's administration. During 1983 and 1984 she also performed as a puppeteer with the Bread and Puppet Theater. Recently she started dancing with Julie Simpson, and the two were awarded a National Endowment of the Arts Award to develop a modern dance theatre piece to tour England and Israel.

Charnow's background, then, is dance-theatre, and her workshops reflect this orientation. The structure of her workshops is the same as Perlstein's--physical warm-ups, improvisations, rehearsal or storytelling, closing ritual. She puts a great deal of emphasis, however, on the physical aspects of her class:

I start everything with a movement base, because I feel it really helps people to get close to one another. I spend a lot of workshops doing movement and vocalizing. I think there are so many levels besides the verbal, and I think that people get so worked into the verbal that they are afraid of other things. In my groups, we have been able to communicate and share because of working physically.¹

For Charnow, the development of a Living History group is analagous to movement:

They come in feeling separate, they get connected, and closer together, and then they can separate, feel separate, and then they can come together and feel connected. And I think that that's really important for all people: to feel separate and to feel close. To be able to have both these feelings at the same time.²

As a director, Charnow firmly guides her members in their artistic choices. She selects the stories they are to dramatize and then directs the scene in as controlled a manner as possible.³ This process is not always an easy task at the Bronx Y. The group meets in a room designated as the library which actually functions as a community room, and

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³See pp. 181-191 below.

people often interrupt the workshops. Also, three particular group members are extremely vocal and special attention was devoted to getting them to learn to listen to each other. So Charnow has to exercise great control as a leader in order to maintain a working atmosphere. Often the group lapses into chaos as the participants all try to talk at once--either offering stories, or arguing a point. With great skill, however, Charnow is able to bring them back to focus. As a director with this particular group, therefore, she has at this stage in its development, to be clear, guiding it specifically at each step in the creation of their play.

Excerpts from Our Lives, as a first Living History play for this group, was created from some of the initial stories they had told each other during their earlier improvisational work when Charnow had initiated such exercises as bringing in photographs to share with the group or telling stories around themes like "big geographic moves you've made in your life," or "what happened to you in 1925?" or "what were your first jobs?" The play was developed in two major stages. Most of the scenes were created in the fall of 1983, but two parts--"Maria's Song" and "The Operators"--were added during the spring of 1984.

As the group shared stories and improvised some of them, Charnow wrote down those she thought had the most dramatic potential. She then selected, in the first phase of the play creation, six stories to develop. Most had to do with early work experiences. Each week the participants worked on

a story until they had a scene they felt they could share with others. Gradually, scene by scene, they put their play together, and it reflected the experiences of the women encountering some of their early conflicts as young adults. Some conflicts involved sexual and racial discrimination, some simply recalled moments of innocence, and still others shared aspects of daily routines.

As a group, the women, aged between sixty-two and eighty-two years, had many common bonds, so all could relate to the stories being dramatized. Most of the women in the group of nine were Jewish. Two were Black. Of the Jews, one was from Russia, the others were second- and third-generation Americans. Of the Blacks, one was from Jamaica, and the other from the South. So all had experienced discrimination and hardship in some form. The scenes only superficially touched on discrimination, but they did address the issues and reveal some important elements of the women's lives.

All the women have lived in the South Bronx most of their lives. The Black women had moved there to find a better life for themselves and their families; Ester had moved there as a young girl after she and her family had experienced great suffering fleeing the Russian pogroms of the early twentieth century. Most, then, had lived through the Depression while living in the Bronx, and their memories of their early adulthood are against a background of witnessing their parents enduring great hardships in order to survive and provide for their families as Ester's father did:

My father had very little education. By the age of nine he was an orphan. But he had so much native intelligence. Uneducated, but a lot of ingenuity, a lot of goodness, in him. And when we came here, he worked in the International Building. He was working there about four months, and they went on strike. We were very poor and we had to eat, so my father hid under the dining room table, and he took home work from the factory. He sat under the table, and he finished the work, and when the goons--at that time it was the men that they had to beat you up if you were on strike, they beat up on the strikers that did work--when they came my mother took a bedspread, and put it over the dining room table, and we children--she put food on the table--and we sat around. When they asked where's my father, my mother said, he didn't come home from the synagogue yet. He was under the table finishing, because it was Thursday. On Friday she had to go to the shop for food.¹

Not to work, then, meant not to eat; so all of the women worked early in their lives. They had little formal schooling, not because they were disinterested in education, but because they could not afford it. Edna's story is representative:

We went to Coney Island on Sunday, and my mother died on Wednesday, and the funeral was on Thursday. And the street was black with people because everyone knew her. I was sixteen at the time, and thinking about it now--when she was buried, and we were going home--I says to myself how could the world go on like this? It was like nothing happened, but to me my whole world was destroyed. And the class was very nice--from school--they sent a beautiful, what do you call it . . . with fruits and everything else . . . to my home. And naturally I had to go back to school. The dean called me in. She says to me, "Tell me, what are you gonna do now?" I says, "What is there for me to do? After all someone has to take care of the house." All my sisters were married, the other two. My brother was still single, but he was still, you know, in the household. So I said, "I have to take care of the house." So she says to me, "No you don't." She

¹Interview with Ester Heller, Bronx, New York, 1 February 1984.

says, "When you graduate," she says, "I want you to go out and find yourself a job and think of yourself, because you know what's gonna happen to you? You're gonna take care of everyone else and you're gonna be left behind. They'll live their lives, but you are the one who's gonna suffer." Well, naturally, I listened to her. I remember her name even to this day. She said, "Listen to me and do as I tell you." I says, "Well, I'll try." But did I do it? No. I felt sorry for my dad. I helped my dad in the market.¹

Eventually Edna, as did the rest of the women, married, and had children. Many of the women returned to work as soon as they were able and held jobs such as waitress, stenographer, insurance clerk, telephone operator, and shop clerk. Two eventually owned their own businesses--Ester had a men's clothing store; Edna, a delicatessen. Most kept these jobs until they retired.

There is much pain and joy in these women's lives, but the scenes in Excerpts from Our Lives reflect little of either. Rather they suggest something about the rhythm of the women's lives--the currents that urged them on in their daily existences. "Welcome to the Bronx," the first scene, was taken primarily from Edna's life. She ran a delicatessen with her husband:

I was with my husband from the day he opened up the luncheonette. Because when my kids were small we lived on Mosholu Parkway--they went to public school on Mosholu Parkway--and we had our store on Kingsbridge and Fordham, so when the kids came home from school, I'd say about 3 o'clock or so, they'd wait for my husband. He'd drive them, take the car, pick them up, and bring them to the store. So actually, they really were . . . they grew up on Kingsbridge Road [in the Bronx] because they were always in the

¹Interview with Edna Oberstein, Bronx, New York, 9 February 1984.

store. They brought their bicycles. And they used to ride there, you know how kids would ride down the block. And, of course, when they were much older, they went home. But still, they would do their homework, and then they'd take the bus. Come down, have their dinner. Then they'd hang around, and we'd close and go home together. But it was a hectic place. I can't begin to tell you . . . you know what it is, my kids, when they came back from school, and they ate, God bless them, at our place, naturally, and the people who worked in the area would come in and say to us, "Well, if your kids¹ can eat here, then we have no problem eating here."¹

The other women remembered how they used to go to a delicatessen for their lunch from work and how crazy it was trying to get served when they only had a short break. They easily related, therefore, to Edna's tales of customers trying to cheat her or bring sandwiches in and ask only for coffee. Collectively, then, they were able to suggest ideas for the scene.

"What's in a Name," the second scene, was taken from stories that Ester had told of her life. She spoke of the racial and sexual harassment she had experienced in some of her early jobs--how the secretary at a job interview had not wanted to hire her because she was Jewish and how her boss had because she was a young woman:

I had to fight for my honor as a bookkeeper more than I ever had to. That's why I quit the job with Irwin Steinbeck. He . . . you know, years ago you had a desk and then there was your, your typewriter was there, you know you turned it over. It was a law office and insurance office. They would sit on the desk, the lawyer would dictate. And slowly you know, you were young, your blouse was a little bit low, they'd keep staring down your blouse; or else he would say, "I think you made a mistake," you know, "Isn't that wrong?" And, you know, their

¹Ibid.

hands would travel. So I didn't want to fight for my honor that much.¹

The third scene, "Sophie's Monologue," was taken from a story Sophie told on herself about being so overwhelmed by a clumsy young man who asked her to dance. Similarly "The Plumber" was taken from a story Ruth told on herself about her sexual innocence. "My Son, Jerry" was based on Pauline's story of her own innocence about bringing up babies, but it also revealed how dominated she had been by her father, and all of these women had stories to tell of subjecting their own desires for themselves to the wills of their fathers who, for the most part, were extremely traditional in what they expected for their daughters. As we have seen, Edna, for example, left school, ran her widowed father's house and helped him in the market. Ester likewise submerged dreams for herself. She had been told by her teacher that she was a good speaker and should take elocution lessons. Her mother told her father this:

So my father turns round, "She hasn't got a big enough mouth that they have to teach her yet!" And he promised me that if I would take piano lessons--because they immediately bought a piano; that's a first thing Jewish people would do, they'd buy a piano; education and music: Jews must, especially Russian children, have schooling and music. So I promised my father if he would get me an elocution teacher, and the school wanted to pay for it, I would learn how to play the piano. For a whole year my father strung me along, and he said, "You're fresh enough, you don't have to learn how to speak yet." And so I never did you know. Poppa was hard

¹Interview with Heller, 1 February 1984.

of hearing. I helped him in the store. He was a very fine tailor. My mother never had an opportunity. She was always frustrated. My parents always wanted for me what they thought would be best. I wanted--I was always good in art. I wanted to take up designing. My father says, "Nice girls don't take designing. They work in a shop. They have men around them. They make believe. They touch you.¹ They do this. A good, smart girl is a bookkeeper."

Ruth's stepfather was equally strong-willed:

He was Sephardic. When I was engaged at seventeen, he had to sit at one end of the room, and me at the other. That was one of the reasons I₂ got married so young, because I was kept so strict.²

So Pauline's story of keeping her son in the house for three months because her father told her to was an experience they all could empathize with on some level.

Similarly the finale of the play spoke to a common experience they had all had in their later lives--being members of the "Y" and witnessing the different types of people who joined and how most simply joined for the trips. This was something they could all laugh at.

The two parts of the play that were added in the spring of 1984, "Maria's Song" and "The Operators," represented aspects of the two Black women's lives. Mavis, a Jamaican lady, had joined the group in February but was initially reluctant to contribute anything to the play. Friends in the group had urged her to join because they believed she would enjoy the group. She had a beautiful soprano voice, and through the drama group they thought she could share it with

¹Interview with Heller, 1 February 1984.

²Interview with Ruth Cohen, Bronx, New York, 26 January 1984.

others. Eventually, she was persuaded to sing a song in the play, and she introduced it by telling a little of her interest in singing. Mavis had worked hard in the New York garment district as a machinist most of her life. When she was young, she had separated from her husband, and left her native Jamaica to find work. She had struggled since to bring up her two children alone, and the one thing that brought her great peace and joy was her singing. In the play, Mavis, a shy woman, simply tells the audience she wants to share with them something she has loved to do throughout her life.

"The Operators" was based on Minnie's experiences of being hired as one of the first Black telephone operators for a New York telephone company. A number of the Jewish women were initially reluctant to work on the scene. They did not want Mavis and Minnie to feel that they condoned the racist remarks they made in the scene. They expressed their reluctance, and an open discussion helped allay their embarrassment. They were, Charnow emphasized, playing characters--not themselves. And Minnie assured them that she was not offended by the remarks they made. They were simply helping her tell her story.

Many said it was a story they knew from their own experience--Ester's story of one of her job interviews was similar, for example. And Ruth remembered being one of the first Jewish people hired at a big insurance company:

When I got my first good job . . . that's the job I retired from . . . that was the first time they

started taking Jewish people into their companies. It was the ----- Life Insurance company. They had ladies in doing part-time clerical work. They didn't show prejudice when I came in. Some of them had been working there thirty-five, forty years. A lot of spinster ladies, you know, with the high-fashioned hair, and the hat, and the gloves, you know. The white Americans, you know. And they said to me, "You're Jewish." But with some sort of an air. "You've never worked before? You're a housewife?" I said, "I'm Jewish, yes. I'm a housewife, but I've always worked part-time, more or less." Well, they didn't know how to react to me. They were a little cold. I can't say they deliberately shunned me. But I want you to know that within six months I was one of them.¹

Minnie said that after she had worked at the telephone company for a while and had proved that she could do the job as well as any other person, she, too, was slowly accepted by her colleagues and eventually remained there twenty-six years until she retired.

