

## **Imagination Workshop builds actors through theater therapy**



*Felicia Ramirez / Daily Bruin*

***Imagination Workshop, an organization that works with at-risk and mentally ill individuals, will feature its production, "Fortune's Adventure," on Friday.***

September 26, 2013 2:02 am More stories in A&E, Lifestyle

### **BY KELSEY ROCHA**

The stage is set with a plastic surgeon, a wealthy divorcee, a maniac and a TV star who all find themselves lost in the Bermuda Triangle on a cruise ship. While it bears the trademarks of a typical theater performance, the production is actually a form of therapy.

On Friday, for one night only, UCLA's Semel Institute Auditorium will play host to Imagination Workshop's latest production, "Fortune's Adventure." The free show is the final stage of a program called Imagination Workshop, in which psychiatric patients engage in the creative process of creating a play with the guidance of professional actors and screenwriters called "artist leaders."

Imagination Workshop is a nonprofit organization that works with at-risk and mentally ill individuals who are usually admitted to the program following a psychiatric referral. Artist Marnie Olson said the 44-year-old organization yields huge successes through its philosophy of giving patients the chance to collaboratively create and perform a show.

"Imagination Workshop empowers people to create a character they want to portray," Olson said. "They often pick characters who are very far removed from themselves, which is therapeutic in itself."

Studies by the Semel Institute's Dr. Lynn Fairbanks show the workshop has about a 16-percent improvement rate in psychological functioning over traditional role-playing workshops. The supportive relationship Imagination Workshop fosters with the Semel Institute is something Olson considers invaluable.

"Theater is very challenging and it's not something that is easy to make a lot of money in, but (the Semel Institute) is just so supportive of what we're doing," Olson said. "The entire staff is so accommodating and nice. It's amazing just to have the opportunity to have a free space to work in and an office to store our things."

With Imagination Workshop, the entire process revolves around metamorphosis. The characters the participants design are meant to be at points of transition within their lives. As these characters adapt and grow onstage, the performers themselves are also capable of reaching emotional transformations within their own lives.

Executive Director Jim McGrath said he recalled one such transfiguration in a workshop involving a woman who could not speak after she lost her sister in a fatal car accident. While the woman was able to write her pieces, she was unable to speak and coped with her speech anxiety by pantomiming her parts. When her final performance came, she finally found the words onstage and began speaking her parts on the spot.

Director Gerald James said he witnessed similar struggles and improvements within some of his patients in the production of "Fortune's Adventure." He said he saw individuals who had to fight through their bad days and their anxieties to be at the rehearsals.

"It's admirable to me to see them put on a show. It's still even difficult for Marnie and I, who don't suffer from psychiatric problems, and sometimes we give up or give in, but we have these people who are challenged on such a deeper level who come together to create art," James said. "The art allows us to step outside ourselves and realize we have a little more room to be human.

McGrath said this element of humanity is what makes the show so powerful. He said the production can be a very emotional experience and has inspired a number of Bruins to join groups or get involved as volunteers. Ultimately, he said he hopes people who attend will learn more about the goal of Imagination Workshop.

"First, I hope (attendees) will get a great night at the theater," McGrath said. "What they will also get is a sense of what (Imagination Workshop) does. They'll get to see the product of professional actors working with psychiatric patients and being able to see that whole process is a very moving thing."

*Email Rocha at [krocha@media.ucla.edu](mailto:krocha@media.ucla.edu).*