

Persephone Sextou

Newman University

Cory Smith

Newman University

Drama is for Life! Recreational Drama Activities for the Elderly in the UK

ABSTRACT

Applied Theatre is an inclusive term used to host a variety of powerful, community-based participatory processes and educational practices. Historically, Applied Theatre practices include Theatre-in-Education (TiE), Theatre-in-Health Education (THE), Theatre for Development (TfD), prison theatre, community theatre, theatre for conflict resolution/reconciliation, reminiscence theatre with elderly people, theatre in museums, galleries and heritage centres, theatre at historic sites, and more recently, theatre in hospitals. In this paper we are positioning the application of recreational dramatic activities with older adults (55+) under Applied Theatre and we are exploring the benefits they offer to the participants. We are concerned that their health and wellbeing in western societies is not prioritized and it is clear that loneliness in particular is a current and ongoing issue. We will present research results from a drama dissertation study that took place in a community hall in the South East England where drama is placed at the core of their practice with old populations. Data was collected by a mixed method (semi-structured interviews and semi-immersive observations) and was critically discussed amongst the authors to conclude that attending recreational drama classes brings a certain degree of happiness, social belonging and improvement of interaction with others to old people's lives.

Keywords: Applied Theatre, wellbeing, community.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to discuss recreational drama activities with older adults in the community in the United Kingdom and consider whether this kind of work can affect participant's socialization, physicality and general mood. It presents an undergraduate drama dissertation study with Newman University Birmingham (United Kingdom) that is examining the work of *Fallen Angels*, a recreational drama group based in Greater London that introduces creative drama classes with older adults in a community hall.

In 2013 the health secretary of the UK, Jeremy Hunt, highlighted the increasing numbers of lonely elderly people in society today. In what Hunt described as a national shame, up to 800,000 people in the UK are classed as chronically lonely (BBC). In Hunt's speech he expressed that the issue could be helped by UK citizens taking care of their elderly relatives and making a conscious effort to visit and to contact them more regularly (BBC). Hunt went on to voice concerns that loneliness can result in physical illness such as blood clots and heart disease. Alongside Hunt's concerns, the BBC webpage also lists potential mental side effects of feeling lonely, including an increase of bad habits, depression and poor eating. Pitkala et al. states that loneliness can be associated with impaired quality of life, cognitive decline and poor subjective health (792–800). It is also noted that loneliness often results in an increased use of health and social services. Rona Dury describes loneliness or emotional isolation as "subjective, involving feelings of loss of companionship" (125). She also suggests that older adults are particularly susceptible to loneliness due to changes in their lifestyle for example the loss of a spouse or adapting to retirement. In addition to these incentives, the Baring Foundation Report (2009) acknowledges that isolation (less than weekly contact with anybody else) is a current issue in the UK and that there is a need for a better quality of life for old people. The report states that creative and participatory work could have benefits for older adults, including forging friendships and socialization. Isolation and loneliness is one of several issues that many older adults are facing in society today. This paper aims to explore whether applications of drama activities in communities of older adults could have a positive effect on the UK's aging community. Could participation in drama decrease the feeling of loneliness and isolation in our aging community? We use Applied Theatre (AT) as a broad theoretical and practical base to this investigation. AT is often supportive of certain unforeseen needs within society. We have considered that the needs and demands of communities and the theatrical applications that take place in care homes hold a deeper meaning at the heart of the art form and the hearts of the participants. With passion to discover a deeper

