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Local respite options

"Elephant's Graveyard" takes a close look at getting older and being "put out to graze."

Jade McCutcheon's play raises issues that are addressed every day by Citizens Who Care, a local agency that provides social support services to Yolo County adults and their family caregivers. These services are provided by trained, caring volunteers, with the support of our professional staff.

The in-home respite visiting program provides family caregivers of older adults with a weekly break from caregiving. CWC provides companionship and social support to both the older adult and the caregiver, thanks to respite volunteers who are trained and supported by CWC's professional staff.

The convalescent hospital visiting program provides companionship and mental stimulation to socially isolated, elderly residents. Volunteers of all ages are matched with residents. Pet-visiting volunteers bring their friendly, well-behaved pets to lift the spirits of residents. Each convalescent hospital volunteer is trained by CWC's director of volunteers.

The "time off for caregivers" program offers site-based social respite activities at the Davis Senior Center two Saturdays each month, giving caregivers a five-hour break each program day. A healthy lunch and stimulating activities are provided. CWC's staff provides periodic individual assessments of the participants.

Citizens Who Care can be reached at 1260 Lake Blvd., Suite 208, in Davis. Contact them at (530) 758-3704 or citizenswho care@omsoft.com.

The CWC Web site also provides additional helpful links:

- Del Oro Caregiver Resource Center: <http://www.deloro.org>
- Family Caregiver Alliance: <http://www.caregiver.org>
- California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform: <http://www.canhr.org>
- Vacancy information and a directory of residential care facilities in Yolo County and California: <http://www.findavacancy.com>
- Medicare (includes nationwide nursing home information): <http://www.medicare.gov>
- Information on caring for Alzheimer's patients: <http://www.alz.org/carefinder>
- The National Senior Citizens Law Center offers a booklet, "Twenty Common Nursing Home Problems and How to Resolve Them," for \$7.95 at <http://www.nslc.org>
- The Mature Market Institute has a free guide, "Becoming an Effective Advocate for Care," available at <http://www.maturemarketinstitute.com>.

— Enterprise staff

Age-old issue

Carefully developed play addresses quality-of-life issues for older people

By Bev Sykes
ENTERPRISE DRAMA CRITIC

Elephants are amazing animals. They're highly intelligent and live in wonderfully structured societies. They understand that it takes a village to raise a child. They support each other throughout their lives. They go into deep depressions, if isolated in zoos without companions.

And there's a reverence about them, when it comes to the end of life. Elephants know when they're dying. They leave the herd and walk ceremoniously to the graveyard that contains all their ancestors, and they lie down in the bones of those who have gone before them.

When an elephant dies, the other members of the herd gather around it: They cover the elephant up, and they hang around it for days, just to be close.

This majestic creature's respect for age and dying was the inspiration for a play called "The Elephant's Graveyard," written and directed by Jade McCutcheon, which opens Friday and continues through Nov. 1 at the Mondavi Center's Larry and Rosalie Vanderhoef Studio Theatre.

The U.S. population age 65 and over is expected to double in size within the next 25 years. By 2030, almost one out of five Americans — some 72 million people — will be 65 years or older. The age group 85 and older is the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population.

It's time to give some serious thought about the quality of life for older Americans.

McCutcheon actually has been working on this piece for a very long time. When I met with her in April, she had begun shaping the script and had started casting the show.

The story concerns Eve, a scientist working for the "Never Die Institute," who is developing technology designed to prolong life and ultimately allow us all to live forever. Eve's mother, Esme, a woman in her 80s, is integral to this narrative: Eve has placed Esme in a nursing home and never finds the time to visit.

McCutcheon sought her Esme among the older women of the Davis community. She was looking for "someone who is able to move across the stage without feeling terrified." She also needed "someone the audience could care about."

When we parted company that day back in April, McCutcheon was about to meet with Donna Sachs, who leads a discussion group for senior citizens. McCutcheon hoped to find her Esme among the women in Sachs' group.

