

Creativity & Culture With Elders of the LES

 leshistorymonth.org/2015/05/13/les-elders/

As most everyone knows by now...May is [Lower East Side History Month!](#)

And what better way to celebrate than to tune into the incredible activity of the elders of the LES. Our seniors are the very core of neighborhood history and culture. They have lived the longest and witnessed the most, they have weathered incredible change, and – most importantly – they have stayed here long enough to tell their stories...so we better listen.

As a former [SPARC](#) (Seniors Partnering with Artists Citywide) artist-in-residence, I have come to know and appreciate the creativity of older adults. I have been humbled by the intergenerational exchange and dialogue that these kinds of programs foster, and am always glad to see creative aging in action.

There are several exciting and innovative projects in the LES, that have come to our attention this month...

—

It's Tuesday morning, and across the street from the FAB storefront a [Dances for Variable Populations \(DVPnyc\)](#) class is in session at [Rod Rodgers Dance Company](#). I walk in slowly, hesitant to interrupt the flow of this process, this group of older women bound together by a desire and energy to stay active. To literally keep moving. The enthusiastic and assertive voice of DVP founder/dance maker, Naomi Goldberg Haas, strains over the music. "Go big!" she yells, as women swirl happily around the room. Haas started DVP in 2005 as a dance company and educational organization dedicated to promote creative movement among people of all abilities and ages with a focus on older adults.

DVP uses the power of movement to build community and create site-specific theatrical dance pieces throughout the city. The work is a combined effort of diverse individuals and professional dancers, fostered through a variety of training opportunities including both paid and free classes and workshops.

Workshop participant Nancy Eder says: "People come with and without physical disabilities, wheelchairs, one man missing a leg. Some who can't stand do the exercises seated, but ALL of us keep coming back week after week. The culmination in a public dance performance says it all...Especially since we are not dancers. She [Naomi] has opened my eyes to exercise and dance and I now appreciate dance in a new way."

Having my own experience in [Authentic Movement \(AU\)](#), a dance therapy technique originating in the 1950s, and being part of a group including Authentic Movement pioneer Aileen Crow –now near 90 – I appreciate the generation gap between myself and these seasoned movers. They know what it is to be human, to have a body, to age creatively and with grace. Their bodies have tested the limits, borne children, fought cancer...and won.

Naomi is busy working/moving with several groups at once...Currently, as a SPARC artist-in-residence at [Mott Street Senior Center](#), she is preparing participants for a performance on May 14th, 10:30am at the DeSalvio Playground, located at 44 Spring Street. The performance is FREE.

—

In the building next door, at [Teatro Circulo](#), a group of seniors is preparing for their show, [Abuelito dime tu \(Grandpa, tell me a story\)](#), opening TODAY, Wednesday, May 13 and showing tomorrow, May 14th at 6:30 pm. This is the culmination of a 3-month theater training program, a pilot initiative with the goal of providing older adults with an alternative creative outlet to tell their stories. Their stories are playful and costumes vary from elaborate traditional Latin dance dresses to actors who simply don hats to get into character. As different groups of older adults move on

and off stage, improvising, laughing, mixing English, Spanish, and Mandarin languages with hand gestures, I sit in awe. This small basement theater on East 4th St. is the perfect microcosm of the rich cultural melting pot that is the LES, and I am glad to be part of the mix.



Abuelito dime tu, dress rehearsal, Teatro Circulo, image via FABnyc & Teatro Circulo

Farther south, the older adults at Manny Cantor Center are part of [Moving Stories](#), a project facilitated by artist-in-residence and LES local Laura Nova, another SPARC artist. Moving Stories encourages senior citizens to combine physical movement and memory through a series of storytelling workshops and group walks throughout the LES. This interactive walking tour includes childhood recollections of first kisses, riding hands-free on a bike along the East River, and shopping for Saturday suits; the journey “unravels stories of people and places, preserving personal identity, community and connection”. The project allows residents and visitors, both old and new, to reflect on the rich history and culture of the LES while inspiring them to make new memories of their own.

Witness the project first hand at the opening this evening, Wednesday, May 13, as part of [the Annual Older Adults Art Exhibition](#), at the Jewish Communal Fund Gallery. Moving Stories will be featured in an installation in the lobby of the Manny Cantor Center in celebration of Older Americans Month and LES History Month.

Visit their website to view a schedule of events and tours including Moving Stories at the [Ideas City Festival](#) on May 30th!

Even farther south – but still within the historic boundaries of the LES – the community center lobby of a NYCHA housing project in the Two Bridges neighborhood will soon be transformed...

Ceramic artist [Syma](#), another LES local, has been working with seniors to create clay tiles depicting the elders’ memories, wishes, and hopes for the future of their neighborhood. The brightly colored ‘Memory Tiles’ are now ready and awaiting an accompanying ‘Panel of Wishes’, in their final phase of completion in Syma’s studio. Inspired by her workshop participants, Syma is transforming their visions into whimsical clay imagery of her own...all the while

recalling the magical process of witnessing the older adults work with clay for the first time and proudly completing their tiles.

Syma herself is an older adult with a long family history in the LES, so [the Memories and Wishes Project](#) is a chance to reconnect in many ways. The beautiful and arduous collaborative mural will soon be permanently installed in the Hamilton Madison House Community Center Lobby.

If you'd like to give the project a boost of support, please donate on their [website](#) and view their [Facebook page](#) full of photos.

—

To move is to understand and be in command of your body in space. To make theater is to build narrative, to reinvent the familiar, and to insert the surreal into the everyday. To make art is to dream, to reinterpret the world in a language without words. To be creative in all these ways is empowering, invigorating, sometimes humorous, and often complex. Perhaps most importantly, to make art is to play, and that's what keeps you young.



Memory Tile, Memories and Wishes Project, Image by Syma



Poa Shen, Kung Fu Master, Leads exercises in LaGuardia Park on Madison Street, Moving Stories, Image by Laura Nova

Words by Anna Adler. She is an artist, educator, and cultural worker based in NYC. She is the Operations Coordinator at Fourth Arts Block, as well as an adjunct professor at Marymount Manhattan College, Dept. of Art & Art History. Upcoming shows include 'The Temporary Tribe', a masked walk, at [the Prague Quadrennial](#) this June.