meaning and purpose of drama practice in old people's lives, we investigate whether dramatic activities and theatrical interventions with older adults can positively affect the lives of the participants.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Applied Theatre is an umbrella term to describe a range of theatrical interventions, including performances, workshops and dramatic activities that happen either *for* or *with* groups of people in places they inhabit and where they socialize. Theatre applications in the community involve non-traditional audiences such as school children, patients in hospitals and hospices, old people in care homes, visitors in heritage sites and prisoners or ex-offenders in non-traditional "theatrical" and sometimes most unusual and alternative venues which are located outside the main theatre. Prentki and Preston describe Applied Theatre as an unconventional practice that is relatable for ordinary people. The dramatic conventions that apply in drama (space, time, characterization etc.) can be rearranged, leaving the overall product somewhat avant-garde. The dynamics of the practice are interchangeable to suit practitioners, participants and audience's needs, interests and preferences. This is appealing as it means creative freedom for practitioners and individuals that are involved, and opportunities for theatrical experimentation in practice. Because Applied Theatre often has a specific resonance with the participants and/or the audience, people are at the heart of its practice. At its best, the audience is highly motivated to participate in the process of drama and performance at various levels. The process may involve research about a topic of the group's interests, story-collecting from the participants and story-telling/making sessions, theatre games, body and language improvisations, devising a play, characterization, and staging a show. The content of activities often holds a special meaning at the heart of the people involved, as for example in work with older adults; the stories of elderly people become the inspiration and material for drama. Dramatic activities with older adults could be performed by actors or sometimes by the elderly people themselves supported by their care givers (especially if an old participant has mobility problems), or both, in residential care homes and hospices or in community centres where people meet on a regular weekly basis.

Fallen Angels was established in 1996 and used to have a different name. However, after eight years of running, the group lost their council funding and have since been dependent on charity donations and attendance fees. This financial change in 2003 inspired the company to transform their name as a means for a new start. The group of older adults meets once a week for two hours on Thursday afternoons. The aim of the group

is for all that attend to have fun and for them to gain drama and acting skills along the way (Sleigh). They devise pieces of drama, however keeping with the aim that the sessions are made to be enjoyable, participants have complete ownership over whether they would like to share their work with the rest of the group or outsiders. Due to the financial struggles that the group has faced over the years, each member pays an admission fee of £8 a session which equates to £96 per term (*Fallen Angels*). *Fallen Angels* is constantly proving that participatory drama work is well within the capabilities of the elderly.

Storytelling is at the heart of the work produced by *Fallen Angels*. Paula Crimmens facilitates storytelling and creative drama classes with older adults. In her book, Crimmens discusses the reasons for constructing work in groups rather than on an individual basis. She expresses that as we get older, we often become less active and socially able. There are fewer social encounters and this can be a great cause of loneliness. Drama group work is an opportunity to feel part of a community and to socialize with others. Crimmens insists that the group work has the power to stimulate the participants and reduce boredom. She notes that participants enjoy themselves during her sessions and their self-esteem often improves. Crimmens continues that all of these are ideal and very possible outcomes of drama group work with the elderly. Reverting back to Hunt's speech (BBC), the extreme loneliness of elderly people has been acknowledged and with the hope Applied Theatre can have on groups of elderly people, this paper addresses the demand for action and explores whether recreational drama sessions can support older adults in a social, active, mental and holistic way.

Audience participation is another key component of *Fallen Angels* practice for older adults. As in any form of Applied Theatre, participatory drama aims to engage the audience in active involvement and offer them opportunities to gain some ownership of the work. Martin Nolter suggests that when facilitating participatory drama with the elderly, "[t]he objective should be maximum participation from all those involved to create a cohesive group which will find physical and mental stimulation and pleasure in studying and creating drama together" (154). Nolter's participatory drama work with the elderly suggests that the individuals are active participants and not audience members. This suggests that in these participatory drama classes participants are highly involved and merely supported and prompted by the facilitator, differing from audience participation in theatre where the actors/facilitators still hold a certain degree of control over the piece. Nolter advises that a drama program with participant involvement can work with any number of elderly people and can be established in various

elderly settings such as care homes or retirement villages. This notion of versatility is important as the participation that we are looking at is with older adults in a non-theatrical setting. The setting is rearranged to serve the purpose of the sessions aiming at enjoyment, as well as having positive effects on their daily lives, including cognitive, physical and wellbeing benefits that can be achieved by participation. Although there is no accurate prediction, and therefore no absolute claim, of the role of the setting in the dramatic process, we find the facilitation of drama/theatre in care homes exciting. Taking drama to places where older adults live is, in our view, not only a fascinating initiative taken by the actors, but also a respectful approach to the participants' needs, and a sincere effort to make them feel valid and special.

