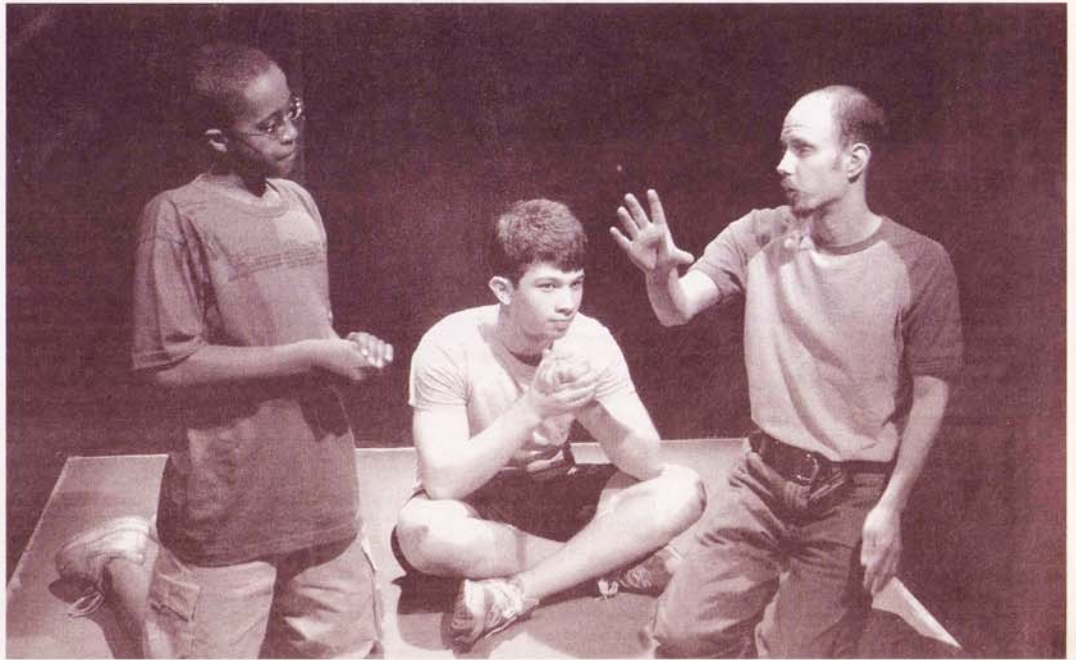


THESPIAN TALK THERAPY

Children who stutter often can speak smoothly onstage

BY JOE DZIEMIANOWICZ
DAILY NEWS FEATURE WRITER

Performing onstage can make even nimble speakers freeze up and get tongue-tied. But it can actually have the opposite effect on stutters. “It’s easier for many stutters to say lines than to have a casual conversation after a show,” says Phillip Schneider, Ph.D., an associate professor of communication disorders at Queens College CUNY. “Onstage you’re pretending to communicate,” he says. “You’re prepared for what you’ll say and how you’ll say it in a play. It’s a wonderful medium in



REBECCA MCALPIN

ON A ROLE: Our Time founder Taro Alexander directs budding actors Jonathan Greig, left, and Yoni Messing

which to build confidence.”

More than 3 million people in the U.S., roughly 1% of the population, stutter. It affects four times as many men as women. Stuttering usually begins between the ages of 2 and 5.

Nobody knows what causes stuttering, but genetics and neurophysiology play major parts. People who stutter aren’t more emotional, nervous or anxious than nonstutterers.

“There seem to be timing problems in systems in the brain that signal the speech mechanism,” says speech pathologist Catherine Montgomery, executive director of the American Institute for Stuttering on W. 20th St. “The breakdown creates a locking of the vocal cords.”

Taro Alexander, 32, has been a stutterer since he was 5. He knows what it’s like to have words get stuck in his throat. As a child growing up in Washington, D.C., Alexander would raise his hand in response to a teacher’s question and then, horribly, struggle to express himself.

“I’d start to answer, then have a block,” he says. “The whole class would burst into laughter or the teach-

er would say, ‘Okay, you’re taking too long. Who’s next?’”

But when Alexander started performing in high-school plays, he found that his stutter lessened dramatically or even disappeared.

“Knowing the script helped,” says Alexander, an actor and director who moved to New York 13 years ago. “But, for me, it was about becoming another character. The person I was playing didn’t stutter, so I didn’t stutter. It’s a mystery, really, why my speech improves.”

Three years ago, Alexander founded the theater company Our Time for teenagers who stutter. Last week, 13-year-old Jonathan Greig, along with nine other young actors from Manhattan, Brooklyn, Connecticut and New Jersey, rehearsed the new play being presented this weekend at Theater 3 on W. 43rd St. (Tickets are \$5 each; for reservations, call 212-414-9696.)

“I like speaking onstage,” says Greig, an upper West Sider who will attend school at Berkeley Carroll in Brooklyn this fall. He learned of the group through his speech therapist.

“After I’m onstage I’m more confident that I can speak,” he says, “that I can be fluent.”

“This is the most powerful tool I’ve seen arrive for stutterers in 34 years,” says Schneider, an adviser to the group. “It’s not a cure. Kids still stutter onstage and off. The value of this therapeutic opportunity is that it helps kids realize that they can do anything, even though they stutter.”

“Adolescence is a time to stay home if you have a pimple,” Schneider continues. “If you have something quirky, that really costs you. What heals you is when you take secrets and put them out in the fresh air.”

The confidence boost derived from facing one’s fears lasts even after the curtain comes down on the show. The young actors report that they are more outspoken in school. They’ve ordered a pizza over the phone — a big deal for someone with a pronounced stutter. They’ve reclaimed their voices — and their freedom.

“We give the kids an environment where they can be who they really are,” says Alexander, who jokes that

play performance will last anywhere from “two to 10 hours.”

Corom Buksha, 15, who lives in Spanish Harlem and goes to Frederick Douglass Academy, will revel in every moment, even though he’s got a small role.

No one in the audience will say, “What’s wrong with you?” or “Hurry up.”

“Being onstage makes me feel good,” says Buksha, who has been an Our Time member for three years. “It’s a good feeling having people clap for you. I can stutter and they don’t care. It makes me feel great.”

Greig and Buksha have a message they’d like to send to offstage line prompters — in schoolrooms, restaurants, stores, on playgrounds, wherever — who can’t resist finishing their sentences: Pipe down.

“I don’t like people filling in my words,” says Buksha. “I know what I want to say. And what I have to say is worth waiting for.”