As a first Living History play, then, we can see how this group shared non-threatening aspects of their lives. Their stories concerned general, everyday experiences they all might have encountered. The structure of the play is also usual for a first Living History play: the grouping together of short scenes that may or may not have a thematic connection. There is only one song and one dance in this play, and that may or may not be typical for beginning groups. It really depends on the nature of the group and the director.

Charnow's style of directing this group seems to work best for groups that are unsure of themselves and initially

¹Interview with Cohen, 26 January 1984.

need a good deal of direct guidance as theatre groups. Perlstein likes to develop an ensemble theatre approach, but ensemble theatre groups all have to start some place. Trust, group cohesiveness have to be built; they cannot be legislated. They have to develop over time. And the kind of approach Charnow took in directing her group worked well for them--it allowed them to participate in the construction of the play while being firmly guided, as a rehearsal of "The Operators" shows.

Rehearsal of "The Operators." January 12, 1984

Sally Charnow begins the rehearsal by setting the scene:

We'll start with the New York Telephone Scene. Miss Adams I'd like to introduce you to Laurali Smith, Daphne Prince, and Patricia Young. So what's going to happen then is that Minnie is going to walk past, and we'll have a two-minute improvisation being as bitchy as you can be. Then we'll start with See how that goes . . . and we'll start on scene two.

Scene starts:

Betty: GIRLS. I'D LIKE YOU TO MEET MINNIE ADAMS.

Greetings and introductions.

(Sally: To Betty: Do you understand what your role is? You're going to come in. You're going to say, "Welcome to the New York telephone company. Girls I'd like to introduce to you our new employee, Miss

Adams." Now take it slow. You can't have your back to us.

Sally gives instructions to the girls.)

Scene again:

Betty: WELCOME TO THE NEW YORK TELEPHONE COMPANY.

(Ruth: No! You look at us. You're introducing her.

Sally: Okay, and your back is to her.

Minnie: Before we start again, let me say something here. Before I get to the lounge, she's already welcomed me, and told me all the things. When she brings me to the lounge, that means that I've been assigned my locker, and the lounge is where you have a cigarette or whatever. So she's already welcomed me to the company. So she'll just say, "Come on I'll take you to the lounge, and show you some of the girls. Okay?"

Ruth: We're in the lounge? Then why don't we sit around a little?

Minnie: No they did have long couches with four or five people on them.

Pauline: But you're putting your back already to the audience.

Ruth: All right.

Sally: I'm gonna give an introduction, and Miriam's gonna say, "I'll now take you to the employees lounge and introduce you to some of the girls. Okay? Go ahead.)

Scene again:

Betty: ALL RIGHT MISS ADAMS, I'LL TAKE YOU TO THE LOUNGE AND INTRODUCE YOU TO SOME OF THE GIRLS

Pauline: CAN YOU BELIEVE WHAT WE JUST SAW?

Laurali: I DON'T BELIEVE IT. FIRST WE HAVE JEWS; NOW WE HAVE BLACKS.

Pauline: LAURALI, LISTEN TO ME. THE WORLD IS CHANGING AS WE ALL KNOW. WE'RE ALL AWARE OF IT. LAURALI, AS WE ALL KNOW.

Laurali: YEAH, BUT SOMEHOW OR OTHER

Pauline: AS A MATTER OF FACT

Laurali: YEAH, BUT SOMEHOW OR OTHER I THINK THAT SHE CAN'T DO THE WORK.

Pauline: WELL, LOOK AT IT THIS WAY. SHE PROBABLY TOOK ALL THE TESTS.

Laurali: YEAH.

Pauline: SHE'S PROBABLY CAPABLE. I'M SAYING, "PROBABLY." YOU KNOW WHY I KEEP USING THAT WORD? BECAUSE THE WORK IS VERY DIFFICULT.

(Sally: Freeze. Start again.

It's only supposed to be a couple of minutes.

There are two or three areas to be covered. Is she going to be able to do the work? Not so much talking. Look at how the telephone company is changing. Images of you being ruffled at the feathers.

Ruth: Or you can say, "Let's give her a chance." That's all. You don't go into why or whether. I say what I think, and she says what she thinks.

Sally: Try it again. Ready? Go.)

Scene again:

Laurali: WELL, I'M TELLING YOU THAT THE TELEPHONE COMPANY IS NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE.

Pauline: I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S NEXT.

Daphne: WHY DON'T WE WAIT AND SEE WHAT'S NEXT COMING INTO OUR PLACE.

Pauline: I THINK WE HAVE TO GIVE HER A CHANCE.

Laurali: I DON'T KNOW. IT'S LOST SOMETHING.

Pauline: WELL THAT I'LL GO ALONG WITH YES. I'LL BUY THAT ONE, BUT WE STILL HAVE TO GIVE HER A CHANCE. I DON'T KNOW WHETHER OR NOT SHE CAN DO IT.

Daphne: TO ME SHE SEEMS LIKE A VERY NICE PERSON.

Laurali: I DON'T KNOW THAT, BUT THEY SHOULD BE WITH THEIR OWN KIND.

Daphne: WHAT'S THEIR OWN KIND?

Pauline: IN A BIG COMPANY YOU HAVE GOT TO INTEGRATE. YOU HAVE GOT TO. IT HAS COME TO THAT.

(Sally: Stop. It's getting too serious. Last week it was good. Edna, remember you're playing a character.

Minnie: Can I say something? First of all, this was in the forties. The war was on. I went there '52, but anyway . . . remember now, you must stress that "She'll never be able to do this work."

Ruth: You think I'm overdoing it also?

Sally: Yes.

Edna: She'll never be able to do it.

Minnie: There is a test involved. So we must get it over that she has to pass the test.

Sally: Okay. But remember, you're not in 1984, and you are not who you are. We're in another historical period. There's great big doubts about whether she can do the work.

Ruth: That's the beginning of the big companies, how they changed, and took in everyone. As I say, I myself was a victim

Sally: Okay, so Minnie has walked out that way.)

Scene again:

Pauline: DO YOU BELIEVE WHAT YOU SAW?

Laurali: I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. THE TELEPHONE COMPANY IS LOSING SOMETHING. FIRST JEWS, NOW BLACKS.

Pauline: I DON'T THINK SHE'S AS GOOD AS WE ARE. SHE'S NOT AS SMART AS WE ARE.

Laurali: I TELL YOU THIS MUCH. I'M NOT GOING TO INCLUDE HER IN OUR LITTLE TREAT, YOU KNOW.

Pauline: ON SECOND THOUGHTS, WAIT A MINUTE, LAURALI. SHE HAS TAKEN THE TESTS; SHE HAS PASSED. AS FAR AS THE COMPANY IS CONCERNED, SHE IS CAPABLE.

Laurali: YES, WELL, I'M REFERRING TO MY OWN FEELINGS, OF COURSE.

Pauline: SO LET'S GIVE HER A CHANCE.

Laurali: ALL RIGHT.

Daphne: LET'S GIVE HER A CHANCE PERIOD.

(Sally: Let's keep going. Minnie, maybe you should walk in that way for the next scene. Walk in and go, "Hi! How's everybody?" Trying to be real friendly. They give you the cold shoulder though. Try it again. We're having three scenes. This is the second scene.)

Scene again:

Minnie: HOW'S EVERYBODY? ARE YOU WORKING NEXT SUNDAY?

Pauline: NO.

Laurali: WHY DON'T YOU ASK THE SUPERVISOR?

Minnie: I'VE GOT A DOUBLE SUNDAY I WANT TO GET RID OF, BUT IF NO ONE IS INTERESTED.

Pauline: YOU TAKE YOUR OWN SHIFT, AND WORRY ABOUT YOURSELF.

(Sally: Good. That was good. Now it's going to be a year later.

Ruth: A year later! We'd be bosom pals by then.

Edna: No, that don't sound good to me.

Sally: Okay. Six months later.

Minnie: Let me say that "double Sunday" was when you got double pay for working that Sunday. I taught Sunday School, so I really didn't want to work on Sundays, if I didn't have to. But, of course, since money is the religion of America, all you had to do was throw out a double Sunday, and they came crawling, because they wanted that money.

Pauline: It's the religion of every country, darling.

Edna: It's because we're generous with money.

Sally calls for order after a general-all-talking-at-the-same-time discussion. Then she sets the next scene. Minnie is at work answering the information calls and doing it very well. They work out a couple of calls.

Sally: Now while this is going on and we're going to go through four phone calls; you're going to make comments about her working like, "Look what a good operator she is."

Ruth: I would like to say, "Well, I misjudged her. She is really a good operator."

Sally: Yes, so you get the idea, but don't make them while she's doing them. Wait. Let there be some space.

Ruth: Like, "She's almost as good as the white ones."

Minnie: (laughs) Yes, I bet some thought that too.

Edna: No. "She's better than a few that work right here."

Sally: That's good. You say, "She's almost as good as we are." You say What are you going to say?

Pauline: I'll say, "She passed the test. We'll have to give her a chance."

Sally: So maybe we should go back to you and say, "So maybe she'd want to come to the birthday party." So how did you get relieved for lunch?

Minnie: Well, someone came to relieve me.

Sally: Okay. So maybe Ester would come in at that point.

Ruth: Let the same supervisor.

Sally: No. Let's include another person.

Minnie: No, the supervisor would only introduce you

Sally: So Ester you come in and say, "Minnie, I'm here to relieve you for lunch." And then you would get up.

Ruth: And then how about saying

Edna: Say what you think

Pauline: I think Mavis should come over to relieve her to show that we are really getting integrated. (Mavis is also Black.) We are getting more girls in.

Sally: Is that okay?

Maria: Yes.

Sally: So you'll come in and you'll sit down and you'll say, "Okay, Minnie, I've come to relieve you for lunch."

Pauline: Yes. You see I think Mavis should come in and can show how we are really . . . socially.

Sally: Yes.

Pauline: Am I right or am I wrong?

Sally: Okay, so let's do the four telephone calls. This is the last telephone call.)

Scene again:

(Telephone rings.)

Minnie: HELLO. INFORMATION.

Sally: I'D LIKE THE TELEPHONE NUMBER FOR RAY'S PIZZA ON 13TH STREET.

Minnie: THE NUMBER IS GRAMERCY, GR 7607.

Sally: THANK YOU.

Laurali: I THINK SHE'S REALLY GOOD. I NEVER KNEW IT.

Edna: YOU KNOW SOMETHING. SHE'S MUCH BETTER THAN QUITE A FEW PEOPLE WHO WORK HERE.

Pauline: YES, I HAVE NOTICED THAT, TOO, DAPHNE. YOU'RE QUITE RIGHT.

(Telephone rings.)

Minnie: INFORMATION.

Sally: COULD YOU PLEASE GIVE ME THE NUMBER FOR BOB'S PIZZERIA ON EAST 61ST STREET, PLEASE.

Minnie: CERTAINLY. THAT'S TEMPLETON, THAT'S TE 8080.

Sally: THANK YOU.

Laurali: YOU KNOW, GIRLS, SHE'S GOOD. WHY DON'T YOU ASK HER TO JOIN US FOR THAT PARTY WE'RE HAVING?

Pauline: I THINK SO.

(Telephone rings.)

Sally: EXCUSE ME, INFORMATION, COULD YOU PLEASE GIVE ME THE NUMBER FOR THE AMALGAMATED CLOTHING WORKERS UNION ON ASTOR PLACE.

Minnie: CERTAINLY, WHICH LOCAL DO YOU WANT?

Sally: I THINK THAT'S DISTRICT 65.

Minnie: OH, YES. THANK YOU. THAT'S SPRING, THAT'S "S" AS IN SAM, "P" AS IN PETER, 777.

Sally: THANK YOU.

Pauline: SO OBVIOUSLY SHE'S CAPABLE.

Edna: SO YOU WANT TO ASK HER?

Laurali: WHAT KIND OF A PARTY IS IT ANYHOW?

(Telephone rings.)

Minnie: INFORMATION.

Sally: HI. INFORMATION, COULD YOU PLEASE GIVE ME THE NUMBER FOR CAPEZIO DANCEWEAR ON WEST 65TH STREET.

Minnie: CERTAINLY. THE NUMBER IS MONUMENT MO 67500.

