

St. Christopher House

# Health Action Theatre by Seniors (HATS)

*Handbook*

Action Theatre as a model for community education



**sponsored by SHARE Awards - financed by GlaxoSmithKline and  
administered by the University of Pennsylvania's Institute on Aging**

St. Christopher House  
Health Action Theatre by Seniors  
(HATS)  
*Handbook*  
Action Theatre as a model for  
community education

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[www.seniorstheatre.org](http://www.seniorstheatre.org)  
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## Dedication

This handbook is dedicated to the group of women who discovered Action Theatre in their hearts and dared to experiment because they believed in themselves! And to the people whose **work**, creativity, **thinking**, friendship, **support**, care, **understanding**, criticism, **belief in community development**, eagerness to learn and discover, and **courage to try and keep trying** ... contributed to the creation of this instrument that we call the St. Chris Action Theatre.

## Acknowledgements

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Heartfelt thanks go to the fabulous HATS Players for their commitment, wisdom and joy.

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heartfelt thanks  
Odete Nascimento, Coordinator EPC and  
Community Development

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## PREFACE

*“HATS is consistent with the mission of St. Christopher House. In fact it has significantly improved our capacity to work with vulnerable people to assist them to gain more control over their own lives and in their communities. It empowers individuals to address problems they are experiencing and to work together with others to find ways to address these problems.”*

Susan Pigott, St. Christopher House CEO 2002



St. Chris HATS Players

## INTRODUCTION

St. Christopher House (St. Chris) has worked with the multicultural neighbourhoods of south west Toronto, Ontario, Canada since 1912. Our central purpose is the enabling of less advantaged community members – individuals, families and groups – to gain greater control over their lives and community. St. Christopher House is not affiliated with any religious denomination.

Based on the settlement house movement, St. Chris has been a place of “firsts” in Toronto. We introduced services such as Meals-on-Wheels, Home Help, Adult Literacy, and a multilingual/multicultural Alzheimer Day program. We are also the first in Toronto to have a community development worker whose priority has been on community consultation and program development in response to community needs.

In keeping with our history of innovative and responsive community development work, St. Christopher developed Health Action Theatre by Seniors (HATS).

We, the project staff, were challenged to deepen our knowledge of popular education, particularly in popular theatre. It also challenged us to look ahead and seize the opportunity to become agents of transformation with the target population, within our community and within the health and social service sectors.

We invite you, our peer community workers, through this handbook, to open yourself to the opportunity to use this effective tool, Action Theatre, in your work as an enabler within the senior community you serve.



HATS Training for Community Facilitators

## **Who is this handbook intended for?**

Community workers, group leaders, individuals interested in senior theatre or in the use of theatre as a community development and education tool.

## **Why this handbook?**

We developed this handbook for community workers, group leaders, animators and individuals interested in seniors theatre or in the use of theatre as a community development and education tool.

## **What can you get from this handbook?**

The following pages attempt to give background information and to describe the training model used with the community groups that participated in the HATS training programs.

Please remember that this handbook is the result of the adaptation of Action Theatre to the realities of the groups we worked with during the course of the Health Action Theatre by Seniors (HATS) project. Nothing here is written in stone, as a matter of fact this is a *Beta Version* (an unfinished version, open for feedback, suggestions, impressions, propositions etc). The instructions in this handbook are just guidelines, **not** prescriptions that need to be followed step by step. We encourage facilitators to change and/or adapt things to their own realities, likes, dislikes, and desires.

We hope you enjoy this *handbook*. Please send us an email to [isabelpa@stchrishouse.org](mailto:isabelpa@stchrishouse.org) to let us know about your impressions, comments, and suggestions.

**As Viola Spolin (1985) wrote “*Inspiration in theatre comes out as energy*” so don’t suppress your energy, use it before you lose it!**

# **PART I**

## **Introducing HATS**

HATS, or Health Action Theatre for Seniors, is a project of the St. Christopher House. It emerged from an Elder Abuse Prevention and Awareness Project in 1992. The elder abuse project was born when St. Christopher House and the Portuguese Women 55+ Support Group of Ontario (PW55+) joined forces to fight abuse and neglect of older persons.