Sachs, a career psychologist interested in personal development in the later years, started her group in 2003.



Top, it's pill time in the nursing home, as Francis (David Lutheran) ministers to Esme (Claudia Marie, left) and her friends, played by Nancy Jungerman, center, and Donna Sachs. At left, Eve (Bella Merlin) is surprised by Esme's reaction to her "big gift." Below, in "The Pharmaceutical Song," Esme is given lots and lots of medication to keep her alive, thanks to the enthusiasm of, from left, Dave Morejon, Jorge Mantione and Anne Reeder.



"I wanted to share some ideas and literature in a seminar," she said, "so I invited people to come for a few times and just talk together in a group."

After the first few sessions, several people were eager to continue, and the group now has continued for more than five years. It has 11 participants; when they heard the plans for McCutcheon's play, eight women expressed interest.

McCutcheon ended up with more than she bargained for, when Claudia Marie became her Esme. Marie wasn't terrified to walk across the stage. She also was willing to learn lines, although she had no stage experience, beyond having watched her parents do some theater work when she was a young child.

McCutcheon then cast five other members of the group — Nancy Jungerman, Lois Grau, Ruth Hall, Doris Beresford and Sachs herself — to be Esme's friends in the nursing home. Each would have a line or two of dialogue, and all would participate in some of the dancing.

Stage manager Reed Martin was "really concerned" about working with older women who had no stage experience, but he was pleasantly surprised.

"They're really a great group of people," he said. "And because of how involved they are, they're very willing to do things for the show. They're really enthusiastic about it."

"It's great having members of the community involved," added Bella Merlin, an acting professor who plays the part of Eve. "It has been absolutely fantastic working with them. They're delightful. Claudia is so open and accessible, and she's so playful as an actress. They all have super energy."

In September, I went to visit the "elders" at work with their choreographer, Kerry Mehling. I entered a room to find a group of women, sitting in a semi-circle, looking old, tired and depressed. Mehling was giving them movements to do with their hands, and each movement seemed to be almost too much of an effort.

But when the exercise concluded, their heads came up and the years melted away. They sparkled with delight while talking about their backgrounds, and their excitement at being involved with this play.

This vibrant group of women was the visual representation of all that McCutcheon wished to convey in her play: how the quality of life can be affected by our ability to remain intellectually challenged, lively and active, rather than stuck in a nursing home, at the mercy of the staff, hoping that someone will visit.

Some day.

"I want this to be a journey where it's a bit of magic, a bit of music, a bit of art, a bit of dance and the issues, and a story that ties it together," McCutcheon said. "It's just a platform. This is a voyage of discovery for Eve. Science might be able to create a bio-body, but what are we about life?"

"We live and die; that's a given. But love can make a difference. This busy, busy life about career, career, career, when you have to cut off that aspect of self..."

"It's worth asking everybody: Is that it?"

"This play throws up all sorts of issues," Merlin said. "We'll make people go away and think about lots of things. My character is a nanotechnologist, so she believes that we can live forever: that there's enough science out there, and enough investigation happening, that it's only a matter of years before we have the capacity to ensure that we never age. We'll be able to put tiny robots in our systems, which will constantly regenerate the degenerating."

At right, Esme (Claudia Marie, left) has a nightmare that she's being attacked by nursing home attendants: from left, Jorge Morejon, Chris Mantione and Anne Reeder. Below, director Jade McCutcheon, left, and choreographer Kerry Mehling take notes during a run-through of the play.



On this day...

The Metropolitan Opera House staged its first performance on this day in 1883.

When the curtains parted, Italian tenor Italo Campanini and Swedish soprano Christine Nilsson starred in Charles Gounod's "Faust." Orchestra-seat ticket holders paid \$6 admission.

The Met remained at the Broadway location until 1966, when a 3,700 seat, 14-story opera house was built in New York City's Lincoln Memorial Center for the Performing Arts.



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