Sally: THANK YOU.

Pauline: YOU'RE GOING TO ASK HER, DAPHNE. SHE MAY NOT WANT TO GO.

Laurali: I'LL ASK HER.

Mavis: YOU'RE RELIEVED.

Minnie: OH! RIGHT ON TIME. THANK YOU MAVIS.

Laurali: MINNIE. YOU WANT TO JOIN US FOR LUNCH? I WANT TO SPEAK TO YOU.

Minnie: WHERE?

Laurali: AT THE DELICATESSEN.

Edna: YOU'LL ENJOY IT.

(They go out talking)

(Sally praises them, gives some final comments, and then asks for criticisms. They then start the whole three scenes from the top again . . . no stopping.)

As in the development of Blackout on the Boardwalk, once the material has been shared with the group and chosen for dramatization, it is objectified and is worked on as one would any other improvised scene. The way it is then developed depends on the skills of the director and performers. In the rehearsal of "The Operators," the group had suggestions about how it should proceed, but Charnow finally determined which suggestions were taken. She shaped the scene and was very precise in what she wanted and how it should be developed.

"The Operators" was rehearsed twice more before it was included with the rest of the scenes and presented to an audience on February 1, 1984, at the Bronx Concourse Senior Center. The group was nervous about this performance, and Charnow had to literally lead them onto the stage at some points and hold microphones to their mouths. "The Operators" did not go well. The actresses were confused about focus. In most of the scene, the focus shifts from seeing Minnie at work answering calls to watching her colleagues comment on her performance. The "colleagues," however, thinking that they should whisper their comments actually whispered their comments, so the audience could not hear them. Charnow tried to get a microphone to the actresses, but was not able to.

The audience yelled for them to speak louder--which is a typical response from senior audiences: they are not usually hesitant in immediately vocalizing their responses--they laugh, sing, cry, or complain often irrespective of current traditional conventions of politeness.

The rest of the play went quite well, and the group received an enthusiastic response, especially to the singing and the Jewish jokes. The following week, at their next meeting, Charnow asked for comments on their performance, and each offered a positive and a negative criticism. Generally all agreed "The Operators" needed more rehearsal. So Charnow spent the next few sessions rehearsing the scene, and teaching techniques for shifting focus. Gradually they became more proficient at shifting focus, and the scene worked much better as a result.

When the play was performed at The Living History Festival, the group gave the best performance they had ever given. Exits and entrances went smoothly; the acting was good--some gave fine characterizations; articulation was loud and clear. "The Operators" was especially well done--they had learned how to crisply change focus. The techniques of presenting a drama, then, were accomplished with a greater degree of sophistication than ever before.

Their success with this play led the group to suggest the theme for their next Living History play. One woman, Ruth, said that she thought they should include a scene in Excerpts from Our Lives which showed some of the dances from

the Depression era. This led Edna to say maybe they should do a play about the Depression as they all remembered it. This suggestion got them talking about their memories of the Depression:

My dad was peddling and it wasn't easy. He sold fish on Hester Street where there were pushcarts, but they weren't allowed to sell there. That was the irony of it all. That was really very pathetic, that if he'd be just about to sell somebody, weigh-off a piece of fish, there would be cops giving them summonses for selling, and certainly that didn't help matters either, that they gave them a summons--you had to go to court and pay \$2 at that time, or whatever, a dollar, whatever. But naturally it brought a lot of frustration. I recall as a child it was really something. I always loved to go with my dad, and I think we went to Bayard. I remember that street quite well because it left a mark on me. We went to Bayard Street--I think now it must be part of Chinatown, something like that. And there were quite a few peddlers around. Some were selling fish, and some were selling fruits, and out of nowhere the block was blocked off. There were cops on one side of the block and cops on the other side of the block, so that they can get all of the peddlers and give them summonses, and I don't know how or where, but my dad, may he rest in peace, somehow sneaked away, and I was left alone. I was only about five years of age at the time, and naturally I was looking for my father. I don't see him. And then a woman from the second floor yelling, "Girlie, girlie!" And I looked up, but she didn't say a word, she just motioned the direction my dad went. She was watching, and naturally I went in the direction that she told me to go just by doing that and found my dad. He was probably waiting and couldn't go back until everything . . . he thought probably I'd be there until he'd come back. But I walked in that direction and found my dad.¹

And for Ester:

We lost everything. Everything. In our industry, they were all committing suicide. I'd go down to the fish store and buy a head of a big halibut, it

¹ Interview with Oberstein, 9 February 1984.

would weigh 8-9-10 pounds. I'd get at least three pounds of meat out of it. I'd make chowder out of it, halibut salad, I'd make halibut loaves, you know, baked loaves. I'd buy 3 pounds of apples, and I'd make beautiful apple pies. My friends didn't have it, but I'd invite them. My husband gave me 12 dollars. I managed. I learned how to sew. I made myself a winter coat.¹ I made my little girl a winter coat.

Ruth recalled:

Well in those days they barely made a living. It was hard to raise a family. You just managed to pay your rent, food. Clothes they couldn't buy for me. If I didn't get a part-time job,² all I'd wear was gym bloomers and blouses ²

And Edna remembered the hardships:

I recall that at night to save on electricity it was every other floor that had a light on. It was a cold water flat. You had to make your own hot water, because we had coal delivered to the building, and each tenant had a bin where the coal would go into their particular bin, and then we'd have to go down to the cellar and take out coal and bring it up upstairs--four flights to walk up, no less--and make our stove. And naturally in the very cold weather you used to huddle around the stove because it was a rail-road flat. Not broken up. It was straight through. In other words, it was like say, a kitchen, dining room, three bedrooms, and a living room, like one line, you know. Whereas today it's broken up. You have your living room here, and your kitchen there, you know, it's scattered in other words, but that wasn't so, it was one way, and it was very, very cold as I recall, the last bedroom, my mother may she rest in peace, and my dad, they had a heater that they used in order to heat up at least that part of the house. But I can honestly say that we are very lucky that we are here today, I mean the family, because the pipe of the heater was disconnected somehow, and the gas was coming through. I didn't know it. We were all in a deep sleep, but my mother was sniffing, and she didn't like what she sniffed, so in a drunken stupor actually, she got up, and she realized what was happening, and she turned off the heater right

¹Interview with Heller, 1 February 1984.

²Interview with Cohen, 26 February 1984.

away, and opened¹ up all the windows. We could have all been

Minnie was a child in Georgia during the Depression:

In 1928-29 I was just 8. When I came home /from school/I had to do my chores. When I went to my grandmother's, my brother cut the wood, and I had to bring it in. We had to bring her water, because she lived, you know, way out. There was no running water as we know it today. She used to quilt with some of her friends. They had this big like rack, and I remember seeing them, maybe four or five of these women would sit around quilting. I don't know if they had radio in those days or not, but I was sure they didn't have one. Because I remember the lamps, kerosene lamps with little wicks. They talked about what was happening in their neighborhood. I don't remember exactly because children were seen and not heard. Even if they were gossiping about one another, they weren't going to say it in front of the children. You know what I mean? But I don't ever remember them talking about hating anybody. It was usually somebody who was having a baby . . . those were you know very hard years. Because they were Black people in the south. But we didn't know any different anyway. My parents didn't feed us any hate about whites, or anything of that sort. They were very religious. They just believed that there was going to be a better day, and that we were going to do better. I guess it worked because we did survive, because I believe that if it wasn't for religion, Blacks would never have made it. Believe me.²

Already we can see major changes in the nature of this group as a Living History Theatre group. It initiated this theme, and it is a central theme. The kinds of stories the group members eventually shared with each other were of a more powerful nature personally and dramatically. The group members were also starting to think in terms of dramatic structure. They suggested, for example, merging into one

¹Interview with Oberstein, 9 February 1984.

²Interview with Minnie Adams, 10 May 1984.

scene Edna's story of her fish peddler father and Ester's of managing to feed her family for a long time on a large head of halibut. They also thought that Minnie's story of the women quilting at her grandmother's might be a central metaphor for the play.

They were also beginning to engage in the educational component of Living History Theatre. Ruth suggested they bring in pictures of the Depression-era to see how they dressed. Edith asked if they could get some music. Others said they had photographs at home; Ester suggested they get some books out of the library on the Depression period. Pauline said she couldn't see well enough to go to a library, and asked Charnow to bring in some books. They were beginning to look for a larger historical context to their individual experiences.

Their next play, then, was in the process of being developed before they had finished their season's run of Excerpts from Our Lives, and it promised to be a more sophisticated play. As a group, they were beginning to learn to trust each other and to develop the cohesiveness that is necessary for ensemble theatre to work successfully, and Charnow as a director was able to be less dominant: the group was beginning to take initiative and suggest scenes and ideas for developing those scenes

Bronxdale Drama Group

The Bronxdale Senior Center is on Weston Avenue in the East Bronx. It is located in a community building on the

edge of a largely Hispanic housing project opposite St. Lawrence Avenue. The neighborhood is well-kept: the streets are clean and there are no abandoned cars. The community center is not new, but it is newly painted, and its atmosphere is congenial.

The Senior Center's drama group meets once a week for an hour. Most of its members are Black, some are Hispanic, and one is an Italian lady; two are men. All are aged between sixty and eighty-two years, and most of them have suffered great adversity in their lives. They have struggled hard to overcome poverty, poor education, discrimination, personal loss, and many have serious health problems.¹ They have, however, made the best of their situations--as their director, Marion Stanton, comments:

Maude's had a lot of heartaches. People dying in her family. She witnessed a daughter of hers being killed. It's amazing. Just amazing. They are such inspiring people, because they have had such lives, and here they are, they are still going, and they are active, and they are enjoying life. They are putting themselves into it. They just go on with life. Louise had fifteen children, and not one is near her now. She's all alone. She lived with her youngest son, and he was killed last year. He fell on the track of the subway train. And he was killed that way. He was twenty. Carol had her leg amputated last year, and here is this eighty-two year old lady back acting on the stage. You know it really amazes me, the tragedies. But they get back to it. They know that life goes on, and they have to do whatever they have to do.²

¹Interview with Marion Stanton, Bronx, New York, 21 May 1984.

²Ibid.

The kind of health problems the group members have range from everyday aches and pains to poor eyesight and hearing, to cancer. Some have emotional problems, others alcohol problems. Many have poor self-esteem. Participation in the group, however, has given them a great deal of confidence. They have been buoyed by the encouragement of Stanton and the camaraderie and support of each other. This community spirit extends their relationships beyond the group's weekly meetings. They have a "buddy" system: if one does not attend a drama meeting, another will call to see whether all is well. Stanton encourages this mutual caring and her attitude has made the group members feel better about themselves:

But Marion gave us the confidence to do what we're doing, right? We weren't sure, but we tried to please her, and looking at the expression on her face, and when she smiled I knew I must have done something right. She enjoys us, you can see; it's written all over her; she enjoys us; she walks in; you know, I guess we're her kids.¹

The group is very close to Stanton as a director and leader--perhaps because she is a warm person, perhaps because the drama group has brought them recognition from family, friends, and audiences--a kind of recognition they had not previously experienced. Stanton helps them believe that they can create their own plays, stand up in front of other people, tell their stories, and that people will care. And for people who have been traditionally oppressed, this is an invigorating experience.

¹Interview with Mabel Jones, Bronx, New York, 21 May 1984.

Stanton, in turn, says she feels privileged to work with such people, because they have taught her what it means to have the courage to live.¹ Such mutual trust and group cohesiveness can only develop over time, and Stanton has been with her group since 1980--longer than any of the other ESTA directors have been with their current groups. Although Stanton does not have a common ethnic bond with her group--as do Perlstein and Charnow--she has lived in the Bronx most of her life and is keenly interested in the neighborhood and its people. In this sense she has strong bonds with them.

Stanton was actually born in the Bronx in 1946, but she grew up in Yonkers. When she left school, she worked at various jobs and eventually joined the Mass Transit Street Theatre where she first met Perlstein. When Perlstein founded ESTA, she asked Stanton to join her as an artistic director. Stanton had worked extensively in children's theatre, directing creative drama and creative movement classes, and she adapted many techniques from this field to her work with ESTA groups. Her first senior group was at the Jewish Home and Hospital for the Aged. Stanton taught them mainly creative movement but did some creative drama activities. Bronxdale has been her only performance group, and they have only been performing Living History plays for a year.

