

# A young company creating theatre for the elderly

PAM SCHWEITZER used to be a worker with Task Force – after many years working as an adviser in Theatre-in-Education – now she works for Age Exchange. At Task Force she worked with pensioners and teenagers and discovered the wealth of material available in the reminiscences of the pensioners.

At last year's Pensioners' Day of Action, they produced a show "Just Deserts", a history of OAPs onwards from the Industrial Revolution and a wryly humorous look at the voting potential of pensioners who, it's estimated, will make up 1 in 2 of voters by the year 2000.

It was from that day and a modest earlier show, "Mary Spriggs" – the life-story of a woman based on the stories of those she'd been working with – that led to the formation of Age Exchange. She could see, says Schweitzer, that there was a demand for a professional company to do work reflecting the

have already produced an impressive array of work. Their first show this year was "The 50 Years Ago Show" which toured OAP Day Centres and sheltered homes during the summer and attracted a good deal of attention (it was featured on Channel 4's pensioners' series, "Years Ahead").

Devised through a seven-week period of workshops and discussions with pensioners, the scripts for the show evolved out of the company's improvisations around the pensioners' accounts of life in London's East End in the thirties. Against a background of widespread unemployment, job marches and the rising tide of anti-semitism, the show recounts the struggles of one working-class family to survive – and emerged as a lively, and, at times, extremely moving account, not without contemporary echoes in Britain of the eighties.

The show was also punctuated by songs from the thirties (a lot of old favourites and quite a few new to me but clearly not to the OAP audience who greeted them warmly). Winningly played by Age Exchange's then musical director Barry Wilmore, he and an engaging quartet (Ann Philpott, Tom Austin and especially Diann Hancock as the harassed mother and John Anton the unemployed son drawn towards the Blackshirts by economic despair) won the affection of their audience the afternoon I saw the group in a North London Day Centre.

versatility and ability immediately to engage their audiences' sympathies and attention. That "The 50 Years Ago Show" worked was due not only to these combined talents but also because, by using the actual experiences of ordinary people as a basis, their audiences recognised in the show a reflection of their own lives.

## Progenitor

Since then Schweitzer has not been idle. As the company's progenitor and director (also its fund-raiser and administrator), she's also produced "Alive and Kicking" for this year's Pensioners Day of Action (it played to over 10,000 OAPs in London's Festival Gardens); is already planning a Christmas show along similar lines to "The 50 Years Ago Show" (taking the memories of pensioners' past Christmases and creating a script from the material); and another project is in the pipeline about the experiences of immigrants – Jews and Asians – in the East End.

Just now, however, Age Exchange have started touring their autumn show. Schweitzer regards it as an exciting new development. "Of Whose Heart Cometh Hope" is a history of the Co-operative Women's Guild, commissioned by the Co-op to mark their centenary. The script, says Schweitzer, is taken verbatim from



Age Exchange company – front row (L to R) TOM AUSTIN, DIAN HANCOCK, JOHN ANTON, back row (L to R) PAM SCHWEITZER, ANN PHILPOTT and BARRY WILMORE.

seventies and eighties, interviewed by researcher Chrys Salt. The show charts the campaign by its members for women's rights down through the decades via such events as the Spanish Civil War, the Jarrow March, etc – and is seen through the eyes of four women. Spanning 100 years of achievement, and culminating in a pageant, it presents, even for the resourceful Schweitzer, something of a problem with only a cast of four. Judging by past form, no doubt it will be overcome.

Despite the heavy workload, Schweitzer is firmly committed to the work of providing pensioners with entertainment that challenges and does not patronise them. In addition to the shows themselves, Age Exchange have also produced an excellent, handsomely illustrated book that accompanied "The 50 Years Ago Show" (recollections from the pensioners' workshops that didn't make it into the show) which Schweitzer and her husband did in



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