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Photographs by Shiho Fukada for The New York Times

Our Time Theater has been supported by actors like Jesse L. Martin, in hat, and Michael Cerveris, far right.

## Providing a Stage for Young Stutterers

By **MARK BLANKENSHIP**

Standing in a crowded rehearsal room at the Skirball Center for the Performing Arts this week, Taro Alexander, founder of the Our Time Theater Company, clapped out a rhythm and told his troupe of performers, “When I say ‘Our Time,’ you say ‘love!’” Soon enough, the word “love” rattled the walls, followed by “peace,” “positivity” and “acceptance.”

Everyone shouted. No one stuttered.

Not a major achievement, perhaps, at most theater companies, but Our Time is billed as “an artistic home for young people who stutter.”

The company had its annual gala on Monday night, at which its young actors performed alongside established veterans like Mariska Hargitay (“Law & Order: SVU”), Jesse L. Martin (“Law & Order”), Cynthia Nixon (“Sex and the City”), Michael Cerveris (currently on Broadway in “LoveMusik”), Kelli O’Hara (“The Light in the Piazza”) and some cast

members from Comedy Central’s “Daily Show.”

In its two ensembles — one for teenagers and one for children 8 to 12 — Our Time can support as many as 25 young people who stutter. All participation is free, and most of the adult staff members are volunteers, though Mr. Alexander says the \$350,000 annual budget quickly disappears in New York’s pricey theater market.

Mr. Alexander, himself a stutterer, founded Our Time in 2001, and every

year since each of its ensembles has written and performed a new musical that is produced in Manhattan before touring the country to play before conferences on stuttering.

The company also stages an annual program of one-act plays written and directed by its teenagers, and next year Our Time plans to release its second CD of original songs.

In the future, Mr. Alexander said, he hopes to expand the company and open a summer camp for stutters from other countries.

“Our Time needs to exist,” he said, “because it lets people say what they want to say with no pressure of thinking: ‘Oh, the clock’s ticking. What happens if it takes too long for me to

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## A place for creativity and confidence without the pressure.

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get out a word?’ ”

One striking element of Monday’s benefit performance — which also honored the acting career of the former stutterer Peggy Lipton — was its unusual pace. Though they sang without speech impediments, the young actors often stuttered while speaking.

“None of them were embarrassed, and that was fantastic,” Ms. Lipton said. “When I was young, I decided the best thing to do was not talk.”

Jonathan Greig, a 16-year-old high school junior and five-year Our Time veteran, said he valued the company for not making him play down his stutter.



Isaiah Fletcher, 17, performs with Sherie Rene Scott at a benefit.

“Our Time isn’t speech therapy,” he said. “It isn’t trying to fix you. It’s giving you a voice.”

While Mr. Alexander said he encouraged speech therapy for anyone who wanted it, he did not believe stutters should be required to seek treatment. That partly explains why stuttering is an element of Our Time’s performances: to foster acceptance.

Mr. Alexander, an actor, dancer and choreographer, has often used his industry connections to attract veteran performers to the group’s events.

Paul Rudd, for instance, has appeared in several Our Time productions and was on this year’s gala advisory committee.

“To see these kids get in front of an audience and speak, which is difficult for anyone, is incredibly moving,” he said in a telephone interview. “What they do just speaks to the power of joining a group and gaining confidence.”