Stanton's first work with Bronxdale was on a scripted play, The Neighbors, by Zona Gale which stressed the importance of community. The Bronxdale Drama Group presented the

¹Interview with Stanton, 21 May 1984.

play to various audiences around the Bronx at Christmas time in 1980. In the spring of 1981, the group prepared a presentation for Black History Month, an annual event at the Center. The presentation included mostly songs and recitations of poems, but they briefly enacted the famous incident of the Civil Rights Movement when a Black woman, Rosa Parks, was told by a white driver to sit at the back of the bus and she refused. This brief enactment marked the beginning for the drama group of developing Living History plays. In the process of developing the scene, they discussed what they remembered of the famous incident with Rosa Parks and what they felt about the Civil Rights Movement. Some of the women who came from the South remembered that songs that became popular in the sixties like "We Shall Overcome" were slave songs that they had heard as children. This led others to recall other slave and gospel songs. What Stanton discovered was that many of her group were fine singers. Most had never sung publicly, and some did not feel they had good voices, but Stanton was able to convince them that they indeed had good voices. They were encouraged to develop their talents, and Stanton included many songs in the Rosa Parks scene. Since then she has tried to include songs in all their plays.

The first play they worked on after their Black History Month presentation was scripted. One member of the group, Julius Sidoine, was a leading participant. He wrote his own plays, preferred a traditional approach to theatre, and did not like improvising. He wanted the group to perform a play

he had written, Love in Jeopardy, and the group agreed. Later he wrote a Christmas skit for them. So the year of 1982 was spent preparing and performing Sidoine's work.

In the spring of 1983 Stanton wanted to try some improvisational work and her group agreed. The first piece they worked on, Cheese, Today, was a skit about the government's handouts of surplus cheese. It took place at a hand-out station and examined how people felt about having to accept free food and the kind of behavior people exhibit at such handouts.

One Afternoon in Alabama, their next piece, was their first Living History play. It concerned memories many of them had of growing up on farmland in the South. They recalled how their families worked the land and sang songs as they labored. It then briefly examined how Blacks were exploited by greedy white landowners. Both Cheese Today and One Afternoon in Alabama were presented at the Third Annual Living History Festival which was held at the Hodson Senior Center in the spring of 1983.

When Stanton began work with her group in the fall of 1983, they prepared a Christmas piece to present at their Center. They used a script this time. It was an adaptation, written by Sarah Safford, of "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." Called St. Nick Visits the Bronx, it humorously mocked the well-known events in this poem.

After Christmas the group prepared a program for the Center's Black History Month Presentation which was specially

significant this year, 1984, as it was a tribute to Martin Luther King. The program included gospel and slave songs, poems and short scenes. The scenes all related to the Black experience in some way. There was the enactment of the Rosa Parks incident, an imitation by Sidoine of George Washington Carver, and a dramatization of a story Maude had told: when Maude was a little girl, she remembered asking her grandmother why she was treated differently from the white children at her school. Her grandmother had tried to explain to her as gently as possible why this was so by invoking God and his plan to have different colored flowers in the world. Maude told how she believed her grandmother at the time and carried this explanation with her for many, many years.

It was not until the late winter of 1984, then, that the group began work on The Days of the Nickel. By the time of the Annual Living History Festival in May 1984, the group was still developing it--hence it was introduced at the Festival as a "work in progress." The group's previous Living History Theatre work had been brief unconnected skits. The Days of the Nickel was the group's first attempt at creating a play that had a series of thematically connected scenes.

The ideas for the play came both from the participants' personal life experiences and from the previous drama they had done:

We wanted to do a new piece, and through discussion we just came up with some ideas. We started reminiscing, and we thought we might do something about generation, like grandma, a mother, and a child. We just talked about different experiences, and we discovered that a lot of the group

lived in the same area in Harlem. We started talking about that and the places that they knew, and it looked obvious that we should do a play about life in New York City back then [in the 1930s].¹

Once they had decided on the topic, they worked on developing a scenario.

We talked about [the play] depicting a journey. We talked about our journeys, where we came from. A lot of them came from the South. [They talked] about what that was like, and what it was like coming to New York City, and how they found their way. Once we started talking about New York City, there was a lot of discussion there, and a lot of them discovered that they lived nearby [each other] on 112th Street. And they didn't know each other then, and here they are. How many years later?²

Gradually they found a focal point for their play:

Rosalie lived on the East Side of 112th Street, and Maude lived on 112th Street on the West Side. So I thought that one of the scenes . . . we could have a scene where there's Blacks, Italians, and Jewish people living in the same apartment. I thought there might be something about food, and the different kinds of foods, but Maude said that it wasn't like that. Italians were on the East Side and Blacks were on the West Side, and that's how she remembers it. So I didn't put that in there, but still on the Street there's a mixture of people, so it's shown that way.³

Stanton felt that this topic was good for her group because it enabled them to talk about community. They were able to compare what the sense of community was for them in the 1930s compared to what it was now: " . . . how people weren't afraid of each other then, and how they could sleep

¹Interview with Stanton, 21 May 1984.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

in a park."¹ Stanton knew that given the previous plays the group had created, a play on community would be an appropriate topic:

The piece that we did about Rosa Parks concentrated on racial tension. Rosalie [the Italian lady] was the bus driver. She was supposed to be a white bus driver. She wore a little mustache. And it was very hard for her to be . . . in this scene. We wanted her to be not very nice to the Black people. And that was hard for her to do. We explained that that was the way it was, and that is what we wanted to show. And there was a lot of discussion and memories about what it was like for people then, Black people. You can see that it's basically a Black group. So Rosalie was having a hard time for a while. She approached me once, and said that she wasn't sure if she wanted to stay in [the group]. She felt as if [the group] hated her. We talked about that: that that wasn't so, they're just talking about that experience. I spoke to Mabel about this, a Black woman in the group who gets along well with Rosalie, and Mabel spoke to her and reassured her that everyone loved her, and that cleared the air. I was glad that happened. I knew that the next piece should be on community and not just on Blacks, and focusing on their problems. And memories back in the 30s are memories for everyone, and not just Black people. There is that mixture in this piece, and I think that people feel very comfortable with that.²

So the contrast between community now and that in the 1930s provided a structure for the play. The group decided that their play should open with a family in the present--grandparents, parents, children--and that the grandmother could reflect back on her past and recall what it was like when she first came to New York from her rural southern home.

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

While they were discussing and rehearsing their initial scene, the son of one of the women knocked on the rehearsal room door and asked his mother for some money. This reminded the group of how they would ask their parents for money, too, only then they would ask for a nickel, not \$5: the connecting motif of their play was cemented. The play would begin in the present, and the granddaughter would ask her mother for \$5 to go to the movies, and this would make her grandmother recall that it used to cost five cents to go to the movies; and this in turn would lead her to remember all the other things one could buy for a nickel. The central scene of their play became a flashback to a street in New York in the 1930s.

The play then returns to the present, and the grandfather tells how, during the Depression, he would go hunting coal for his family to keep them warm in the winter. This narrative was based on an experience Sam had had as a young man. One winter his family had been very cold, and they had no money to buy heat. He had had no alternative but to go scrounging where he could. He went down to a local train station's coal yard and started to pick up stray bits of coal, but he was yelled at by another man who seemed to be doing the same thing. Sam had commented on how he did not care what the other man thought. He did not feel he was stealing the coal as the coal was not being used, and his family was freezing cold. He was prepared to fight the man for the coal. The intensity and ramifications of this

experience are not fully captured in the play's scene, but as we can see from the following rehearsal of the scene, the group is still in the process of developing it, and more work has yet to be done before the full nuances of Sam's experience are dramatically revealed:

Rehearsal of the last scene of THE DAYS OF THE NICKEL:

May 14, 1984.

Grandmother: WHO KNOWS WHAT EVIL LURKS IN THE HEARTS OF MAN? THE SHADOW KNOWS.

Grandfather: DID I HEAR THE SHADOW?

Granddaughter: HI, GRANDPA.

(Stanton: Good. Cut. Come into the scene, Janie. You're on this side Sam.)

Grandmother: YEAH. WE WERE JUST TALKING ABOUT THE DAYS OF THE NICKEL.

Daughter: I REMEMBER I USED TO DO ALL MY CHORES BEFORE I WENT TO SCHOOL WHEN I WAS A KID.

Grandmother: YEAH, CHILDREN HAD CHORES IN THOSE DAYS. WE DIDN'T SIT AROUND AND DO NOTHING. WE ALWAYS HAD TO PICK UP.

Stanton: (Right. Then you say, "I remember my favorite job was...")

Granddaughter: I REMEMBER MY FAVORITE JOB WAS PUTTING A NICKEL IN THE GAS TANK.

(Stanton: No, it was a quarter.

Carol: Five nickels.)

Daughter: FIVE NICKELS.

Grandmother: AND THE COAL STOVE WE HAD TO SIT AROUND. WE ALWAYS HAD HEAT. WE HAD OUR OWN HEAT. WE BURNED ANYTHING. OLD SHOES. ANYTHING THAT WOULD BURN. OUR FRONTS WOULD BURN UP, AND OUR BACKS WOULD FREEZE. WE'D TURN OUR BACKS TO KEEP WARM.

(Marion: Now this is where I want you to come in with the story of the coal. She's talking about the coal stove, and you say, "Yeah, I remember going down to the train yard to borrow coal.")

Grandfather: YEAH. I USED TO GO DOWN TO THE TRAIN YARD TO BORROW COAL. ONE TIME I MET

(Stanton: What I want you to do, Sam, is tell it just as you told us that time. At this point . . . ssh . . . you'll probably be standing anyway. You'll be telling the story, but you'll really be telling the audience. Okay, "One day I went" Tell the story. Just in your own way.)

Grandfather: I REMEMBER WHEN I WENT DOWN TO THE COALYARD TO PICK UP COAL AND THERE WAS A MAN DOWN THERE WITH A SACK. HE ASKED ME WHAT WAS I DOING, AND I TOLD HIM THAT I WAS PICKING UP COAL. SO HE SAID, "WELL YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO DO THIS HERE." SO I SAID, "WELL, WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO? WE HAVE NO HEAT. WE HAVE NO MONEY FOR COAL, SO I CAME DOWN HERE TO GET IT. IT'S ON THE FLOOR ISN'T IT? IT'S GOING TO WASTE." AND THAT WAS THAT.

(Stanton: That's good.

Sam: That's better.

Stanton: One thing you said, the first time you told the story, was that you came down, you started picking up the coal, there was another man there, and he said, "What do you think you're doing?" And you said, "I'm doing the same thing you're doing." Okay, because he's probably doing the same thing you're doing. After that, Grandma, you say we had good times, we

had bad times; it was the Depression; it was rough. But we made it, and here we are.)

Grandmother: THOSE TIMES WERE TOUGH. THE GOOD TIMES AND THE BAD TIMES. BUT WE MADE IT. AND HERE IT IS 1984, AND WE ARE STILL MAKING IT. SO YOU JUST BE SATISFIED WITH WHATEVER YOU CAN GET. AND STOP TWITCHING YOUR NOSE.

(Stanton: Good, and the music will start, and you'll say, "And we've got the best music ever." And the music will get loud again and you'll dance; and if anyone wants to join . . . (Laughter and choruses of "All of us.") And this is how we'll end. Let me think a minute. I would like to get the "Nickelodeon Song" in at the end of the street scene. So the end of that is . . .

Mabel: When we buy the hot dogs?

Stanton: No, the ice man.)

They discuss where the song should come in and then sing it. Mabel accompanies the song with a washboard. They conclude the rehearsal by making plans for their next meeting.

The rehearsal of this scene was shortly before the Living History Festival. The group had presented the play on May 24 at the Manhattan Women's Shelter on East 3rd Street, but it was presented as an open rehearsal. The play had the basic structure they wanted, but Stanton and the group knew that each scene needed to be developed further. At the time

of the festival, unfortunately, two key performers, Janie and Miriam, were absent. The group had tried to contact them but were unable to do so. In addition, Maude was sick, but she still came to the festival. Their degree of group cohesiveness fortunately allowed them to compensate for the absent members. Mabel took Janie's part, and Rosalie took Miriam's. Maude played as best she could. Their performance was a little confused at times, but Carol, as grandmother, was able to provide the necessary continuity and, as she is a fine actress, she gave a compelling performance which helped buoy the other performers. The crowd scene in the New York flashback did not flow as well as it might, and they did not sing the "Nickelodeon Song" as well as they could have.

