



Eugene's Playback Theatre captures life in short vignettes based on personal stories. Courtesy

Actors celebrate heroes

A Eugene theater has taken to the Playback improv format, in which actors act out real-life personal experiences

Mark Baylis
Pulse Reporter

Two essential ingredients exist at the heart of any movement: heroes and dialogue. Eugene Playback Theatre introduced its audience to both concepts at a Downtown sidewalk performance during Saturday's Earth Day Celebration. Under the theme of "Superheroes in Our Community," the local troupe brought its unique approach to live performance to a small audience and mulling passersby for an hour of interactive, short-form improv.

The Playback Theatre format, created by Jonathan Fox in New York City in 1975, now enjoys popularity and success in more than 25 countries. Hannah Fox, daughter of the original founder, started Eugene's Playback Theatre in 1998.

During a Playback show, audience members share a personal story and watch as the actors spontaneously recreate the event in skit format. Sometimes comic, other times abstract, the format's stated purpose is to honor and illuminate the lives of individuals and community members by re-enacting their personal experiences.

"It's a tool to break the ice and generate dialogue," Playback actress and Boldness Institute director Lola Broomberg said. The Boldness Institute is a Eugene nonprofit organization that provided the grant for Saturday's performance.

"I'm not remotely interested in any written scripts," Broomberg said. "I want to do things where people are telling stories from their lives. ... Playback gives us tools to speak our own words, not someone else's."

Saturday's group of five performers, which included one conductor, a musician and three actors, was a scaled down version of the usual eight-member troupe. Audience members shared stories of important people in their own lives, then sat and watched their stories unfold. Such heroes included a gracious pastor, an older brother full of unsolicited advice and a fur-ball family cat.

While most improv shows are rooted in comedy, Playback's actors said they aren't overly concerned with getting a laugh.

"It's nice to get people laughing and enjoying themselves," Playback actor Jason Agar said. "But we really try to take the essence of a person's story and play it back for them, funny or not."

Broomberg agreed.

"It's about making contacts," she said. "And not just superficial contact like at the store. But when you

can get a stranger to trade stories with you, that's a really beautiful intimacy. I can't think of anything else I'd rather do."

The show followed earlier performances by the Teen Superheroes, a group of teens trained by Broomberg to act as superheroes. Each character was developed with his or her own personal mission, symbols, sound effects and gimmicks. The group performed street theater on Saturday at various locations.

Although the Playback shows were not focused on the Earth Day issues highlighting the day's events, Agar said the theme of "Heroes" performed by both groups is an essential one in the environmental movement.

"There is a lot that needs to happen," Agar said. "And there are a lot of inspirational people doing inspired things for the earth that need to be done to keep this place sunny."

Apart from regular public performances and shows at festivals and celebrations, Playback Theatre appears at schools, workshops, training sessions and detention and recovery centers. Upcoming shows include a performance on Saturday at Café Paradiso, located at 115 W. Broadway, at 8:00 p.m. Tickets are \$6-\$10 on a sliding scale.

Contact the Pulse reporter at markbaylis@dailyemerald.com.

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