

Stutterers’ Words Flow More Easily On the Stage

By JESSE McKINLEY

On Sunday night David Nachman, a handsome 15-year-old and Hunter College High School freshman who has stuttered since the age of 3 stood onstage at the Blue Heron Arts Center on East 24th Street in Manhattan and confronted one of his biggest fears: a theater packed full of people, all waiting for him to speak.

“God, I wonder what my mother would think if she ever knew I left this place,” David said, speaking the opening words of a scene softly but clearly. “She loved living here.”

David was just one of seven teenage and seven adult actors who performed last weekend at the Blue Heron as part of the inaugural production of the Our Time Theater Company, a new troupe devoted to being “an artistic home for people who stutter.”

The company was founded last fall by Taro Alexander, a 30-year-old actor who has been a company member of the downtown performance hit “Stomp” for three and a half years.

Mr. Alexander, who has stuttered since he was 5 years old, said the idea for the company came to him long ago, during his days at a performing arts high school in Washington.

“What I found was that when I performed I was completely fluent onstage,” he said. “I could speak completely normally. I was amazed.”

What Mr. Alexander had touched on was something that speech pathologists have long observed: stuttering often disappears when people perform or sing. The list of performers who do stutter or have had a stutter is long, including Carly Simon, James Earl Jones and Bruce Willis.

Dr. Diane Paul-Brown, director of clinical issues in speech-language pathology for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, a national trade group for speech pathologists in Rockville, Md., said: “Acting



Chris Maynard for The New York Times

Lindsay Campbell, left, has tea with Grandma, played by Taro Alexander, with the Our Time Theater Company.

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is a different form of communication. People who stutter are able to get into a different role and to speak with fluency. They're not communicating information about themselves, and that's one of the things that reduces communication pressure."

The cause of stuttering, which affects some three million Americans, remain mysterious, combining both physical and psychological elements. Vowels are not difficult for stutterers; plosive consonants like D, P and T are.

But according to the speech-language-hearing association, 50 percent of people who stutter have a family history of the disorder, suggesting a possible genetic link.

Whatever the reason, stuttering can be debilitating. The actor Austin Pendleton, who is member of the company's advisory board, says he remembers times when "people who stutter who would literally not leave their rooms."

"It's a thing you spend your entire life addressing," said Mr. Pendleton, who has stuttered since childhood. "I remember all through my adolescence I would announce to people I wanted to be an actor, and they would look utterly bewildered."

Paradoxically, Mr. Pendleton said he was probably best known for his work in "My Cousin Vinny" (1992) in which he played a stuttering public defender.

"If you use it properly, it can become part of the life of the character," he said. "The whole joke of that part was that he had a stutter, which is just more evidence that God is a kidder."

At Sunday's performance, the primary effort was to just get the stories across; all of them were written by company members. The first act, which featured teenage performers, stayed light, with three short sketches about football players, a satire about Romeo and Juliet and a takeoff on "A Star is Born," which



Chris Maynard for The New York Times

Elizabeth Mendez plays a mother, Zied Hamada a stuttering son.

ended with the entire cast singing. And while there were several moments of verbal struggle, the performances never stopped.

Lee Caggiano, a speech pathologist from, Syosset on Long Island, whose 19-year-old son stutters, was in the audience.

"While I thought the performers were brave, I think it was more important for the audience to see what some of these kids have to live with," she said. "For a parent it can be excruciatingly painful. You know they are in pain, and you don't know how to help."

The second half of the evening was decidedly more serious, with one sketch featuring Zied Hamada apologizing for his speech impediment to his dying mother. It was a scene, like many others that night, Mr. Alexander said, drawn from an exercise in which actors wrote monologues addressed to important people in their lives.

For all the emotion involved, Mr. Alexander and his troupe also have a healthy sense of humor; the program for the show noted that the performances would last "anywhere from 2 to 10 hours, depending on the actors' fluency."

And while this weekend's run of three shows was brief, Mr. Alexander has bigger plans. The company, a program of Naked Angels, the Off Broadway troupe, plans to go to Anaheim, Calif., this month to perform at the National Stuttering Association's annual convention. Beyond that, Mr. Alexander would like to find a permanent home for the troupe and increase the number of actors.

"I just think the arts are such a healing thing," he said. "It's actually very simple. You don't really have a voice, and then all of a sudden you have a voice. You can see what kind of power that has."