The fact that they were able to put on a performance at all was remarkable. The group had, however, reached a point in its development where it often toured to centers and presented its plays without Stanton being present. The group was, therefore, familiar with coping with the myriad things that can go wrong when a group tours a show. Stanton also provided them with a scenario of their play (or scenes), so that they could easily check, if they had to play someone else's role, what they had to communicate. There were mechanisms that the group had developed that allowed them to function as a theatre group under whatever trying circumstances. Group cohesiveness, however, does not solve all problems. Stanton and her group feel that they have only just started to develop their play. They feel that there are

still problems with it as a play, and that they are in the midst of evolving the characterizations and scenes. They plan, therefore, to continue working on it for a while longer. They are especially concerned about the New York street scene as they feel it is too fragmented and, indeed, it is, but like the Bronx Drama Group, the Bronxdale Group is beginning to think collectively about the dramatic elements of play construction. As a Living History Theatre group, therefore, they are entering a new stage in their development.

Hodson Drama Group

The William Hodson Senior Center is located adjacent to housing projects in Claremont Village on Webster Avenue and 169th Street in the South Bronx. Founded in 1943 by Harry A. Levine, an administrator in the Department of Welfare, and named after the then Commissioner of Welfare, it was the first such day center for seniors in the United States.¹ It was started in an old wooden shed that had previously been used by the Works Progress Administration as a depot for the distribution of clothing.² The Center moved to its present building in 1962 and has been long-recognized for its innovative work with seniors, most of whom are Black.

¹Virginia O'Neill and James P. Dumpson, Patterns of Progress in Aging: Hodson Day Center (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 5.

²Ibid, p. 6.

One of the first programs started at the Center was a drama program. In their book, Group Work With the Aged,¹ Susan Kubie and Gertrude Landau outline the development of Hodson as a day center and describe its initial drama activities. Essentially the leader helped the seniors develop short plays which they performed for their fellow Center members on a small, inadequately equipped stage. Drama, then, has had a long history at Hodson, so that when Perlstein started Living History Theatre at the Center, there was already traditional support and acceptance for her work. After Perlstein left the group to pursue her increasing administrative ESTA duties, Charnow took over the group for a few months. In the fall of 1983 Sarah Safford, a newly hired ESTA director, assumed the leadership of the Hodson Drama Group.

Safford was a dancer who had been dancing professionally since a child. When she left high school, she worked first in children's theatre, dancing for a theatre company called "Theatre in a Trunk," a company that toured improvisational shows to schools in the Bronx. Later Safford joined a dance group in Albany, New York, and toured mime shows to local schools. She then worked independently as a dancer and taught dance and drama to ex-drug addicts at a New York halfway house. Eventually she met Perlstein who asked her to direct for ESTA. She agreed, but she has also maintained her professional dancing career and has performed not only in

¹See p. 15 above.

in New York but also in other parts of the United States, and she has also toured some of her shows around Europe. Most recently, in early 1984, she performed in Carnival Knowledge: Second Coming at the Franklin Furnace in Lower Manhattan. This show was funded, in part, by the National Endowment for the Arts. Safford's particular pieces included "Tapping and Talking Dirty," which she danced with Jane Goldberg, and "Tits'n Ass, Brains'n Guts," which she danced with Ellen Goldsmith. Both concerned feminist pornography, the theme of Carnival Knowledge

Safford inherited a Hodson Drama Group which consisted of fifteen people--two Black men, one Jewish woman, and twelve Black women. Some of the participants had come from the South and some from the Caribbean, while others had been born in Harlem or the Bronx. Like the Bronxdale Drama Group, many of the members had struggled against adversity most of their lives, and continued to do so. Now in their later lives--most were aged between sixty-five and eighty-three years--they lived alone on Social Security in high crime areas. One of the group described the neighborhood:

The element here. I could be standing outside waiting for a bus, and the kids get out of school that day, and they take rotten onions, and they hit you with them. Then they run around and they say let's see what else we can do. And I'm in the bus paying my fare, and all of a sudden I feel it again on my back. I've been robbed so many times. It don't matter how careful you are in a crowd you don't feel anything. That's why I sew pockets into everything. They don't give you warnings. They came and told us how to protect ourselves. They got down on the floor, and told us to squeeze his testicles if he attacked us. I could never do that. So they put Susan [Perlstein] down one day on the stage. I

thought I'd die. Susan had a lot of nerve. Don't be afraid he said. Your life is worth more. This morning this character--I suppose he was about 20--he sat down next to me, and his hand, his right hand is on his lap, and his other hand is creeping, and creeping, and I felt the creeping, and I don't know whether he was creeping into my pocket, or anywhere else. I give him a dirty look. I got up. You don't know what they're up to. They sometimes go carrying an overcoat over their arm, and when they pull something out of you, they hide it. They take all sorts of things; all sorts of tricks. They take my change, so no matter how careful you are . . . and I'm nervous when I go on the trains. One guy stops and he pretends to be doing his shoelaces up, and he wants to trip me up. But I got wise to it.¹

Despite their difficulties many struggled each day to get to the Center to sit with friends, eat breakfast and lunch, and participate in the daily activities.

As a director new to this group, Safford had many obstacles to overcome. The initial Hodson Drama Group had achieved a measure of fame. They had had a film made about them, appeared on television, been featured in newspaper articles and a monograph, received plaudits from their relatives, friends and neighbors. Their degree of public success had, as Perlstein described,² changed the way many of the group members felt about themselves. Their self-esteem increased, they believed a little more in their ability to change their living conditions, and some even became politically active. Others found a renewed purpose: the group and Perlstein became important parts of their lives. When

¹Interview with Daisy Winfield, Bronx, New York, 12 January 1984.

²Perlstein, A Stage for Memory: Life History Plays by Older Adults--The Work of the Hodson Senior Center, p. 21.

Perlstein left the group, then, many felt a sincere and deep personal loss--another loss to add to the many they had already experienced in their lives.

Charnow took over the group for a while, but she, too, had administrative and teaching commitments that made it impossible for her to undertake its continued leadership. A new director was needed, and Safford became that person. Her initial task, then, was to try to re-establish trust--a trust that Perlstein had built up over seven years. Trust and commitment take time to establish, and Safford had to overcome a number of further obstacles before she and the group felt comfortable with each other. She had no common ethnic bonds with the group. (Neither did Perlstein, but Perlstein had spent a great deal of time with her group members outside of the workshop experience, and bonds had developed between them over the years.) Safford, in addition, was young, and her petite size made her look younger than her thirty years. Therefore, she had to work doubly hard to convince the group that she could empathize with some of their life experiences. Also, she had never worked with seniors before, so she had to learn the many differences that exist between directing adolescents and directing older people. Furthermore, she had never developed plays from the oral histories of group members, so she had to learn much about the process of Living History Theatre. Generally, then, Safford was inheriting a difficult situation, and what happened to the group over the

course of the following year could, perhaps, have been predicted.

Safford's first work with the group was a series of introductory workshops--warm-ups, movement exercises, improvisations. The exercises were mainly designed to establish rapport and develop theatre skills. After the initial few weeks, Safford tried to begin work on the traditional Christmas show. The group requested that they perform a written rather than improvisational play, so Safford wrote St. Nick Visits the Bronx, a spoof on "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," with lots of Christmas songs and much dressing up as Santa Claus and reindeer. The group had a lot of fun rehearsing it.

Unfortunately, there were some group conflicts during this period. One of the women had tried to take over the leadership of the group, and the rest of the group members objected, so she felt slighted and threatened to leave the group. In addition, neither Safford nor the group had worked with a script before, so they encountered some problems they had not anticipated. Further, Safford had cast a newcomer in a role that a prominent member of the group had suggested and initially developed during some improvisations. The longtime member left the group, and the others were upset by this as she was a strong and talented group member. Nevertheless, they were able finally to put together an entertaining show which was well-received by the Center members.

After Christmas, Safford started on her first Living History play. By this time there were ten members of the group left--the two men, the Jewish woman, and seven Black women. Safford had decided to develop a play on the theme of love. Her workshops followed the ESTA format--warm-ups, movement, improvisations, story telling, closing ritual--and during her initial workshops she asked her group to discuss their early courting and love experiences. This, in turn, led to some discussion of mothers, parental controls, and eventually to marriage stories. Most group members were reticent to contribute much to the discussions, although some told of their early experiences and generally they agreed that they had had a stricter upbringing than youngsters today. As one man said in a workshop:

My parents died very young. I lived with my god-mother, and I turned her hair grey. I went to work, then I wouldn't go home. We'd go to a dance, and I don't care what time I'd come in--and a dance, then'd go from nine to twelve--I'd creep upstairs, and she'd be setting right there: "Whose house did you go to that you stay out all night?" "The dance got out at twelve o'clock. That's not all night." We'd been at the dance since nine o'clock. We'd enjoyed it. But to her it was all night And we had a little cherry tree that grew on the edge of the porch. It didn't get to grow, because she used it up on us. In a way, you know, if we did bad things. But one word she used to say, "It hurts me worse than it does you!" Well I think if she had been on the other end of that cherry tree switch, she would have had a different . . . (laughs).¹

Some people, however, objected to being asked to discuss their mothers and their married life. Others said that

¹Louis Jones, Living History Theatre Workshop, Hodson Senior Center, 26 January 1984.

they did not see the point of all the discussions, and they wanted a script. Safford explained that they were working on a Living History play now, and that they would develop their own script. But this did not satisfy those who were upset, and the presence of an observer to the group did not alleviate the situation.

Safford decided to switch the theme to friendship, and the following week she found that her group had dwindled to five--the dissenting members had dropped out. The workshop went much better. Stories were shared--perhaps because the theme was less threatening, perhaps because those who stayed felt comfortable with the group. Safford discussed commitment with the group, and all agreed that if the group was to continue, then each had to make a commitment to it.

At the next workshop, though, there were only four people, and those left were concerned that the group would cease to exist. Safford assured them that it would not, and that they had a number of scenes they could develop. Particularly, she started to work on improvising Louis's story of coming home late from a dance. She then did some improvisations on the stories some of them had told of their friends. However, there was a lack of trust in the group. Many felt upset that they had lost so many members, and some of those who remained still wanted a script. Safford said she would write up a scenario of what they had already developed and would bring it the following week, which she did.

Safford had decided to begin their play with a dance scene, then have the group sing "Walking my Baby Back Home," as Louis takes his girl to her house and then returns home to confront his godmother. The scene which followed Louis's was based on a story Martha had told about how her mother used to chaperone her dates; the next scene showed how one of the men, Ben, agreed to marry his pregnant girlfriend; and the final scene was of Ben's wedding. With a "script" in hand, the group could now improvise the scenes. Many had doubts, however, and many reiterated their previous concerns about not having enough people in the group. Nevertheless, Safford proceeded to rehearse the scenes. Again there were complaints--the scenes were too dull, the acting was unimpressive:

If I was playing a character in my mind I have to become that character, and I think to myself how I would act if I was that person, and that's how when I act toward anyone, I have to imagine it was me . . . like when I was supposed to be pregnant, and he was supposed to be the father, I just imagine if I was pregnant, and the boyfriend stood there and I had to tell him about it, how I would tell him. So I put myself in that character, and I went over to him, and I said, "Excuse me, I have to talk to you." And he said, "About what?" And I said, "Well, it's something I can't talk to anyone else about. I have to talk to you." And he said, "Okay." He stopped grinning. I hesitate a while. I just imagine what I would have done, or the girl in that position would do. So I said, "I went to the doctor, and I'm two months pregnant." "What." He supposed to get excited, but he say "What." Now that's not acting at all.¹

¹Bea Roche, Living History Theatre Workshop, Hodson Senior Center, 23 February 1984.

Each week at this stage in the development of the group, there was some resistance on the part of someone to some aspect of the week's workshops. Safford, however, persevered. When she rehearsed the dance scene, she taught the group some jitterbug dance steps, and they really enjoyed doing this. Daisy then spontaneously told a story of being taken to a dance where such music was being played. The boyfriend who had taken her had been very jealous, and when someone else had asked her to dance, he threatened to leave her there alone. Safford picked up on her story, and the group enacted this scene which they eventually included, along with Louis's scene, in the production they presented at the Living History Festival.

The dance experience had relaxed the group a little. They started to discuss ways of developing the scene, and suggested including some songs--the fight between the jealous man and his girl was enacted by each singing popular love songs and Lydia, an accomplished jazz pianist, played the music.

