

Truth Be Told



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A woman in need of subsidized housing is unfairly turned away for a second time. A homeless man meets someone willing to do more than just hand him some food. A father demands that his son kick an opioid addiction.

Those scenarios are playing out in a second-floor rehearsal space at Long Wharf Theatre, but the actors aren't just acting. They're sharing their own experiences under the auspices of the New Haven Play Project, an effort to shine a spotlight on people whose stories are often left untold—and to let those people decide how to tell them. This year's project brings two performances to the Long Wharf stage: *Survivors of Society Rising*, directed by Elizabeth Nearing and created in partnership with the Connecticut Mental Health Center (CMHC) Foundation; and *Elders and Newcomers*, directed by Nearing and Sharece Sellem and created in partnership with The Towers elder housing complex and Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services (IRIS).

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Since March 1, Nearing and dramaturg Madeline Charne have been meeting with clients of CMHC, starting with four weeks of building theater skills. 15 of those clients then opted to create a production together, which turned into *Survivors*. At a rehearsal just nine days before their big performance on June 28, actors warmed up. They improvised a call-and-response diction exercise. They stood in a circle and tossed hand claps back and forth. Then they hunkered down with their scripts, pencils and questions for Nearing and Charne.

Finally, it was time for the first full-length run-through. Actors found it hard not to pause and question or respond to what was happening as the 32 short scenes unfolded, but mostly they sat and watched attentively as their friends and stage colleagues got up and enacted some of the seminal moments of their own experiences with homelessness, addiction, suicidal thoughts and more.

The subject matter is serious—depressing, even. It’s also a window into a New Haven that many in the audience may be accustomed to side-stepping. And ultimately, Nearing says, *Survivors of Society Rising* is a play about the “journey from hopelessness to hope.”

Though the relationship with CMHC is brand new, Long Wharf and The Towers—providing senior living and services downtown “based upon Jewish values and traditions”—have been partnering for 10 years, helping residents articulate and share their stories. Towers residents make up the “elders” in *Elders and Newcomers*, while members of the youth leadership program at IRIS are the “newcomers.” Together, they create the “widest age range I think I’ve ever seen on stage here,” Nearing says, from 14 to 97. The common thread is “stories about home.”

Towers residents went to every Long Wharf production this season, then used them as jumping-off points to talk with Sellem about their own experiences. Facilitating those conversations brought some surprises. For example, after seeing *Miller, Mississippi* with its dark currents of family dysfunction and racism, Sellem says people spoke frankly about issues surrounding race in a way she admits she probably wouldn’t have. “They just came right out with it,” she says, impressed by their candor. Later in the season, Long Wharf’s production of *An Iliad* elicited “some really vivid, touching stories about war.”

At the same time, Nearing and Laurel McCormack of IRIS were working with IRIS youth, meeting every Friday to teach them about the important roles of women, particularly women of color, in American history “and then looking at their own stories.” Their narratives will be interspersed with those from the “elders” in the final production.

Elders and Newcomers “really represents New Haven,” Sellem says. The process of meeting on Sundays to talk about the productions they’d seen and their own stories also had a binding effect on the Towers group. “You see people really taking care of each other and rooting for each other,” she says. “It’s a great representation of community.”

Future iterations of the New Haven Play Project are in the works. For the next three years, the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art will fund programming to address Islamophobia, a subject Nearing is excited to examine with city residents. The Project is part of a nationwide movement toward community-based theater that began at The Public Theater in New York City.

The aim is “creating theater that is not only for the people, but by and of the people as well,” says a Long Wharf press release. The challenge for Long Wharf, Nearing says, is “figuring out how to build the best environment and container to make the plays and the stories the way people want to make them.”

And then to present it to the people.

New Haven Play Project

Long Wharf Theatre – 222 Sargent Dr, New Haven ([map](#))

Survivors of Society Rising: June 28, 7pm

Elders and Newcomers: June 30, 2pm

Tickets \$20, available on a sliding scale; free passes for New Haven library card holders at all branches
(first come, first served)

(203) 787-4282

www.longwharf.org/new-haven-play-project

Written and photographed by Kathy Leonard Czepiel.

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