METHODOLOGY

This paper closely examines *Fallen Angels* as an example of practice that potentially supports the wellbeing of older adults. Data was collected by semi-structured interviews to allow interviewees freedom of speech and the opportunity to express themselves 'so that some issues can be explored more freely' (Greetham 214) and "non-participant but semi-immersive observation" (Wisker 137). This means that the researcher is not involved in the process as participant but familiarizes themselves with the group so that they are comfortable and behave as they normally would. Observations were also based on the characteristics and nature of the group, and helped in supporting the interviews and in contextualizing the work of the recreational group.

The first author visited the venue as part of the study, and interacted with a group of elderly people. For this reason, primary research, ethics and safeguarding were considered under the supervision of the second author. James Thompson expresses a view that the "digging" that is involved in obtaining information from others is "problematic" and must be approached with caution and he states that an inquisitive process of this kind can leave people feeling vulnerable and personally invaded (Thompson 39). The main concerns of ethics in an academic research project are that no harm comes to anybody in the process and that at all times extra care is taken about "confidentiality, the preservation of the rights of those involved in the research, and also issues to do with access to information" (Wisker 43). The study has gained a research ethics approval from our own Higher Education institution, consents were collected from the participants prior to the study, and false names of their choosing are used in the paper throughout to maintain complete confidentiality.

On the day of the visit, nine members attended the group. Two members were busy at the time of the interviews, therefore, data was collected from seven participants and their professional drama facilitator. The ages of the research participants ranged from fifty-five to eighty-two and the facilitator was in her thirties. Due to absence, the group were all female on the day of the visit. Characteristics of the group were varied. Some members were very extroverted from the start whereas others were quieter and more reserved. The amount of time that the interviewees had been attending the recreational drama group was wide-ranging. The newest member joined nine months previous to my visit and the oldest member had been attending the group since it began twenty years ago.

Data has been analyzed in a discussion focusing particularly on a set of specific variables. We consider participants previous experience within the arts and question whether this affects a member's willingness and desire to participate in a recreational drama class as they get older. If this is the case, would older adults who have little or no experience in drama be less inclined to join the group? We will be discussing the level of commitment within the group, taking into consideration attendance and the individual members involvement within the sessions. We aim to find out whether the participant's commitment to the sessions and to one another influence the success of the group that has been running for twenty years. We will enquire as to whether attending the recreational drama group presents its members with an opportunity to forge friendships vs. loneliness, and whether this has been achieved amongst the members that were included in my study. We will be discussing whether the members made friends within the class and whether this stimulates a more regular attendance. Does attending the recreational drama group affect the participant's mood and wellbeing? If so, how long does this last? We are also keen on considering how the participants feel before they arrive in comparison to how they feel once the class has ended. Are there social benefits of participating in a recreational drama group? If so, do the members value these encounters?

DISCUSSION

We asked whether the participants had been interested in the arts before they joined the group to gain an understanding of the effect of *Fallen Angels* on their familiarization with dramatic processes and their appreciation of the art form. Every member answered "yes" and specified what they had previously pursued. Most members elaborated on an interest as a child, one member was a teacher and helped with school productions, and another had

actually worked with a Theatre in Education group for a year or so. Elvira (Interview no. 3, 21 January 2016) believes that:

It's people who've had a [erm . . .] a love of drama in the past and want to continue now in their older years. Whereas people who've never done it and they're older, it's probably more difficult for them to get up and improvise. (Interview no. 3, 21 January 2016)

Nolter expressed that if an older adult had experiences with drama in earlier stages of their lives, there was often a longing to continue (153). Star (Interview no. 2, 21 January 2016) mentioned in her interview that she browses the Internet in search of more recreational drama groups for older adults. All of the members expressed a love of drama from a younger age and found the class through a specific search for a group of this kind. It may be that due to the group's sparse amount of promotion and advertising, potential members that are not specifically searching for this group are missing out on the opportunity to join. Older adults without previous experience in drama could be searching for a new hobby but are struggling to find the recreational drama group. In this sense, the facilitator believes that

279

We're automatically cutting off a group of people that potentially could be, I'm not saying that they would be, but they could be interested. (Interview no. 8, 21 January 2016)

Most of the participants have been attending for over ten years with the longest attendee being Star (Interview no. 2, 21 January 2016) who started twenty years ago. Interviews were taken from two newer members who had started just over a year ago and the newest member Pertulia (Interview no. 7, 21 January 2016) joined only nine months before the visit. Some of the participants were coming to the group on a weekly basis.