Unfortunately, this rapport did not develop further at this time. One of the men dropped out, and two of the women returned, but each week there were one or two people missing for rehearsal. So Safford was never able to fully rehearse any scene. Those who were present each week were not comfortable with constantly switching roles--it made them feel uneasy, insecure, and the more they felt so, the less they were able to make a commitment to the group.

By this time, it was March and Safford was absent for two weeks touring one of her dance shows. Stanton took over the group for the interim. When Safford returned, she had decided to scrap what they had worked on and begin again with whatever the group decided. The workshop was scheduled in the auditorium, and while she waited for whomever showed up, she started to tap dance to some music she had on tape. Gradually the members of her group entered, including some who had previously left the group. They all joined her in her dancing:

We just started dancing together, and we had a lot of fun. Edith came in, and she hadn't been here since January. And she suggested we should do a hippy scene. I was playing modern band music. So anyway she suggested doing this hippy scene, and we tried it right away. And we are all dancing around, and I went off, and came in as a mother, and they were all very rebellious. And it was very funny, and it was good because we were acting out some of the group problems, and also it was something from their own lives. Some had never been able to do that. Some were good at it. So that turned into a scene, and the following week I brought in props to use for that--headgear, scarves, sunglasses for different characters. We made up sayings about kids today, where each person said, "Kids today are independent. Kids today are something else. Kids today are rotten. Kids today have no respect." So I told each of them to take that as their main characteristic. So we did that.¹

From this point on the group began to work well together. Edith was a key member of the group, and her return encouraged others to return. Also, her initiating a scene had led to a greater interest in that scene. Safford decided to use

¹Interview with Sarah Safford, Bronx, New York, 10 May 1984.

some of the material they had already developed--Louis's scene, and Daisy's scene of her jealous boyfriend. The play emerged as a series of songs, dances, and brief skits which commented on the differences between generations--what it was like to be young in the twenties and thirties compared to what it is like to be young today.

Safford decided to include many songs and dances. The group enjoyed the singing and dancing, and she could utilize her dance skills and provide a forum for the talented members in her group--one lady was a formidable jazz singer, another had played piano for Dizzy Gillespie, and another, a Caribbean lady, sang fine gospel songs. Safford outlined a new scenario, and in the brief month before the festival, the group developed a sense of cohesiveness. There was still some reserve on the part of some members, but all were committed to their new venture which they found less threatening and certainly a lot more fun.

The show that they eventually put on at the festival was entertaining. Safford played a character in most of the scenes, and in this way was able to guide them through the scenes and through the transitions from one scene to another. Part of the fun of watching this show was to see so many of the elderly ladies enjoying themselves so and listening to the mostly talented singers and their exceptionally talented pianist as they thrilled an audience with the songs and dances of their heyday. Some hammed it up, and one or two sang solos in faltering monotones, but generally they

celebrated the joy in life, and this in sharp contrast to their desolate surroundings and wrinkled faces. The paradox of such a contrast challenged all stereotypical assumptions concerning what the elderly can or cannot do, and as each in her own way told the audience she was "ready for love," the audience members identifying with their peers knew exactly how true that was. The applause was loud, indeed.

Ready for Love was not a fully developed Living History play, but it did have some integrity as one: Safford had included some of the stories from the participants' lives and some songs and dances that were important to them. In many ways, what Safford and her group experienced in their work together was not uncharacteristic for a beginning Living History Theatre director and a new group. Each had to learn about the other and this particular play-making approach. Safford, unfortunately, had many other difficulties to encounter with this group--its previous fame, lack of common bonds, and an observer present at a delicate stage in the process of developing trust. Safford's lack of experience with this type of directing did little to mitigate these difficult circumstances. There were a number of occasions during the workshop sessions when resistance from the group could have been lessened had Safford had the necessary directorial skills. One woman, for example, told of a traumatic experience in her life when she learned by reading a newspaper account of the dead that her fiancé had been killed in the Second World War. She told of walking around in a daze

for a few days and finally summoning the courage to visit her fiancé's mother. The woman commented that she had never married since and that the experience had fundamentally altered her life. Safford wanted to dramatize the story and initially the woman agreed. They worked out a scenario, but the following week the woman said she did not want to enact the scene. Unfortunately, this came at a time when some people were dropping out of the workshop, and others were questioning commitments. Safford was understandably frustrated. Her response was to express her frustration over participants generally agreeing to dramatize a scene and then not following through on it.

Obviously there were a number of problems here. This was a very real and excruciating experience in the participant's life. She had wanted to share it with the group, and it was certainly a story of love. But there was no group cohesion at this time, so there was little support from the other group members. Also, there was no framework established for the play. Had Safford been able to take the woman's story and put it in a larger, historical context--perhaps the effects of the War on the personal relationships of Black women at that time, say--the woman's story might have been distanced from her, and she might have been able to share her experience and seen its universality. Other distancing techniques like role reversal, for example, could have been used--as Perlstein did in Blackout on the Boardwalk. Safford agrees that she had not known how to do this:

I didn't think it through, and plan adequately. I hadn't known how to do that exactly. Since you are dealing with time, you know. There's a time line. You're comparing the past with the present. Our other shows have not involved an historical progression. You have to be able to put their stories in an historical and social context right away. To get them to think about it that way. So that they respond to an historical period like, say, the Depression, because a lot of interesting stories did come out when it started going in that direction. Ben's story, for example, of getting married, because his wife was pregnant. There was ^a good discussion, then, about abortion, and so on.¹

Another problem for Safford was that she was used to working with adolescents: "From my experience working with teenagers, these were different problems to deal with. I was trying to do too much, trying to get them to go too fast."² The older participants did not respond well to this approach. They needed more time to develop ideas and retain blocking patterns. Also, Safford initially chose too difficult a topic. "Love" was too personal. Few people will want to share such intimate life experiences with strangers, and the choice of such a topic alienated the group. This was especially so for this particular group. Many had had unhappy love relationships. Some had been divorced, others deserted, some had never married. Many were not brought up by their parents. So discussions, therefore, about mothers and fathers were especially difficult. Those who did share stories, the Center's social worker suggested, may have done so because they did not have the courage or skills not to:

¹ Interview with Sarah Safford, Bronx, New York, 10 May 1984.

² Ibid.

We talked about this in a staff meeting. What would have been good was to discuss love from a general point of view--brother and sister love, love of pets--all kinds of non-threatening ways. Not romantic love. I think the main place where it got strained was where the mother, the relationships with mothers was mentioned, because some people were really feeling sensitive about being raised.¹

We can, perhaps, see that this was indeed so from a transcript of the workshop Safford was referring to:

Living History Theatre Workshop: January 26, 1985

Safford conducts warm-ups for voice and body.

Flo came in late and ignored the fact that the workshop had started and chatted to one of the participants, then slowly sat down and unenthusiastically joined in with the warm-ups.

Safford then led some mirror exercises:

One approached the other and acted getting dressed for a church social. The other mirrored her. After the exercise, the mirrors commented on what the other had worn and said.

There was some involvement and participation by most except Flo. Safford then asked if any of them had had a particular boyfriend from a long time ago. A number responded yes. Silence.

Martha: That's right. We used to meet at my house. My mother would put two chairs together, one for me, and one for him, and no one dare to sit in those chairs. I was really embarrassed.

¹Ibid.

Safford: What did he look like? Do you remember?

Martha: Well, he looked very handsome at that time.

Safford: Was he tall?

Martha: Yes. He was tall. I remember.

Safford: So your mother set two chairs next to each other.

Martha: Yes and no one else would sit in them. My mother she sit nearby. That how we was brought up them days.

Safford: So what would you do when you had this party, and you'd all sit around?

Martha: We'd, ice cream or cake. We had it on the front porch.

Safford: What kind of music was there?

Martha: They had a radio.

Safford: Do you remember what kind of songs?

Martha: I can't remember. Some kind of musical tune.

Daisy: Suppose you don't go to church? Can't you meet somewhere else?

Martha: Oh, sure!

Safford: Well, what about these church socials? I never got to go to one, so I don't know what goes on.

Martha: All the young people would come in, and they'd have something to eat. It was wonderful.

Safford: Did any of you get to be alone, or were you always in the homes of people?

Martha: Well, he used to walk me home, then he'd kiss me at the corner before we got home. Then we shook hands when we got home.

Daisy: Louis says he's a wild one.

Safford: What do you mean?

Daisy: He says he'd get run out of town.

Safford: By whom? The girl's father?

Daisy: Yeah. He'd be so sore.

Safford: Oh yeah. Mr. Popularity. Remember. He danced with them because he felt sorry for them.

Louis: My godmother was very strict. Now I came to New York in 1920. My mother-in-law to be, I see her. And I start to talk to her for a while, and I start to go, and somebody touched me on the arm. It was my godmother. She'd been in the same street. I didn't know it. She didn't know it. But she sit down and she wrote me a letter. She told me what a nice boy I was. But when I was a boy she'd told me how no good would come of me. How I wouldn't reach thirty-five. Sometimes if I didn't get out of a dance on a Tuesday night on time, I wouldn't get out again until choir rehearsal on a Friday night. The next dance I'd be there.

Safford: So you didn't get beat or anything.

Louis: No. Everything was okay. No problems.

Safford: Did anybody ever get in trouble? For being out too late?

Daisy: My mother almost had a stroke when one fellow brought me home so late; she was so worried.

Safford: What happened to you?

Daisy: It just happened that where we went, we lost the sense of direction of travel, and we got all confused. It took us longer to get home.

Safford: So nobody ever got in real trouble. (To Flo) Did you stay out late?

Flo: I don't know anything about that.

Safford: Why?

Daisy: She was a goody-goody.

Safford: You said you always used to have the same dance partner.

Flo: Since I grow up I meant. I didn't go nowhere.

Safford: You didn't go anywhere?

Flo: No way.

Safford: Just stayed at home? What about at school? Didn't you get a chance to hang out with persons of the opposite sex?

Flo: I go to school, and from the school I go home.

Edith: That's right.

Safford: You, too, Eleanor?

Eleanor: That's right. Yeah.

Safford: No church socials?

Eleanor: I gotta get home change my clothes, and I got to close the door. I'd work to do.

Bea: Not like children today. They stay out on the street. We had to change our clothes, then we got to wash or iron. Something.

Edith: That's right.

Safford: So how did you meet You must have gone to a dance sometime, right?

Eleanor: When I was twenty-one, that's when I get to go to a dance, twenty-one.

Safford: Was that the same for you? So up until twenty-one, most people stay at home?

Bea: I had a stepfather, and my father was a cook on a dining car and he had to be out of town, and I used to pass for sixteen because I was tall enough, and I used to get to go out more often, because my father was out of town.

Safford: What about your mother?

Bea: My stepfather wasn't bad, but he wasn't strict like my father.

Safford: So you didn't have to come home and do chores or anything?

Edith: Sure we had chores, then after that you gotta do your homework

Bea: We had a lotta homework the, English . . . we didn't have much time for fun.

Edith: Iron clothes, and all that business

Safford: Until twenty-one?

Edith: Nearly everyone until twenty-one.

Safford: Then how did you meet a guy to marry him?

Edith: We meet them at school or church.

Bea: School occasions, and things.

Martha: You remember we'd go down the store and they had those pickles?

Eleanor: Yeah. You had one of those pickles and you were rich.

Safford: You know that song, "I Wish I Had a Nickel"?

Chorus: "I wish I had a nickel, I'd buy myself a pickle."

Safford: That's it. That's a good song. Let's try and remember the words for it.

Eleanor: First they had the sour ones, then they had the dill. I could eat those dills forever.

(Some try to remember the words of the song. They can't.)

Safford: So on your way home from school, you'd buy yourself a pickle?

Eleanor: Everytime you get a nickel . . .

Daisy: You didn't pay a nickel for them, you'd pay two cents for them.

Eleanor: That's right.

Daisy: You could get two for a nickel.

Bea: You know a friend told me once, and she was twenty-one and working, and she came home, and she said, "Mum, I met this man and I love him." And she slapped her so two teeth was out. Twenty-one and working. I said, "What?" She said, "Yes." That's right! Twenty-one and working.

Martha: I don't think there were too many mothers like that.

Edith: No.

Martha: Wouldn't be these days.

(Lots of chatter)

Safford to Flo:

You were down South during your childhood? And your father was here?

Flo: Yes.

Safford: Someone took care of you?