The elder abuse project focused on

- Raising awareness of abuse and neglect of older persons to the English, Portuguese and Vietnamese-speaking seniors at St. Christopher House,
- Forming support groups,
- Training participants to provide peer support training,
- Educating the wider public, including both seniors and the community at large.

We soon discovered that public education that relied on written materials or passive learning was not very effective, especially with seniors who had low English language or literacy skills. We wanted to create meaningful ways for our participants to

- Share information
- Identify and solve problems
- Receive leadership training
- Develop and strengthen informal support networks

We knew that we wanted to do this work in ways that would transcend linguistic and literacy barriers. Participants in the program gave us lots of direct feedback.

In 1997, a group of seniors and community workers from St. Christopher House participated in a 3-day workshop at the Ripple Effect Festival in Toronto. The workshop was facilitated by Warren Linds. He uses theatre to work on health issues in British



Columbia. His approach is inspired by Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theatre director who believed that participatory theatre is an effective tool for social action.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Augusto Boal developed The Theatre of the Oppressed. The approach quickly grew into a movement which spread all over the world. Boal's technique was based on the teachings of the famous popular educator Paulo Freire. Boal maintained that participatory theatre could transform monologue into dialogue and help people to overcome oppression. Both Freire and Boal have been highly influential in developing the politics of liberation.

With the support of some funders such as The Ontario Trillium Foundation, The Kensington Health Centre Foundation, the City of Toronto and others, St. Christopher House developed and tested the Action Theatre model -- a community development and education model based on Augusto Boal's methodology of the Theatre of the Oppressed.

In September 2000, St. Christopher House received an Innovation SHARE Award sponsored by the GlaxoSmithKline and administered by the University of Pennsylvania Institute on Aging. The funding allowed us to continue using Action Theatre, to expand the use of the Action Theatre model for two years and to apply it to health promotion in general.

### **The main activities of the HATS project**

- To develop Action Theatre Training and deliver it to seniors' groups of diverse backgrounds, so that they can explore this powerful tool and adapt it to their own realities.
- To use Action Theatre sessions, workshops and presentations to disseminate information, to raise awareness about various issues affecting older adults and to encourage people to engage in dialogue and civic action to increase access to appropriate health care.

- To develop and publish this handbook.
- To create a website which contains an interactive Action Theatre Forum and the online and downloadable versions of this handbook as well as versions in Portuguese and Vietnamese.



HATS players during a workshop

## **Part II**

### **Action Theatre as a model for community education**

The HATS project has used Action Theatre to target issues including problem gambling, substance abuse, home and street safety, fraud prevention, abuse and neglect of older persons, nutrition, heart health, caregiving issues among others.

The players, or actors, from the St. Chris Action Theatre Seniors Troupe develop and perform short plays. When the plays are performed or presented, the audience is encouraged to change how the players have dealt with an issue in their play, and to replace a player so that the play can be performed again with different endings. The plays performed by the St. Chris Action Theatre Seniors Troupes are primarily mimed, reducing the barriers of language and literacy. This allows people of diverse cultures, languages and literacy levels to engage in exploring critical issues, to share their knowledge and to experience the power of shared problem-solving.

Performing has had a significant impact on the HATS senior players. Many have lost their professional status as a result of immigration, or have experienced some other change of roles in their society, community, or family. For example, their spouse may have died, their living arrangement may have changed, or their economic status may have decreased. As the senior players realize their new roles as public educators, and how important they can be to their community and in society at large, they become empowered. One woman troupe player put it this way, after a presentation at Ryerson Polytechnic University: *“Imagine, some of us never sat on a school bench when we were children and today we were teaching at a university!”*

## **What is Action Theatre?**

Action Theatre allows people from different language and cultural backgrounds to come together to discuss common issues affecting seniors' lives.

Even though the approach in this handbook was developed while searching for tools to raise awareness and sensitivity about seniors' issues, it can also be used with other age groups. As a matter of fact, we have used HATS with women, children aged 10 to 12 and youth groups, and the results were as satisfactory as when working with seniors.

