

BED-STUY SENIORS GO BROADWAY

**Program proves it's never too late to learn to act or
kick up your heels in "A Chorus Line"**



BY JOYCE SHELBY Tuesday, April 8th 2008, 4:00 AM

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The drama is palpable as first-time actors Elizabeth Norfort (l.) and Dorothy Jasey take part in an acting program.

Forget the Cupid Shuffle and the Electric Slide.

Seniors at a center in Bedford-Stuyvesant are going old-school, singing and doing a dance routine from "A Chorus Line" as they get ready to put on a really big show in June.

"Forward, 2, 3, kick! Back, 2, 3, kick! Slide, cross, slide, heel! Let me see some attitude!" instructor

Shannon Marshall shouted to the seniors one day recently, above the song "One" - the "Chorus Line" finale.

The dancers at the Wayman Tompkins Park Senior Center are amateurs. But their coach is a professional theater teacher who conducts weekly classes at the center, courtesy of a new program sponsored by Inside Broadway.

Michael Presser, executive director of Inside Broadway, said, "Seniors want to be active, stimulated and connected to the larger things happening in a cultural center like New York City. . . . We are encouraging more seniors to come out and take advantage of our program."

Inside Broadway is a 25-year-old group best known for introducing children to musical theater. In January, the group launched "The Magic of Broadway," a program for seniors at 17 centers around the city. Four are in Brooklyn.

The "Magic" curriculum includes a discussion of Great White Way history and some of its best known songwriters. Classes are run much like those a student new to acting would take, Presser said.

Marshall began her session last week with warm-up exercises. Then, seniors who were physically able formed their chorus line. Improvisations came next.

"The seniors aren't as physical as younger actors are, but they are very sharp," said Marshall, 26, of Bay Ridge. "We do activities that make use of the mind more than the ody."

Ollie Fraley, 83, whose improvisations had the entire class laughing, said, "I've always been a ham; I love this outlet. I wouldn't be memorizing so much without this class."

"This class gives me something to do," said Fraley's longtime friend Rosalee Allen, "and you forget about your problems."

Mary Thompson, 77, said she'd never done any acting before the "Magic" class. "I just picked it up," she said. And while she was doing her comic improvisations, she left her walker behind.

The exercises clearly got the seniors' minds off any physical ailments they had. That alone made the class worthwhile, said Luz Burgos, director of the senior center.

"It's great to see our seniors laughing and enjoying themselves," she said.

"The Magic of Broadway" is also being offered at the Fort Greene Albany, the Fort Greene Hazelbrooks and the JASA HES senior centers, with funding from the City's Department for the Aging, the Department of Cultural Affairs and City Council.

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Ollie Fraley, 83, is in the hot seat surrounded by class members as she prepares to perform an improv piece about not wanting to cut her nails. But she wasn't worried. "I've always been a ham," she said. "I love this outlet."

Bed-Stuy seniors go Broadway



Seniors who are physically able (l.) take part in a dance exercise at the senior center. The group rehearses dance moves to the song "Ease on Down the Road" from the musical "The Wiz." "The seniors aren't as physical as younger actors are, but they are very sharp," instructor Shannon Marshall said.



Top, seniors Mary Thompson (l.) and Rosa Lee Allen crack up while performing an improv piece where Thompson wants to break her own arm. At left, instructor Shannon Marshall of Bay Ridge (r.) goes over some pointers for a group of senior actors before they tackle more improvisational exercises.

Alta Beeks (l.) and Mary Koonce work on acting exercise at Wayside Tompkins Park Senior Center in Bed-Stuy as part of "Magic of Broadway."



Photos by LINDA ROSIER