Flo: (Nods)

Safford: Let's just think about this kind of a mother for a minute. Even if you didn't have this kind of a mother. Even if your mother was really nice and lenient, let's just think about this kind of a script, because I think this would be a good kind of a scene for our play.

Edith: My brother, he was eighteen, right, and the girl next door, he tried to, you know what I mean? And my mother, she beat the brains out of him. She beat my brother, yes she did: Stay away from that girl!

(They all laugh and chatter.)

Safford: Let's try and think about the kind of mother you had. Just think about it for a minute. What she looked like

Eleanor: Well, my mother was a beautiful woman. She had beautiful hands, she was proud and stylish. I didn't have mean strict parents. My father died when I was quite young. It was my mother and my grandmother. My mother took care of us. My grandmother was very strict. "You go over there, and you work" You know things like that.

(Safford started to organize an improvisation of Martha's story, but one person said she had to leave for an appointment, and the others said they had to go too. The workshop ended.)

This workshop did accentuate tensions in the group. Some participants contributed freely, but many said nothing, and some like Flo were blatantly non-committal. There was some obvious resentment on the part of many to Safford's questions which they interpreted as prying questions. Had the topic not been so personal, the method of questioning would not have seemed offensive.

Another difficulty for Safford was the sheer mechanics of working once a week in a Center. Often Center events were scheduled at the same time as her class, and because of her personal schedule she was unable to spend more time than the allocated hour a week with her group. This is going to be a problem in most centers, unless the drama person is a full-time staff member--which is usually not the case. The attitude and degree of support of the particular center's

director is, therefore, crucial to the successful implementation of a drama program in any center, but especially one where many different activities are scheduled for its members.

Yet the Hodson group eventually gelled and put on a successful performance: in part, because Safford stayed with the group; in part, because she shifted the focus of direction. She let the group suggest scenes, and she included songs and dances--theatrical forms which they found non-threatening. So we can see, then, that Safford and her new Hodson Drama Group were at the beginning stages of developing Living History Theatre. The long process had just begun. In their next play they would, perhaps, be able to locate some collective experiences in a larger historical context. The trust level in the group should increase and this would, in turn, facilitate a freer sharing of experiences. And Safford would be better able to apply what she had learned of the process of developing Living History plays.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LIVING HISTORY THEATRE: AN EVALUATION

Living History Theatre: Its Values

The previous four case studies show us that each Living History Theatre director and group is at a different stage in her and its evolution: an evolution that is only partly theatrical. Because the form has its roots in oral history, people's theatre, and gerontology, directors of Living History Theatre must be able to bring together harmoniously those elements which traditionally are assumed to belong to "pure" theatre, and those which are tangential to it. Initially, the director listens to the stories the members of the group tell, the reminiscences they share from different places and from different moments in time. He/She must then transform those stories into a theatrical presentation. The stories heard are not normally shared publicly and en masse. And the nature of the Living History Theatre process, because of the age of the participants, can be explained within the framework of certain gerontological theories, most especially those that relate to reminiscence. This coalescing of the artistic, the historical, and the psychological, while it has many values, obviously creates problems. Those problems seemingly must be resolved by the

director's ability to encourage commitment from the group as he/she seeks to unite theatre and life.

As we have seen, Living History Theatre is a creative process and as such is social, aesthetic, educational, and, at times, therapeutic. Its values, therefore, are different in each of these areas. Generally, the participants agree that their main interest in being involved in such a group is social. For many it represents a way out of isolation and into a community of some kind. Most of those involved in the groups are women, and many are widows who live alone. The theatre group provides, for some, a means to make new friends, explore new roles and consequently find a new purpose to life:

I love getting dressed up and going. I love it. That's the main part. That's why I'm here. that I have a reason to get dressed up and have my hair done, and my nails--instead of standing over the stove wondering what to make for dinner, or lunch, or breakfast.¹

The drama group provides a means for enacting roles they are unable to enact in society at large:² to have positions of leadership, to be educators, to be artists--to be someone of significance. The group also fills a void that is created either by a loss of job or loss of husband or loss of children:

¹Interview with Pauline Raffio, Bronx, New York, 10 May 1984.

²See José B. Cuellar, "El Senior Citizens Club: The Older Mexican-American in the Voluntary Association" in Life's Career-Aging: Cultural Variations on Growing Old, eds. Barbara Meyerhoff and Andrei Simic (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1978), pp.207-231.

My husband died. I sat at home for one year, and I felt so sorry for myself. What am I going to do? I got out of the house every day, because my doctors said that I should. I walked to the Post Office. I walked down the hill. Whatever. But I wasn't really doing. I just was. Then one day, I met Mrs. Young--Fanny Young--and Charlotte Sellovoy. They both came, come here. They¹ said why didn't I come. And I did. And I loved it.

For most who join such a group, the involvement in the-
atre is something that they have always had, or it is some-
thing they have always wanted to do:

I love it. I don't know if I would call myself a frustrated actress. Since I was a child I went to the ----- Foundation. I was taking elocution and drama. I was a youngster. I didn't know what it was all about, but there was that feeling there. I knew there was something to be fulfilled, could get fulfilled within me. We didn't put on shows, but we learnt how to enunciate, you know, and different poems we'd have to have. It was something I liked to do. I like the whole thing now [the performance, the oral history] the whole feeling of the group getting together. You know, each one transmitting to the other, and back, and yes I like it. We have the same feelings. The same desire. Let's face it --most people who would join a group like this, it must be something that they have always wanted to do. Especially seniors, you know. Youngsters all do it, but seniors! It's a big sacrifice for them. One of them, she comes from Jersey, she comes over. Another elderly woman, she takes two buses, and in bad weather! With her bad heart and everything! So they really have to have a strong desire for that, and they do. It's very fulfilling. They're always telling me, "Oh, Ruth, I look forward so."²

So for many, then, there is a sense of well-being derived from the knowledge that they are engaged in an activity that not only gives some sense of a renewed purpose to their

¹Interview with Minnie Adams, Bronx, New York, 10 May 1984.

²Interview with Ruth Cohen, Bronx, New York, 26 January 1984.

lives, but is also fulfilling an interest they have long held.

Within the framework of the group, each participant is able to develop his or her creativity to the extent that he or she can. Many are surprised by the degree to which they can demonstrate their creative abilities: "What I like is doing something I didn't think I could do."¹ This, however, often takes time, and each group member is at a different stage in his or her artistic development at different periods within the life of the group. Nevertheless, all seem to benefit from the boost their self-esteem gets when they successfully demonstrate their creativity by imaginatively recalling their past, or enacting a scene, or singing, or dancing, or telling a story to each other and to an audience.

Another factor that seems to boost participants' self-esteem is the recognition that someone is interested in their lives, in what they have undergone. For many, the realization that this is so is a learning experience. Not only do they learn to articulate an order to their own life histories, but they learn that others shared similar histories, and with the help of the other participants and the group leader they put their individual history within a larger historical, social context:

Everybody has a memory, and yet it's not that much different. People are people. I don't care what

¹Interview with Minnie Adams, Bronx, New York, 10 May 1984.

color they are or what part of the world they come from, they have a story they can tell you, and it might be similar to yours, but it's from a different part of the world that's all! And once you share a memory, you're not completely alone.¹

It is from this dramatization of self that many of the therapeutic benefits seem to evolve. What happens, it seems, to a player during his or her involvement in the acting group, the ensemble, is that he or she is transformed to a certain extent--changed by the experience--in the sense that Joseph Chaiken described it in The Presence of the Actor:

Each role, each work, each performance changes us as persons. The actor doesn't start out with answers about living--but with wordless questions about experience. Later, as the actor advances in the process of work, the person is transformed. Through the working process, which he himself guides, the actor recreates himself.

Nothing less.

By this I don't mean that there is no difference between a stage performance and living. I mean that they are absolutely joined. The actor draws from the same source as the person who is the actor.

In former times acting simply meant putting on a disguise. When you took off the disguise, there was the old face under it. Now it's clear that the wearing of the disguise changes the person. As he takes the disguise off, his face is changed from having worn it. The stage performance² informs the life performance and is informed by it.

This process is especially important for a group of people who traditionally in our culture are not afforded great prestige and who undergo a series of losses of social

¹Ibid.

²Joseph Chaiken, The Presence of the Actor: Notes on the Open Theater, Disguises, Acting, and Repression (New York, Atheneum, 1980), p. 6.

power as they age. Through the recreating of the self, the player asserts that very self: this is my experience: I exist. For many of the participants, this is an incredibly important assertion, as many of them no longer have long-time friends or family alive who can attest to all that they have been or achieved in their lifetime. For such people, as Barbara Meyerhoff and Andrei Simic have noted, self-dramatization is a necessity:

[For those] whose lives have been separated from significant long-term witnesses to their accomplishments, it is all the more necessary to stage a dramatization of one's worth. Only by doing so may they "cash-in" on the rewards of a lifetime, since their biographies will otherwise be known only to themselves.¹

Even for those people who do have family and friends close by, the dramatization of their lives seems an important act, as if their lives are being recorded for posterity and therefore matter. As Meyerhoff has noted, when describing her life history classes at a senior center in California, in being subject and object at once a sense of personal continuity is seemingly established. By living and reliving aspects of their past history, they are able to integrate the different perceptions that they have of themselves at different times:

The sense of personal continuity often occurs in ritual settings that allow for enactments that may re-arouse and release earlier memories. Some of the reasons that ritual has the capacity for releasing stored experiences are suggested by Susanne K. Langer's discussion of dance, where she describes

¹Meyerhoff and Simic, Life's Career, p. 242.

what might be called body memory. Dancers, like participants in ritual, create and behave in a "virtual image of a different world," where one may "with his own body feeling . . . understand the gestic forms that are its inter-woven, basic elements. He cannot see his own forms as such, but he knows his appearance."¹ . . . He sees the world in which his body dances."¹ So, too, the center elders, in certain ritual enactments, were able to see themselves at earlier periods of their lives, and the world in which those earlier experiences took place.²

And so, too, the participants in Living History Theatre can see themselves at earlier times in different worlds, and share these former selves and worlds with others. The actual witnessing of the productions, then, is an important part of the theatrical process. Obviously, in all theatrical situations, the actor-audience relationship is a special one. As Eric Bentley has said, "there is a kind of unwritten contract between the two."³ But in Living History Theatre, that contract is very special, for in witnessing the players' stories, the audiences, in turn appear, from the testimonies they share and the experiences they articulate, to validate their own life stories. In the appearance of the other person, one authenticates one's own appearance. It is a kind of dialectical process, much as Erving Goffman has described

¹Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art (New York: Charles Scribner, 1953), pp. 200 ff.

²Barbara Meyerhoff, Number Our Days (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), p. 278.

³Eric Bentley, "Theatre and Therapy," pp. 385-401 in The Theatre of War (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), p. 392.

in his seminal book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life when discussing the nature of self and society.¹ And this dialectic process, is akin to mirror gazing: the looking in a mirror and being confronted by one's current physical self. The players and audience become each other's mirror. Such "mirror-gazing" at a time when authenticating one's present identity is of crucial importance, has certain connections with the process of life-review:

The phenomenon of mirror-image gazing is of both practical and theoretical interest. In addition to affording one a diagnostic clue to the existence of the life review, it may provide an unusually excellent experimental basis for the study and further elucidation of the changing concepts of the self--and body-image, and the phenomenon of depersonalization accompany the rapid, profound,² and multiple bodily and mental changes in the aged.

Consequently, through memory, a sense of self is asserted--I am a series of "me's" that have existed over a period of time. But in order for that self to be validated, it is essential that there be some kind of feedback to corroborate the assertion. The members of the ensemble and their audiences provide this feedback: Each aids the other in his or her struggle for self-awareness.

¹Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

²Robert N. Butler, "The Life Review: An Interpretation . . .," p. 74.

Living History Theatre: Its Problems

Living History Theatre, then, is a vehicle for articulating untold history, and engaging a people in a creative activity that fosters self, group, and cultural awareness. It also encourages the establishment of a community of artists. Of course, as we have seen, it is not without its problems. Each stage of the process invites potential difficulties that if not addressed successfully will undermine the group and its art.

Central to the functioning of a Living History Theatre group is a relationship between director and participants that is built on mutual respect and trust. Such qualities cannot be legislated, however; they take time and the involvement in mutual experiences to develop. It is understandable, therefore, that Perlstein feels that it takes more than one year for a group to be able to develop a sophisticated Living History play.

