

**Pursuing Dialogue Through Interactive Theater**  
**Larry Pellegrini, Los Angeles**  
**By Barbara Ford, Kansas City, Mo.**

DURING the running of *Aunt Chooch's Birthday*, the cast and playwright met with invited guests and family members of the company, 4th Wall Productions. *Aunt Chooch's Birthday* is an interactive play, the brainchild of Larry Pellegrini, playwright and producer from Los Angeles, whose busy schedule keeps him traveling throughout the country and worldwide. Larry generates energy as he explains that he writes plays for people, plays that strive to create dialogue between the actors and audience, plays that completely close the gap so that the audience is the actor and the actor is the audience. The exchange depends upon the "invited guests" and the actors who pull playgoers into the story and make friends with them.

Larry speaks to the alienation found in today's society as having profoundly affected the arts, particularly theater. "In today's world," he says, "people don't support the theater. People don't go out and seek theater. They can stay home and watch something on television. But interactive theater allows for full participation in drama, more like 'live TV.'"

*Aunt Chooch's Birthday* involves a cast of characters of a family: Aunt Chooch, the matriarchal Italian grandmother and icon of family stability as well as owner of the family's restaurant, The Villa Pompeii; her two daughters and her five grandchildren. This family is not unlike Larry's own; there is a feeling of familiarity as the family squabbles and problems surface throughout the evening. The audience participates in the birthday party and its goings on. Characters sit beside you, tell you their stories, the family gossip, ask you to dance, make you sing on stage, stand staring at the bickering between lovers, take sides for or against Aunt Chooch's daughter and her younger Jewish boyfriend, and even play a game of bingo with you.

Before you realize it, you are having fun, laughing and getting along with "the family." All at once you are a confidante to one of the characters, or feel sorry for another one who everyone has chosen to pick on. Even Larry participates along with the producer, Wendy Cashen. Sometimes they dance with other cast members or guests, and other times you can observe them sitting at one of the long party tables observing and laughing.

When I asked Larry what inspired him to pursue "interactive" theater, he told me that President Ikeda inspired him through his emphasis on dialogue. Particularly, he was moved by President Ikeda's words at the SGI's fourteenth anniversary meeting held on January 29, 1989:

Why do I emphasize the importance of dialogue? Because I believe that dialogue and discussion are the main proof of one's humanity. In other words, only when we are immersed in the ocean of language do we become human.

In *Phaedo*, Plato astutely associates hatred of language with hatred of man. To abandon dialogue is in fact to abandon being human.

"In my own life," Larry says, "dialogue is what has helped me grow as a Buddhist so there was no better way for me to create my art than through using what has made me grow, which is dialogue. Art is an extension of my own personal growth." □