

New Haven Play Project Takes Off The Mask

by BRIAN SLATTERY | Jun 26, 2019 7:40 am

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BRIAN SLATTERY PHOTOS

Diana Martinez and Mark P. Griffin.

Diana is a worker from Fellowship Place, which offers support to people with mental illness. Mark is a homeless man, everything he owns in a garbage bag at his feet. She offers him a cup of coffee, a sandwich, maybe a place to stay, maybe some help, and Mark doesn't know how to take any of it.

"I've been using," he says. He's scared. He's exasperated. "Is your program going to help or what?"

Diana listens and sits next to him. She's undeterred. She suggests that Mark call 2-1-1.

"I don't have a phone," he said. "I don't have anything." So Diana gives him her phone to use.

At last, he softens. The shield comes down. "I apologize," he says. "I've just been like this for the last 60 days and I don't think anyone cares. I don't think *you* care."

But he makes the call. "I want help," he said.

Mark then rises from the bench to give the story behind the story. In 1984, he says, “I was doing real bad.” He was addicted to drugs and hospitalized for a year. But he’s now been clean for 26 years. “I am grateful,” he says, “to be helping others and giving back.”

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Mark P. Griffin, Diana Martinez, and 12 other people on stage at Long Wharf were at their first tech rehearsal of *Survivors of Society Rising*. They had all developed the piece together. Each of them was in recovery from mental illness and/or addiction, making theater in the [Connecticut Mental Health Center](#)’s first partnership with Long Wharf under the auspices of the New Haven Play Project.

CMHC joins IRIS, which is in its second year of partnership, and the Towers, which is in its tenth year. This year, people from IRIS and the Towers collaborated to create a piece together, *Elders and Newcomers*, which paired the seniors of the Towers with representatives from IRIS’s women’s youth leadership program, “amazing young women who are finding their voices and their activism,” Nearing said.

Survivors of Society Rising will be performed Friday, June 28 at 7 p.m. at Long Wharf Theatre. *Elders and Newcomers* will be performed Sunday, June 30, at 2 p.m.

“We’ve been talking about working together for a while,” said Elizabeth Nearing, Long Wharf’s community partnership manager, about building a relationship with CMHC. Of the 14 participants in the program from CMHC, 10 of them had worked with [Theatre of the Oppressed](#) for three years, and thus had some experience in becoming a theater troupe and developing theater pieces from their experiences of living with mental illness. They all began working with Long Wharf at the beginning of March. They began with four weeks of theater workshops and

Nearing.

two weeks of storytelling workshops, and then spent the past eight weeks developing *Survivors of Society Rising* — made up, Nearing said, of the “truths in their lives.” What started off as a weekly engagement ended up becoming “pretty much full-time this week.”

“We created a play together,” she added, but “they are the authors and performers.”

The substance of *Survivors of Society Rising*, Nearing said, moves “from hopelessness to hope — it’s about finding hope in hopeless places. They’re hard stories, about hard-won joy.”

But of the program participants from CMHC, “most if not all of them have never done a tech process,” Nearing said — the rehearsal in which the script and the performance of it are married to lighting and sound cues and other technical aspects of the performance to create a full piece of theater. It’s also when performers finally meet the lighting and sound designers themselves as well as the stage manager.

“Tech is the first time, and often the only time, everybody’s in the room together,” Nearing said. Because the process could get a bit complex, it was also important that it be “as welcoming as possible.”

“Watching everyone cheer each other on — that’s the reason we do it,” she added.

“When we first came together, we didn’t know each other from the street,” said Alfred Gamble, one of the people in recovery at CMHC and a veteran of working at Theatre of the Oppressed. Three years at Theatre of the Oppressed changed that. But the ten original members also welcomed the four brand-new people. “We had needed some fresh people, some fresh ideas,” he said.

For Gamble, working on the project was a part of the recovery process. “If I tell you my story, I get to take off the mask,” he said. “These are the

Gamble.

things that can hurt. These are the things that hold us back.” Letting all of that out, he said, “you feel like a ton of bricks is off you. It’s therapeutic.”

Gamble’s own story, he said, was of never having a father. “If you don’t know where you came from, you don’t know where you’re going.” For Gamble, that meant a youth of struggling with mental illness, addiction to crack, and eventually prison for his drug use. He served time for 28 years. “I stand for millions of boys in the system,” he said.

In the lowest points of his mental illness, Gamble said, “I became the oppressor.” Getting help, and working hard, meant gaining compassion too. He learned how many others had similar stories, and how many others could have similar stories.

Eight years ago, Gamble got out of prison, and in the first year, he reconnected with his family. He met one of his father’s other kids, a half-brother. “We look just alike,” he said. “He cried about the wrongful things I went through.” His own history, he said, “could be a ‘yet’ for somebody — if it happened to somebody, it could happen to you.”



To begin their tech rehearsal, the people in the theater troupe circled up and did breathing exercises. They ran through a few questions about pacing and how to set lighting and sound cues. They got a tutorial about microphone use. Would they have headsets? one participant wanted to know.

“They would be great,” Nearing said, “but they’re very expensive.” Everyone laughed.

As the performers took their places, Nearing had some words of advice. “Let us know what we can do to support you,” she said. “It may not feel like you’re ready for this. You are. We trust you.”



Nearing was right. Even as the tech crew stopped and restarted in a couple places to straighten out their lighting and sound cues, the performers moved ably from scene to scene. And they told their stories. Tammy Imre showed how serving a sentence in prison meant having a lot of trouble finding a job or a place to live once she was released.

“I’ve been out of prison for nine years and my past gets thrown in my face every single day,” she said. “My hope is that I’m meeting new people. I have God in my life, and read my scripture every day.”



Do Walker and Paul Hammer.

Do Walker, Paul Hammer, Shannon Smith, and Joe Jackson showed how opioid addicts suffered the disappointment of family members who urged them to take “personal responsibility” for their actions even as they themselves were victims of drug companies who had pushed the painkillers on them in the first place.

Bob Forlano talked about how dealing with his mental illness also meant dealing with racism embedded in some of his own attitudes. He had worked hard, and was now on a better footing.

“I give back to my community,” he said. “I’m not a prisoner of my own mind. I stand before you a survivor.”

Survivors of Society Rising plays Friday, June 28 at 7 p.m. at Long Wharf Theatre, 222 Sargent Dr. Elders and Newcomers plays Sunday, June 30, at 2 p.m. Visit the theater’s [website](#) for tickets and more information.

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