Action Theatre adapts Augusto Boal's methodology of the Theatre of the Oppressed. By acting out *anti-models* based in real life situations, participants can:

- identify the problems,
- think about possible solutions to those problems,
- find ways of effecting change to tackle the problems.

The main objective is not to find the right solution to the problems but to engage people in critical thinking and analysis of their own realities. Action Theatre provides ways for people to dialogue. 'Dialogue', Paulo Freire says, *'is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world.'* (Freire, 1970)

The Action Theatre model allows people to move from a conceptual awareness of an issue. It lets them act out alternative responses to the situation causing the problem. In this way it is effective at moving people from monologue to dialogue.

## **How does Action Theatre work?**

Action Theatre involves eight steps, which lead people from naming issues to developing responses to the issue.

### **The eight steps in the Action Theatre process are:**

- Theatre games
- Sharing stories and identifying issues
- Developing the story and creating a play which depicts the anti-model
- Performing the play
- The forum
- Interplay between the players and the audience
- Determining the conditions and tools
- Reflecting on the workshop

### **The Action Theatre methodology - from monologue to dialogue**

The Action Theatre methodology is composed of eight interrelated activities facilitated by a person which in the Theatre of the Oppressed Boal calls the Joker, the *difficultator*.

### **The eight activities in the Action Theatre process:**

- **Theatre games** include warm ups and theatre exercises designed to challenge participants to distinguish between hearing, listening, feeling, and seeing.
- **Sharing stories and identifying issues**, for example: elder abuse, problem gambling, substance abuse, seniors' safety.
- **Developing the story and creating a play which depicts the anti-model**. The anti-model shows the problematic situation, or a situation of oppression to be corrected before potentially becoming more severe.
- **Performing the play** in front of a large group of *spect-actors*, audience-players.
- **The forum** will engage participants in the discussion of the issues depicted in the play, inclusive of any issues not explicitly referred to in the play, but emerging from the discussion itself. The construction of a shared group experience provides a non-threatening environment allowing participants to openly reflect on their experiences.

- **Interplay between players and audience** of the possible solutions to the problems and analysis of each intervention (for its practicality and identification of barriers that can prevent people from acting upon the possible/chosen solutions).
- **Determination of the conditions and tools**, which may need to be in place in order for people to be able to tackle the problem(s) for example: more language/translation resources, culturally appropriate services.
- **Reflecting on the workshop**, including lessons learned and practical next steps.

## How the HATS project applied Action Theatre

There are many creative ways of applying Action Theatre in the community, depending on your group's objectives. Action Theatre is so flexible that it can adapt to many different uses. It is virtually impossible for two different groups to come up with the identical Action Theatre model. Each group can use the same instrument and adapt it to different types of activities, such as information sharing, civic engagement, problem solving, conflict resolution, critical thinking and fighting oppressive situations.

### Action Theatre Events

- **Training** – We offered training to participants. This includes a series of 6-8 workshops which provided groups with the experience they needed to initiate the creative process using Action Theatre as a model and adapting it to their realities and desires. Throughout these sessions participants had the opportunity to learn about Action Theatre while engaging in fun and highly interactive exercises. Boal maintains that players “*must always work their bodies to get to know them better and to make them more expressive*”.

During the training participants talked about their experiences in small groups. The focus of group discussions was the “anti-model” -- *a situation to debate and not a model to follow*. The group discussions provided the platform from which the stories developed

and then were adapted into plays performed for the larger group. We used pantomime, since we work with speakers of several different languages.

It is important that Action Theatre players participate in the training workshops. They need to get to know each other better, but also to get rid of inhibitions and to feel comfortable and confident when acting in front of an audience or speaking up about a subject-matter and expressing their opinions during the interplay and other activities.

- **Workshops** – We offered workshops which follow the eight activities described in the methodology. The workshops varied from half-day to 2-day workshops, depending on the size and number of languages in the group, and on the extent to which the theme was explored. For a description of our workshops, see Activities 1 to 8.