The collective years that the participants have dedicated to the class highlights a sense of loyalty within the group. When asked what the biggest success story of this recreational drama group is, the facilitator commended the participants stating that

There's a real commitment to it. There's a real commitment to the group, there's a real commitment to learning. (Interview no. 8, 21 January 2016)

Jasmine (Interview no. 5, 21 January 2016) noted in her interview that she reluctantly had to take a term out when she broke her hip but returned immediately once she had made a full recovery. Star (Interview

no. 2, 21 January 2016) expressed a reluctance to attend the class when she was feeling low but insisted that she fought this urge and felt pleased once she was there. Out of all of the participants that attended the session, everyone arrived on time for the session and many of the members were substantially early. When the session ended, the participants were sitting around, conversing rather than leaving promptly. The amount of time that the participants have dedicated to the group and their continuous attendance regardless of mental and physical circumstances solidifies a loyalty to the group and to one another. Levels of commitment to the sessions and the art form itself can be influenced by many factors including experience, likeability of tasks and relationships within the group. Something as minuscule as a decision or a comment made by another member within the group could affect the participant's involvement and enthusiasm during activities because "emotions are complex, ephemeral, highly individual and difficult to research" (Dunn, Bundy and Stinson 2). With this statement in mind, it appears that the relationships built and the enjoyment of the sessions is a primary reason for the consistent attendance and ongoing loyalty within the group.

Even though it is clear that the participants have formed working relationships which make the sessions comfortable and enjoyable, we wanted to know if attending the group gives the members an opportunity to forge and nurture friendships. This could lessen the chances of the members falling into what Jeremy Hunt described as increasing numbers of lonely older adults in the UK (BBC). The interviewees were asked if they had made friends in the class since joining. Every participant answered "yes" and most of them added that they met up with other members outside of class. Pertulia, for example, (Interview no. 7, 21 January 2016) is the only member who does not meet up with others outside of class. However, she is also the newest member and it may be that she is still gelling with the rest of the group. Later on in the interview, Pertulia expressed that she had enough social encounters in the week due to being a part of many historical committees with her husband. Therefore, it may be that forging friendships and social networks that extend further than the class is not a need or priority to Pertulia. Other members expanded on their meetings outside of class which included coffee dates, trips to theatre, meals and visiting each other's homes. Jasmine (Interview no. 5, 21 January 2016) noted that she requested the help of another member and her husband to fix her broken computer in the past. In some respect, Jasmine relied on the help of these forged friendships from the group to help and support her with something that was becoming a nuisance in her life. This is a sign of forming relationships within the group that last outside the group meetings.

Observations show that many of the participants were speaking to one another in a friendly and familiar way. For example, when referring to one another, participants would often use nicknames and abbreviations. The members were asked to split into groups, everyone seemed happy to work with one another and there were no clear cliques or closed friendship groups. Golden et al. measures both loneliness and social networks in participants of sixty-five years and over (694). The participants studied were lonely and lacking social networks similar to the increasing amount of older people that Jeremy Hunt has concerns about in the UK (BBC). During the study, participants were interviewed in their own homes to assess their social support networks and a level of loneliness. The study concluded that both loneliness and a lack of social network had a significant impact on the wellbeing of these older adults. The research expresses that these feelings that had been found in the individuals that were studied are a great cause of depression in older adults. Golden et al. argues that “both loneliness and non-integrated social networks were associated with depression, hopelessness and wellbeing” (699). It is noteworthy that many participants in the *Fallen Angels* class have formed friendships that extend past the group itself. However, during the two hour sessions there is an air of friendliness and inclusivity throughout the group. Various events that members organize could be fulfilling a want or need for socialization and interaction with others.

