

AMERICAN THEATRE

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Wanted: Performers Who Stutter

Taro Alexander's company nurtures creativity and confidence, on stage and off

For 31-year-old actor Taro Alexander, founding a theatre company is something of a family tradition. His father, Robert Alexander, started the groundbreaking Living Stage Theatre Company of Washington, D.C., and his brother Jace Alexander is one of the founders of the well-known Off-Broadway troupe Naked Angels. For Taro Alexander, the dream of running a theatre for young people was a natural.

He realized that dream in 2001, when he became the founder and artistic director of the New York City-based Our Time Theatre Company, the first and only not-for-profit theatre company dedicated to providing an artistic home for people who stutter.

Alexander knows firsthand the difficulties faced by people who stutter. He has lived with the problem since he was a child and did not meet another person who stuttered until his mid-twenties. Like many individuals who stutter, Alexander grew up feeling isolated and alone—he experienced fears and anxieties with everyday tasks, such as asking a stranger for directions or talking on the phone. Surprisingly, Alexander found comfort in acting and performing, because it allowed him to express himself without the listener cutting him off or finishing his sentences for him.

“Communicating is something we are all born doing,” says Alexander. “If you take away someone’s right to communicate, you are taking a huge part of them away.”

BY TARA BRACCO

Theatre helped Alexander overcome the fear and shame of stuttering. He studied theatre professionally at the Duke Ellington School for the Arts in Washington, D.C., and landed roles in the national tour of *Lost in Yonkers* and the Off-Broadway hit *Stomp*. He later learned through the Stuttering Foundation of America that other accomplished actors, including James Earl Jones, Austin Pendleton and Jimmy Stewart, also once stuttered. Remarkably, people who stutter tend to be more fluent when they act and sing.

Alexander knew that if theatre could help him, it could probably help others, too. “Theatre is meant to heal and make the world a better place,” he says. “I wanted to create a place free from ridicule where young people who stutter could discover the joy of creating and performing original theatre at their own pace and in their own time.”

The idea was so progressive that initially it was challenging to find participants. “Most people who stutter are not easy to find because they are hiding,” he says. Mostly through recommendations from speech-language pathologists, Alexander found a group of teenagers interested in being part of Our Time. The current company is comprised of 10 teens, ages 12–17, most of whom have no prior theatrical



ELIZABETH MENDEZ

Taking control: artistic director Taro Alexander, center, and Our Time Theatre Company.



LEIGH PENNESHAKER

Passion and point of view: Taro Alexander, Keith Russell and Linda Gjonbalaj in rehearsal.

training. Our Time has no audition process and serves all members free of charge.

Alexander is careful to point out that the company is not in the business of curing stuttering. “I don’t want to take away from what speech therapists are doing. I want to enhance what they are doing, and I think theatre is a great tool.”

Through weekly workshops, held on Saturday afternoons from October to May, Our Time teens study acting, singing, playwriting, dancing and drumming with professional theatre artists. After learning the basics of theatre, the members create and write their own play, which is performed for a public audience each June in a professional Off-Broadway theatre. All workshops are led by Our Time’s staff: Alexander, managing director Chelsea Lacatena and musical director Everett Bradley. During the summer months, the company travels and performs its work at national stuttering conferences.

Now in its third year, Our Time has already gained national and worldwide attention—there have been requests to perform throughout the U.S. and in Australia. Our Time has documented its work through a CD of songs and a film about the workshop and production process.

Alexander emphasizes the “process-over-product” philosophy taught to him by his father, a longtime innovator in the youth theatre field. Using his own curriculum, he carefully balances lessons to ensure that each workshop challenges the teens and gives them obtainable goals. Teens are encouraged to be themselves, to be open about their stuttering, to trust and collaborate with fellow company members—and to share their ideas without fearing that someone will make fun of them.

AS OUR TIME TEEN LIDIA EROKHINA, 17, explains, “Our Time is a very fun place to express how you feel. Everyone gets to say what they want and they don’t get interrupted.” Adds staff member Lacatena, “The energy is on the performers’ passion and their point of view, not on their speech.”

Since company members write the plays themselves, the teens have complete ownership over the material, which helps instill feelings of confidence and comfort on stage. Even so, the idea of performing can be nerve-wracking. “If you are a person who stutters, performing on stage is a huge fear. By acting and talking in front of people you are overcoming that fear,” says Alexander. “The power, the sense of accomplishment and the self-esteem that you get from doing that is immeasurable.”

Company members notice the impact Our Time has on their lives. Jonathan Greig, 13, recalls, “Before Our Time, I was really quiet and didn’t want to talk much. But now I’m more talkative.” And Linda Gjonbalaj, 17, says, “Now I know I can speak for myself.”

The company’s annual benefit, hosted by Tony-winning actress Jane Alexander, will be held May 10 at the Lucille Lortel Theatre in New York City and will honor Dr. Alan Rabinowitz, a successful author, explorer and person who stutters. Then the company launches an intense rehearsal process in preparation for its production at Theatre Three in Manhattan, which opens on June 18.

“These kids are my heroes. They have shown more courage than any other group of people I have seen,” Alexander says. “And they have done it in a way that is so joyful, fun, creative and caring. It blows me away.” **AT**

Tara Bracco is a freelance writer and performance poet in New York City.