- **Presentations** – HATS troupes went to other organizations to perform our plays and to engage audiences in critical thinking, analysis and debate of the issues portrayed in the plays. For a description of the presentation, see Activities 4B to 7, or Activities 1A, 4B to 7 8, or Activities 1A, 4C to 7.

- **HATS sessions** – HATS invited presenters to talk to us about health determinants. Participants learned about the topic, participated in non-verbal theatre games and exercises, and had the opportunity to apply their knowledge by rehearsing the possible solutions to the real-life situations presented by the Action Theatre. For information about these HATS sessions, see Activities 1, 4B to 8.

## **Part III**

### **The HATS training program**

#### **The Action Theatre training workshops**

The goal of this training program is for participants to embark on a journey of self-discovery. The activities allow participants to develop and express their body, mind and spirit. The objective is that participants (or trainees) will experience increased self-confidence, increased comfort level to speak out in public, increased social support and increased knowledge in utilizing Action Theatre.

#### **Who are the training workshops for?**

HATS is designed for seniors from diverse language and cultural backgrounds but it can be adapted to any age group. For example, participants could be from an existing group with a community organization, club or association, or could be recruited from the community at large. They can be the residents of a building, health and community workers, or community members in general. Anyone interested can participate!

#### **The aims of Action Theatre training workshops are:**

- to engage participants in learning about themselves and others while having lots of fun playing theatre games and using their bodies and imaginations;
- to identify their voices and liberate themselves in a creative and entertaining way;
- to create theatre pieces that will generate discussion and analysis of issues impacting upon peoples' lives.

The purpose of these workshops is to contribute to the process of helping people help themselves – to define and give voice to their concerns, visions and desires for themselves, their peers, communities and the world.



It is very important that the workshops be provided in a safe and non-threatening environment. It is therefore essential for the group to define what a safe zone is for them.

Here is the HATS definition of **Safe Zone**

*An environment free of hurtful discrimination, or judgment, where one is free to express oneself in a respectful manner, taking into account the feelings of others. An environment in which, you are free of ridicule or detrimental criticisms. An environment in which, one is a respected and valued contributor.*

This definition was written by Tania Narciso. She was the onsite recorder/note taker for the HATS training program, and developed this definition from observations of the process.

## **How to use this training program?**

The activities or workshops in this handbook can be used in several ways. These are facilitated by the joker – the workshop facilitator.

Feel free to structure a customized series of workshops! For every workshop select warm-ups and exercises that match your group's specific goals.

- Follow the process outlined, using the complete series of eight activities.
- Choose individual activities, use them separately if you wish.

You can also use this outlines in whatever other way you and your group prefer.

## **What is the role of the facilitator?**

In the Theatre of the Oppressed Boal calls the facilitator “the Joker”. Rather than a facilitator, they are a *difficultator*. The Joker is, at different times, director, facilitator and workshop leader. The Joker is

- an intermediary between the audience and the performers, and
- an intermediary between the reality of the workshop and the world.

The Joker also challenges assumptions, pursues disagreements between participants and highlights contradictions that emerge in the process.

## **Preparing for the training workshops**

When preparing for Action Theatre training workshops, you should take several things into consideration:

- Who is the group you are going to be working with?
- What content will your workshops focus on?
- How long will the group meet?
- What language groups are you working with?
- What kind of space will you need?

Here are some suggestions to help you answer these questions for yourself.

### ***Learn about the specifics of the group you are going to be working with***

- Do people already know each other, or are they meeting for the first time?
- What language(s) do participants speak?
- How well does the group read and write? How comfortable are they with written materials?

### ***Length***

- Allow two to four hours for each workshop.

- To cover all the exercises included in the workshop, you may need more than one session. For example, during the HATS training programs, we facilitated from five to 10 sessions per group, and also had many rehearsals and working meetings to make props, and several workshops to explore issues of concern to the groups.
- Our experience is that sessions should not be longer than three to four hours.
- The number of sessions you hold will be determined as you go along. Several different factors will influence how much time you should allow, including the pace of the group, the number of languages involved, and whether the group has had previous discussions about the issue. The length of your sessions should reflect the reality of your group.
- There is no pre-determined time per theatre game or activity because it depends on the size of the group, if interpretation is being provided, how in depth you want to explore the effects of the games etc. Again, adapt to suit your group.

