

Chicago Tribune



David Nachman and Angelina Bruno-Metzger in “For the Love of Family,” performed by a troupe of actors who are stutterers.

A theater company finds empowerment

By Michael Kilian
Tribune staff reporter

NEW YORK — The young actor was halted in mid-speech by his own loud, staccato stammer. It continued for several seconds, bringing all action on stage to a halt. The other actors waited patiently.

The stammer didn't matter. It was why they were there.

This was a dress rehearsal of “For the Love of Family,” a new play written and performed by members of what is arguably the most unusual theatrical company in New York.

The troupe is called Our Time. Its 10 members range in age from 12 to 18 and come from the posh precincts of Connecticut as well as less tony neighborhoods in Manhattan, Brooklyn, New Jersey and Yonkers. One former member, Lindsay Campbell, now in college, used to commute from Albany, three hours up the Hudson River.

Four of the company members are African-American, one is an immigrant from Russia, another is an American of Indian heritage. What they have in common, what binds them together unlike any other New York theater company, is

STAMMER: Stuttering is not an impediment

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

that each is afflicted with stammering or stuttering, in some cases severely.

“When you’re a teenager, people don’t even give you a chance and just laugh in your face,” noted cast member Corom Buksha. “That’s why I enjoy Our Time so much, because we can stutter and nobody cares. We can express ourselves through acting. Once you can do a two-hour play in front of hundreds of people, talking to a

friend or a stranger is nothing.”

The enterprise is the creation of founder and artistic director Taro Alexander, half-brother of actor/director Jace Alexander, son of director Robert Alexander and stepson of actress and former National Endowment for the Arts chair Jane Alexander.

Himself an actor, Taro Alexander played Jay in the national tour of Neil Simon’s “Lost in Yonkers” and, more recently, was for four years one of the stars of “Stomp,” among other stage, movie and television roles.

‘Very healing’

The idea for the Our Time company was a natural. Taro Alexander is also a stutterer.

“I have stuttered since I was 5 years old,” he said. “I grew up around theater. I grew up seeing firsthand how the arts can change people’s lives and how they can be very healing. From a very young age I always wanted to be involved in the arts, but I never thought I could be a professional actor because of my speech.”

Nevertheless, he enrolled in Washington, D.C.’s, Duke Ellington School of the Arts to study theater.

“When I was 15 years old, something absolutely amazing happened to me,” he said. “I started rehearsing scenes and performing scenes, and whenever I became a character and went onstage, I was completely fluent, which was so shocking to me.”

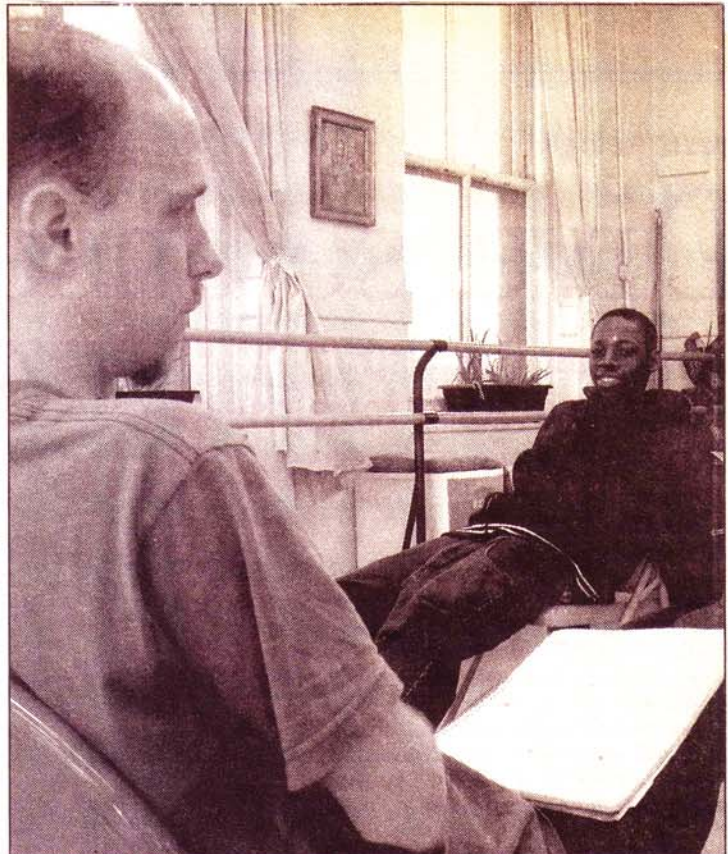
The phenomenon emboldened him so much that, after graduating from high school at 19, he moved to New York with the ambition of becoming a professional actor.

A daunting challenge

This is a daunting enough challenge for any aspiring actor. Because his stuttering returned when he was not performing, Alexander was afraid it would prove to be a major impediment.

“I was living in complete fear of my stutter and the shame of it,” he said. “I would do anything to avoid having a block.”

As he explained, stutterers often acquire a “tool box” of tricks they use to avoid embarrassing blocks.



