

Spring Lake Village's Playreaders Breathe Life into Classic and Original Works

For resident Howard Gitlin, one of the co-chairs of Spring Lake Village's Playreaders, performing plays is not just about putting on a show — it's about trying and succeeding at something new.



The Spring Lake Village Playreaders in action.

In his 10-month tenure, Howard has directed three plays, among them an adaptation of a Gertrude Stein lecture and an August Strindberg play, "The Stronger," about two women in love with the same man. Essentially a monologue, it calls for two actresses, only one of whom speaks. Howard is also a playwright and an actor. His most challenging acting experience at Spring Lake Village happened when a reader became ill two days before the performance, and Howard, the understudy, was tapped to step in. "Pulling off that performance was one of my proudest moments," he said.

Play reading is a style of theater in which the actors present dramatic or comical readings of narrative material without costumes, props, scenery or special lighting. Actors use only scripts and vocal and facial expressions to help the audience understand and get immersed in the story.

Howard is one of approximately 30 readers and six directors all committed to bringing stories to life for their community. Performing at Spring Lake Village's 75-seat theater, the Playreaders repertoire is wide and varied, from Neil Simon classics to resident originals. The closet that stores their materials is overflowing with scripts.

Playreaders has a long history at Spring Lake Village. Residents like Nancy Dill, John Norall, Van Moller and his wife, Carolyn helped to nurture and guide enthusiastic readers and directors.

Frances Tauber, who has been running the group with Howard for the last 10 months after taking over from fellow Spring Lake Village resident Jim Masters, has debuted some of her work with the group. "To see your words come to life is a most amazing thing," Frances said. "It opens up all sorts of possibilities"

Though it's not a requirement, most people in Playreaders have some theater background. Jim started building his performing arts resume when he was in high school. "I was in a play, on a 20-foot ladder, and my only lines were to sing, 'My Bonnie lies over the ocean,'" Jim remembered with a laugh. He caught the acting bug early and continued to perform throughout his adult life. He brought that passion to Spring Lake Village.

During his seven years in the group, Jim has learned a thing or two. One lesson is that creativity plays a big role in performance. In Playreaders, directors are free to use artistic license, whether that means eliminating text or even removing entire characters. The idea is to make each reading their own.

For Frances, her main takeaway is to take chances creatively and follow her intuition. “Not everyone is going to like what you do, but criticism makes a person stronger and more discerning.”

Right now, Frances and Howard are eager to add new members, especially those who wish to direct. No experience is necessary. All are welcome! Additionally, Frances is working on a longer play and aims to get it on the stage.

“Directing is about helping the actor discover the character through the words,” Frances said. “Once they embrace the character, they are transformed and amazed by the audience’s response.”

People often ask Frances why she was so keen on playwriting. For her, the act of creation is an end in itself—whether writing, acting or directing. She says, “Just doing it is the purpose.”