If the director is of a different ethnic background to the group, then such mutual respect and trust take much longer to develop, and even then there are certain barriers that may never be removed. As Yvonne Tixier y Vigil and Nan Elsasser have found, for example, in relation to oral history interviewing, certain ethnic groups will respond to particular questions from interviewers of a different ethnic background, but not to others. In their studies, they discovered that Hispanic women, for instance, would respond to questions about sex from Anglo interviewers, but not Chicano

interviewers; whereas, they would not respond to questions about discrimination from Anglo interviewers, but would from Chicano interviewers.¹

A major means of eliciting the oral histories that are to be transformed into drama is through such interviewing. Usually the director will ask the group questions, although participants often will be given exercises whereby they interview each other and then share all or parts of those interviews with the director and group as a whole. So it is crucial to the work of a Living History Theatre group that as open a dialogue as possible is encouraged between all participants.

The developing of the play is based largely on the "interviews" or sharing of life histories, and it is largely, therefore, a collaborative effort that depends on the compatible interaction between director and participants, participant and participant. The ethnic and class background of each will greatly influence what is or is not shared. Subtle cues will be given by all as to whether to proceed in storytelling or not, or as to how the stories are being received. At any time during this delicate stage the wrong cues can be given, or cues can be misunderstood. The director, consequently, must not only know when to pursue a

¹Yvonne Tixier y Vigil and Nan Elsasser, "The Effects of the Ethnicity of the Interviewer on Conversation: A Study of Chicano Women," in Sociology of the Language of American Women ed. Betty L. Dubois and Isabel Crouch (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1976), pp. 161-70, quoted in Sherna Gluck, "Women's Oral History," in Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Approach, ed. Dunaway and Baum, p. 237.

line of questioning or explore an area for dramatization, but also must know when not to, as Tamara Hareven has noted:

Sometimes people just forget experiences; at other times they care to forget, or if they remember them, they do not want to talk about them . . . in many families there are prohibited zones, which most family members choose, not to tread in, as if by unspoken agreement.¹

Of course, a director may not be aware of what those "forbidden zones" are until they are broached.² But if they are unwittingly broached, then the director is in a more secure position with the group if she or he has the skills necessary to cope with such delicate situations. Participants are not going to talk to each other or share parts of their life history if they do not feel comfortable. And one of the ways to foster that security is for the director to be as compassionate and sensitive to the group's needs as possible. Compassion and sensitivity, however, are not enough. The director must be as knowledgeable in both theatre and group process skills as possible. The group must feel comfortable in knowing that the director knows what he or she is doing. Very little is achieved if a director feels he or she can simply

¹Hareven, p. 142.

²There is an extensive literature on the interviewing process. See especially Thompson, Voice of the Past: Oral History; Ken Metzler, Creative Interviewing (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Marc Lee Raphael "Oral History in an Ethnic Community: The Problems and the Promise," Ohio History 86 (Autumn 1977): 248-57; Ronald Grele, ed., Envelopes of Sound: Six Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory and Practice of Oral History and Oral Testimony (New York: Precedent Publishing, 1975); Daniel Aaron, "The Treachery of Recollection: The Inner and Outer History," in Essays on History and Literature, ed. Robert Bremner (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1966), pp. 3-27.

go into a group of elderly participants and get them to talk about their lives and then act some aspects of them out. Any group would resent and consequently resist such an approach. The director must know how to warm-up a group theatrically--how to start off with movement exercises and lead gradually to improvisation, for example. Many of the group members will be unfamiliar with improvisational drama, and will have not only to learn its techniques, but also to feel comfortable using them. Some cultural groups feel more at ease improvising than others, but all generally have to feel that they are not simply "acting like kids." The kinds of improvisational exercises they are asked to perform must be rooted in some experience to which they can relate--they will not enthusiastically enact a scene where they are playing cowboys and Indians, for example, but they will act one where they are trying to keep their handbag safe from a mugger. The director should be familiar with the general approach used in creative dramatics, but should also know how to make the exercises and assignments sophisticated enough for senior adults.¹

The director should also be able to use drama techniques to distance, if necessary, some of the material that emerges from the exercises. Perlstein, for example, in the

¹There are a few textbooks available that outline such exercises. See especially, Marcie Telander, et al, Acting-Up! An Innovative Approach to Creative Drama for Older Adults; and Anne H. Thurman and Carol Ann Piggins, Drama Activities with Older Adults: A Handbook for Leaders.

development of Blackout on the Boardwalk was able to defuse a potentially serious emotional situation with Sophie by asking Sophie, when she refused to participate further, to let the other group members tell her story of having the Nazis take and exterminate half of her family. By using role reversal and some Story Theatre techniques, Perlstein was able to provide a way for Sophie to remain part of the group and experience not only a real release in telling about a part of her life she had not discussed in forty years, but also to share a firsthand account of that terrible period in history. Yet Perlstein's approach allowed Sophie to be separate, distanced from the material--to look at her experience within larger contexts, and to make connections between her present and her past: to see that her experience mattered and was important enough to share with others. It is essential, therefore, that the director be aware of the major social, historical and political forces that informed the lives of the participants. Not only can that knowledge allow the director to make connections between the particular and the general, it can also allow him or her to further stimulate memories on the topic discussed.

Another key theatrical skill that a Living History Theatre director must have is the ability to transform the stories and reminiscences shared into dramatic material. In working with a group, the director must look for the similarities and differences between the group members, so that from the individual stories a collective truth can be developed.

The director, then, in collaboration with the group becomes a dramatist. And it depends on the skills of that dramatist as to how the play will be developed and presented. Much of how this is achieved, of course, depends on the nature and cohesiveness of the group and the director's knowledge of the intricacies of group process will help the director anticipate many of the difficulties that might evolve in this area. Just as a Living History Theatre group has to evolve as such, so too, then, does a director. While each director will have his or her particular, idiosyncratic approach to communicating, directing, and teaching, he or she will nevertheless undergo similar processes to other Living History Theatre directors as he or she learns how best to elicit and transform oral history into theatre. As with the group's development, the director's development as such takes time and experience.

In order to develop a cohesive Living History Theatre group, the group must establish some identity as a group. The initial phase of improvisational exercises helps foster this group identity. During the course of the improvisations and games and movement exercises, the group learns about one another and establishes relationships and friendships that in many cases carry over outside the group's allocated meeting time. As the group develops, it becomes, as Victor Turner in From Ritual to Theatre has noted, like a family.¹ And as a

¹Victor Turner, From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play (New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1982), p. 69.

family, many participants become deeply loyal to it. It becomes, in Turner's terms, their "star" group¹--the group to which they look for recognition and prestige, self-respect and belonging. As Turner comments, however, the degree of commitment, belonging, and loyalty of different members to the group may vary:

Now every objective group has members some of whom see it as their star group, while others may regard it with indifference, even dislike. Relations among the "star-groupers," as the first category may be called, are often highly ambivalent, resembling those among members of an elementary family for which, perhaps, the star group is an adult substitute. They recognize one another's common attachment to the group, but are jealous of one another over the relative intensity of that attachment or esteem in which another member is held by the group as a whole. They may contend with each other for the incumbency of high office in the group, not merely to seek power but out of the conviction that they, and they alone, really understand the nature and value of the group and can altruistically advance its interests. In other words, we find symbolic equivalents of sibling rivalry and parent-child competition among "star-groupers."³

Indeed, this situation was apparent at Hodson where Safford took over directorship of a group that had been highly successful and had gained a great deal of public recognition. The individual members had made a firm commitment to the group and in return had garnered a measure of prestige from it. When Perlstein left, so did some participants. The new participants who joined did not have the same commitment and sense of belonging to the group. Many were

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

unfamiliar with the techniques of improvisation and wanted a "script," and many objected to what they saw as "prying" into their lives. Those participants who were familiar with the process of Living History Theatre tried to defend it, and rivalries and competitions did, indeed, ensue. Had Safford been more familiar with some of these rivalries and attachments, she might have been able to minimize some of the group's conflicts. Of course, this was only one of a number of complex problems with which Safford had to contend during the course of work with the Hodson group. All of the problems illustrated, however, that Living History Theatre cannot just happen simply because there is a leader and a group of senior participants. All must be committed to the process, and the leader must be adequately trained to nurture that commitment.

Generally, then, Living History Theatre is a pioneering theatrical form. Where it differs from other Oral History Theatre groups for, by, and with seniors is in its use of improvisational drama as a means for developing a play or coherent scenario; and in the nature of the populations who currently create it: elderly working-class women in depressed geographic urban locations. The history they dramatize, the creativity they demonstrate, and the learning they share has long lain unrecognized. The directors of Elders Share the Arts are making sure that this is no longer so. And in their willingness to share their ideas and methods with other potential directors of Living History Theatre groups,

they are, perhaps, helping fulfill Perlstein's dream that Living History Theatre be a grassroots theatre movement for a people traditionally dismissed by the majority of society.

Conclusions

As an emerging art form, Oral History Theatre as it applies to the senior adult is still in a state of evolution. How far it will evolve will depend on future funding. Those groups that have been successful in surviving so far have been able to generate funds from private sources to boost their meager public support. Such a trend seems likely to continue for some time. Certainly the likelihood of Oral History Theatre continuing to develop is great. The proportion of elderly people in our society is going to increase, and forms of art will continue as a viable means to improve their quality of life. Certain leaders will continue to see theatre, in addition, as a means to advocate, educate, and in some cases, heal.

How Oral History Theatre develops as an art form, however, will depend a great deal on its directors and their commitment to it. By its very nature, it is open at one extreme, to trivializing people's memories: to making their lives into a soap opera. And, at the other extreme, to commercialism. Neither truly works as it undermines the integrity of the art form and the people involved. Oral History Theatre is a theatre of community. It becomes some thing else, something less formidable, when it is removed from its milieu. It is largely for this reason that Quilters, for

example, received mixed reviews when it was moved to Broadway. Frank Rich condemned it, for instance, because it:

. . . manages to rob its raw material of its most vital elements--its specificity and authenticity. Instead of hearing the detailed individual histories of various women, we hear only tiny, fleeting scraps of those histories, generally pared down to the red-letter events that are supposed to sum up the eternal heritage of womanhood (or at least White Protestant Womanhood). Though the show contains a continuous flood of incidents--births, baptisms, adoptions, marriages, deaths, natural disasters--the figures inhabiting these tableaux vivants are so bloodlessly sketched that we don't care what's happening to whom.¹

The experiences of the pioneering quilters was trivialized and consequently those experiences lost their authenticity. Even if oral materials are skillfully transformed into theatre, however, authenticity can still be lost. The stories must remain connected with the storytellers and their audiences if the power of this theatre is to be fully realized.

The disintegration of community in modern urban industrial society is an accepted fact. There is a breakdown, therefore, of shared cultural assumptions. The individual is increasingly isolated from links to a common historical past. Oral History Theatre presentations are, consequently, not easily transferred from one kind of audience to another. There has to be at least some commonality between performers and spectators.

Oral History Theatre is rooted in the traditions of three people-centered disciplines, yet to a certain extent

¹Frank Rich, "Stage: Quilters, A Musical Opens a New Season," New York Times, 26 September 1984, sec. C, p. C17.

it is esoteric. The audience that can respond to it the best is the audience that can make some links with the historical past of the storytellers. There must not, therefore, be a discrepancy between what Lionel Trilling has termed "avowal and actual feeling."¹ There must be a sincerity in the truth of feeling expressed in the presentations if they are to have any power as works of art. Such sincerity is the integrity of Oral History Theatre presentations: they must be about and of the people involved. They must not mock the people or use them or patronize them, but be part of them. They must provide a way for a person in his or her old age to share his or her accumulated skills, knowledge, heritage and wisdom with others: to be seen not in isolation (as an "old person"), but as part of a community, a link between past and present, a repository of living history: a personal history, and a cultural history.

Through the theatre presentations, then, seniors can sing of themselves to each other and to us. "Of what is past, or passing, or to come,"² for, as Yeats says:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless,
Soul clap its hands and sing"³

¹Lionel Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 2.

²W.B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," in W.B. Yeats: Selected Poetry, edited by A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 104.

³Ibid.

And theatre, of course, provides an ideal means for this clapping and singing of the soul. It aids in the transformation of the person as "old" to person who has lived and is of some significance in having survived, of having become a voice of his or her own past. Oral History Theatre presentations speak, therefore, to the needs of the elders of our society, and in so doing offer an alternative to what we have long accepted as perimeters in Senior Adult Theatre.

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