Actor Taro Alexander (left), who has stuttered since 5 years of age, rehearses lines with Keith Russell in a scene from “For the Love of Family.”

“Sometimes there are certain words or certain sounds that you know will give you a hard time,” he said. “Sometimes you can feel it coming on. It’s kind of like you’re driving down the highway and you see a big wall ahead. You can go around the wall, but you end up not saying what you wanted to say. You end up using a substitute word or a substitute thought or changing your whole thought.”

“You’re always, constantly frustrated,” he continued, “and you’re never fully communicating what’s in your heart because you’re afraid of being laughed at or teased or looked at in the wrong way or being cut off.”

His overriding dream was to one day have his own theater company. His father had run a theatrical outreach program and his brother Jace was a co-founder of the now famous Naked Angels experimental theater group.

Alexander, 32, also wanted to find some way to make the heal-

ing powers of the theater available to young people, just as they had been provided for him.

In the spring of 2001, he was making a movie in Romania with fellow “Stomp” cast member Everett Bradley when he hit Bradley with the notion of a company for stutterers and stammerers.

Bradley’s response was a simple: “Let’s do it.”

“The big challenge was finding the kids,” Alexander said.

Though his own experiences with speech therapy had been unhappy ones, he called every speech therapist listed in the New York Yellow Pages. “They were all so positive about it,” he said. “These are good-hearted people. They’re in it because they want to help. From the first 10 phone calls, I made connections with people who are helping out now.”

All that summer, however, he got no response whatsoever from teenagers. When the terrorists struck the World Trade Center, he figured his plan was doomed.

But a week after that he received an e-mail from then 18-year-old Lindsay Campbell in Albany. Within a few weeks, they had a company of seven.

“First thing we did was talk for a long time about the ground rules,” Alexander said. “You have to treat your own creations with respect. You have to treat your fellow company members’ creations with respect. You can’t make fun of anybody ever and you can’t give anybody a weird look ever. And everyone has as much time as they need to speak, which means, if it takes someone an hour to say his name, that’s what we’ll do for that hour.”

For eight months they met every Saturday, collaboratively writing their first play, “Stories From the Cardboard Box,” and five songs that went with it.

Then, the following June, they rented a 99-seat Manhattan theater for two weeks of dress rehearsals and four public performances. They were sold out.

“I’m sure a lot were parents, teachers and friends, but it was a real audience,” he said. “First time they came out, you could see this inner joy and excitement and pride in themselves — being onstage and before a sold-out audience and performing. They really performed. They went for it.”

Equal time on stage

The next year’s show was “The Mystery of this Diamond.” This year’s, “For the Love of Family,” deals with gangsters, lawyers and family ties.

The plays are written so that all the cast members have equal time onstage. The current cast of 10 includes six who’ve been with the group from the beginning.

“Sometimes the kids are a lot more fluent when they’re performing,” Alexander said. “Sometimes there’s no change at all. Sometimes the kids are more dissonant onstage. There’s no rhyme or reason to it, and it changes all the time.”

Our Time has offices on New York’s Union Square but rented Theater 3 in the Broadway theater district for this year’s show.

“My dream is to have a permanent home,” Alexander said, “because I would really like to work with kids every day of the week.”

With help from foundations and corporations, the company now has a budget of \$150,000. The kids help out in the office, a chore that includes answering the phone.

“For a young kid who stutters, to answer the phone is a big deal,” Alexander said.

After their New York run, the company tours during the summer doing shows for stuttering organizations.

On July 23, they’ll perform in San Francisco for Friends, a national organization of young people who stutter.

“In the fall, we’re going to start a second program for younger kids, ages 7 to 12, and use the teenage group to mentor the younger kids,” Alexander said.

There is no fee charged for belonging to the group and Alexander hopes someday soon to be able to pay his young actors, so that participation in the group will be a part-time professional job.

“It hasn’t been a silver bullet,” said David Nachman, a 17-year-old 11th grader from the Upper West Side who speaks with a decided stammer and has been with Our Time from the beginning. “But I think as a whole it has helped me to learn that I can accept myself.”

Lidia Erokhina, 18, who emigrated from Moscow nine years ago, said “my whole life changed” because of the company.

“I used to not talk in school all the time,” she said. “I used to be shy and never would speak in class because of that. After I joined the group, I gained more confidence in myself. I love acting. I love being onstage. It’s like a second home to me.”

She said that, though she might do acting on the side, her main ambition is to become a doctor. She will begin pre-med courses at Manhattan’s Hunter College this fall.

Alexander said the kids do

more than benefit themselves.

“Not only is the acting powerful for the kids, and not only is it powerful for people who stutter and come and see it and are inspired,” he said. “What I’ve heard from a lot of people who come, who are not people who stutter, is that they see the courage it takes for these kids to overcome their disability. ... We’re all afraid of things and we all let fear or doubt hold us back from doing something.”

“You see the kids do it and you say, ‘If they can do that, I can do what I always wanted to do.’”