### ***Language groups***

- As facilitator, make sure you don't always rely on verbal communication. Include a balance of non verbal interactivity, especially when you are providing interpretation. Groups are encouraged to sit according to their language group.
- When you work with different language groups, you must provide appropriate interpretation so everyone can participate equally.
- Make sure you have arranged for interpreters before the sessions start.
- Plan to meet with the interpreters and co-facilitators before hand.
- Make sure that the room setting reflects the group's needs for interpretation. Set up seating so that participants can hear the interpreters.

### ***Space***

- Once you decide what you are going to do, think about the space you are going to need. Ideally, you would have a large room for activities involving the whole group and access to several other rooms for small group activities.

- To find a room that is large enough, we suggest multiplying the number of participants by three. A room capacity of that number should be large enough. For example, for a group of 20 people get a room with capacity of at least 60 people.

# The eight Action Theatre activities or workshops

## 1. Theatre games

**Objective:** to get participants to warm up

**Activity:**

Generally we begin with **theatre games** in the form of warm ups and exercises designed to challenge participants to listen to what they are hearing, to feel what they are touching, and to see what they are looking at.

A. Warm-ups get the players loosened up, feel safe about taking risks, develop trust and get the players in synch.

B. Exercises focus on particular aspects of creative expression and self-discovery and allow for players to focus on the skills of environment, characters, listening, story telling, corporal expression.

### **Facilitator Tips:**

Make sure you don't always rely on verbal communication. Include a balance of non verbal interactivity, especially when you are providing interpretation.

Quote from Boal: (players) *"must always work their bodies to get to know them better and to make them more expressive."*

## 2. Story sharing and identification of issues

**Objective:** To encourage participants to share stories about a theme

**Activity:**

- Facilitate the identification of the **theme**/topic/issue to be debated. Focus on a specific topic of importance to the group and target audiences. The themes are identified by the participants based on what is important to them and their community.
- In a training workshop setting participants break up to form **small groups** depending on the number of participants and time available for the performance pieces. Small group participants identify the issues in their stories and collectively choose the story that offers more content and illustrates the main aspects of the problematic situation to be debated.
- In a situation where you already have a group of trained players, and in cases when time is limited and/or the *spect-actors* express discomfort to enact their stories, the use of Playback theatre is an option. In this case a **large group** exercise is conducted to encourage *spect-actors* to share stories about their chosen theme, then choose the story they like the most.

**Facilitator Tips:**

We begin with the assumption that people are the experts in their own lives. It is important to remember that this is a tool for people to liberate themselves and fight oppressions, so it is important that the issues are identified by participants themselves. Themes cannot be imposed on people. We provide the tools and the participants do the work, empowering themselves and finding their voices in the process.

The way the group is divided depends on the composition of the group. For example if there are several languages, it might make sense to divide by language, or if a group of participants want to debate different issues, it might be worthwhile to divide the group by topic of interest.

### **3. Story development and creation of a short play depicting the anti-model**

#### **Objectives:**

- To create and analyze the story
- To select troupe of performers
- To prepare for the performance

#### **Activity:**

Create a short play--5 to 10 minutes in duration. The play builds to a problematic situation or crisis and stops there, offering no solutions.

#### **Steps for story development and creation of a short play:**

- **Story** – share experiences and choose a story related to the theme.
- **Setting** – where the events in the story took place and plan performance space.
- **Casting** – who was involved and assign players to characters.
- **Rehearsal** –produce play and practice.

#### **Facilitator Tips:**

Ask participants to analyze the story and prepare themselves to address audience questions put to the characters they play in the performance. They will be asked to stay in character during interactive discussion.

#### **4. Performance**

**Objective:**

- To act/perform before a large group of *spect-actors*, audience-players

**Activity:**

Formats for performance include:

A. Workshop – a group of people discuss a topic/situation, come up with a story and rehearse and perform (improvising) in front of the whole group.

