

JOURNAL

JANUARY 2004
DRAMATICS

Published by the
Educational Theatre Association
for students and teachers
of the performing arts
Volume 75, Number 5

A pace of their own

Our Time Theater Company gives stuttering teens a voice

By Laura Schiller

IMAGINE YOU ARE on stage playing a leading role in an Off Broadway play, and suddenly your lines won't come out. You fear the audience will laugh or get up and leave—after all, as an actor you're supposed to have perfect command of your speech, right?

Well, not if you're a member of Our Time Theater Company, a two-year-old troupe in New York City created specifically for teenagers who stutter. The members and their audiences know that eventually the words *will* come out, although it may take a little longer than usual. In fact, at each performance a line in the program informs the audience, only partly in jest, "The performance will be anywhere from two to ten hours depending on the actors' fluency."

Founded and directed by Taro Alexander, a cast member in the Broadway hit *Stomp*, Our Time is an artistic home where young people who



Our Time company members Linda Gjonbalaj, David Nachman, Corom Buksha, and Jonathan Greig.

CHELSEA LACATENAS

alone until then, which is why Our Time serves as a community of young people who share the same experience.

In this artistic community, the actors express themselves at their own pace—truly an anomaly

in hectic New York City. "At Our Time you enter this whole new world where the idea of time is not the same as it is for normal people," explains Alexander. "You know that no one is going to interrupt you and finish your sentence for you—which is a very common thing. And for people who stutter it hurts because you're trying to get it out and you can't and then someone cuts you off, and then you just say 'oh, never mind.'"

One main distinguishing factor between this and other theatre troupes is that, here, when an actor is speaking, everyone knows that they have to wait until he or she gets the words out. While some of the actors are referred by their speech pathologists, the point

stutter can express themselves freely without the shame that they often experience in everyday life. A PWS (person who stutters) himself since the age of five, Alexander spent most of his life unable to say what he really wanted to say. "I developed a bag of tricks to avoid stuttering," he explains. "So I lived most of my life in a shell trying to hide this big secret I had."

Things changed, however, when he started acting at age fifteen and his speech impediment vanished on stage. And he's in good company—Bruce Willis and James Earl Jones, both stutterers, also found themselves completely fluent in character. But Alexander didn't meet another PWS until he was twenty-six and felt utterly

is actually not to improve fluency but simply to build confidence, rediscover creative gifts, and just have fun. And word is getting out—they often receive phone calls from young people who *don't* stutter but want to join anyway. (Our Time gently sends these callers away.)

Another thing that makes this troupe special is that they perform plays of their own, written in a unique, collaborative process. The nine-member troupe meets every Saturday for four hours, alongside a volunteer team of professional artists including Alexander and some of his fellow *Stomp*-ers. Surprisingly, the plays end up being about everything *but* stuttering and its accompanying isolation. “I guess if you're in a room filled with people who all experience similar things,” says Alexander, “why sit around talking about something that everyone knows? Instead, why not just have a good time?”

And that's exactly what they do. The teens begin their season in October with improv exercises that incorporate acting, singing, playwriting, drumming, and dance. Then, in November, they begin to develop a script. Last season's production, *The Mystery of the Diamond*, turned into a musical adventure about a diamond stolen from the chancellor of the world, with some wild travels to Alaska to track the thief down.

Alexander admits that one of the challenges he and his volunteer staff face is letting the young artists go through the process on their own, and not trying to “fix” anything. He explains, “As adults we want order and we want things to make sense, but it's their play and they have to trust that we'll let them create their own play.”

Between February and May, the group rehearses the play at the same time as they rewrite it—that's the beauty of being both the playwright *and* the actor. Finally, in June they do a four-night run in an Off Broadway theatre. The group also performs at local and national conventions, such as the National Stuttering Association's annual conference and the Na-

tional Organization for Young People Who Stutter.

In spite of the fact that many of them have never sung before, the members also compose their own songs. Our Time's musical director, Everett Bradley, one of the first American performers in *Stomp*, works with the teens one-on-one to create show-stopping musical numbers. The songs from *Mystery of the Diamond*, in fact, were collected in a cast recording, and on the cover of the CD are pictures of each member recording their song.

Whether it's stuttering or something else, anyone who has a challenge they feel is impossible to overcome can certainly learn a lot from these teenagers. The main point, according to Alexander, is to *not* go through life trying to hide. “Look at these kids putting themselves on the line,” he says. “Just the fact that there's an album with their pictures on it is inspiring. When I was their age, if anyone had associated me with the word stutter I'd feel like a freak. Whereas now it's cool to stutter,” he adds. “It's okay.”

In their pre-performance jitters, the members often ask Alexander what will happen if it takes too long for them to get the words out. “Eventually you'll get them out,” their proud director assures. “And besides, if you're acting, singing, and having a good time, it's not gonna make a difference how long it takes.”

The next time they ask themselves that question, perhaps they will remember their own unmistakable message in the first song on their CD:

I was scared from the beginning
but practice took away my fear.
Now it's clear
that I want people to hear
what we have to say.
What we have to say.

We aren't afraid to express.
We aren't afraid of what we want.
We each have our own type of way
of what we have to say.

Laura Schiller is a New York City-based freelance writer.