B. Performance – a group of HATS players perform short plays that are pantomimed. See them in the HATS website at [www.seniorstheatre.org](http://www.seniorstheatre.org)

C. Playback – a group of trained players or a mix of players and *spect-actors* rehearse the story on the spot and then act out the new scenes in front of the large group.

**Facilitator Tip:**

HATS uses different approaches to deliver the performance. In some cases we work with the workshop participants to create the stories, in other cases we work with troupes of HATS performers. Once you have a troupe of performers, decide what's best for your group.



## 5. The forum

**Objective:** To encourage participants to articulate opinions in discussing the issues portrayed in the play.

### **Activity:**

Following the performance the facilitator will engage the players and *spect-actors* in exercises where they explore the situation, identify the different aspects of the issue/s portrayed in the play.

### **Ask *spect-actors*...**

- What did you see?
- What you would do differently, and why?
- How would you do it?

The construction of a shared group experience provides a non-threatening environment allowing participants to openly reflect on their experiences.

### **Facilitator Tips:**

The interactive discussion of the issues depicted in the play, can also include issues not explicitly referred to in the play, but emerging from the discussion itself. This enables the participants to observe their experiences objectively.

The facilitator is not the keeper of the truth. People are the experts of their lives. The facilitator's job is to ensure that participants have the opportunity to express themselves and to act out and to show what they are capable of.

## 6. Interplay

### Objective:

- To encourage the *spect-actors* to change how the players have dealt with an issue in their play, and to replace a player so that the play can be performed again with different endings.
- The objective of the Interplay is not necessarily to find the correct solution to particular problems, but rather to explore possibilities.

### Activity:

The play is performed for the second time (in a faster motion) and the *spect-actors* are invited to yell “stop”. The scene freezes as soon as they see something they think should be done differently such as an incident of oppression, a conflict or a problem. When the *spect-actor* yells “STOP!”, she/he comes to the playing area and replaces the character dealing/suffering the problem and rehearses her/his possible solution to that problem – this is called an *intervention*.

Participants explore and rehearse a variety of possible solutions, proposed by the *spect-actor* during the forum/interactive discussion of the problems portrayed in the plays.

Participants discuss the possible solutions and intervention strategies to identify barriers preventing people from acting upon the possible, chosen solutions.

### Ask *Spect-actors*:

- What you would need to help you do it differently?
- What resources already exist and how can we access them?

**Facilitator Tip:**

The facilitator can motivate the audience to take action by making it clear to the audience that if they don't change the world, no one will, and everything will turn out exactly the same, which is the last thing we want to happen.

Quote from Boal: “... *if they don't change the world, no one will for them, and everything will inevitably turn exactly the same – which is the last thig we would want to happen.*”

**7. Determination of the conditions and tools**

**Objective:** To identify the necessary conditions which may need to be in place in order to be able to tackle the problem(s).

**Activity:** Participants analyse their own conditions

**Ask *Spect-actors*:**

- What new resources need to be in place?
- What actions do we need to take for change to happen?

**Facilitator Tip:**

The key message here is that sometimes we have the necessary tools and/or conditions to deal with the situation, but because we may be overwhelmed we do not see them.

## **8. Reflecting on the workshops**

**Objective:** To encourage participants to discuss learning outcomes

**Activity:**

Discussion will focus on the lessons learned, such as identification of

- risks and problems/barriers,
- resources and strategies which may be employed to overcome these problems/barriers
- the process they have been through and how it has helped them become more self-aware and empowered.

**Facilitator Tip:**

When appropriate participants are encouraged to practice some of the tools at home and in the community and report back on suitability, impact and practicality of the learned tools.

Quote from Boal: *“The knowledge which results from this investigation will, of necessity, be the best that particular human social group can attain at that particular moment in time.”*

## **We hope you have enjoyed this handbook!**

Let us know about your impressions, comments, suggestions, propositions, desires etc...contact us

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Website: [www.seniorstheatre.org](http://www.seniorstheatre.org).

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