We enquired as to how the participants feel once the class had ended on a Thursday afternoon to examine whether attending the class had a significant influence on the individual’s mood. Tinkerbell stated that

[The class] fulfilled something that’s still inside me. I love drama and [erm . . .] it just makes me feel so happy that I’ve been able to do it. (Interview no. 1, 21 January 2016)

Elvira (Interview no. 3, 21 January 2016) expressed that she was the treasurer of the group, as well as a member which could sometimes leave her feeling less happy. Jasmine (Interview no. 5, 21 January 2016) feels that she is never entirely satisfied with her performance but other than that she is happy and is certain that she would never miss a session if she could help it. An Age UK (2016) factsheet which is updated monthly and provides most up-to-date percentages that are publicly available measures every aspect of older adults’ lives. 82% of the older adults studied said that in the two weeks previous to the questionnaire they had felt happy or content either every day or most days. However, this would suggest that 18% of those questioned did not feel happy or content on most of the days. This

is considered to be quite a high percentage of older adults that may feel unhappy often. During observations of the work by *Fallen Angels* the class members were smiling and laughing continuously. It is quite clear through the interviews and observations that the majority of the participants leave the class feeling better than they did before, which is an indication of improved mood.

To gain a better understanding of the significance of the recreational drama group within the participant's weekly schedules, we asked if the participants attended any other social or recreational activities apart from the drama group. There was a surprising variation and quantity of activities that the participants attend in the week. Tinkerbelle (Interview no. 1, 21 January 2016) was the only participant who did not attend any other groups or activities. Anne (Interview no. 6, 21 January 2016) hadn't been attending anything else but was aware that a new improvisation group for older adults was starting up and would be going along to that. The rest of the participants mentioned several classes including an age concerned choir, Pilates and arts and crafts. Tinkerbelle (Interview no. 1, 21 January 2016) also showed an interest in the new improvisation class; however, she was concerned that it was a late evening class and stated that she would not feel comfortable driving at night-time. Her concerns about evening classes suggest that recreational groups for older adults may be better placed in the daytime. Furthermore, the Thursday class is suitably held in the afternoon which may make it more accessible and appealing for attendees. An evening class may not be as successful, as naturally the participants may be tired and apprehensive about leaving their home when it is dark. From observations it appears that the class was full of energy and every participant contributed ideas and got involved.

Halfway through the recreational drama class, the participants all congregated in a communal area where they were served hot beverages and biscuits. It was observed that as well as conversations concerning the class itself, the participants were also having personal discussions about their week and other unrelated topics. These fifteen minutes felt very much like any social gathering that may take place at a coffee shop or a restaurant between friends. "Loneliness can be understood as an individual's personal, subjective sense of lacking desired affection, closeness and social interaction with others" (Age UK, 2014). Crimmens writes that there are two types of interaction, "contact" and "connection" (passim). Contact is a wholehearted interaction which involves opening ourselves up to somebody else on a personal and emotional level. Connection encounters are more distanced and can be an inclusive interaction amongst several people. Connections can still be friendly but are neces-

sarily less personal. Crimmens worries that as we get older our contact encounters become limited (*passim*). She stresses that we need this personal and emotional socialization to feel validated and to give our lives purpose. During the coffee break, the members were not just conversing but were truly dedicating time to listening and to acknowledging one another (what Crimmens describes as “contact” encounters when the members were taking time to acknowledge one another in an intimate and personal way). When asked what can be gained from participation in the arts, the facilitator of the group stated that

It brings people together and it makes them feel part of something for the time that they’re here and beyond. It helps them to forge friendships. (Interview no. 8, 21 January 2016).

283

It has been suggested that friendship can have a significant impact on our health by reducing stress, improving self-esteem, coping mechanisms and generally boosting our happiness (Mayo Clinic). During the interviews, we also asked the participants whether they felt that they had enough social encounters during an average week, which could be anything from a phone conversation with a relative to a coffee date with friends. Annabelle (Interview no. 4, 21 January 2016) expressed that she would like more social encounters but physically felt that she did as much as she could. Star (Interview no. 2, 21 January 2016) does not necessarily desire additional social encounters but does feel that she should do more and try to be more sociable. Tinkerbelle (Interview no. 1, 21 January 2016) feels that she has enough social encounters but expressed that she was able to do a lot more when she was younger. Furthermore, she has had to drop classes that she was attending due to back problems that she has acquired with age. Anne’s (Interview no. 6, 21 January 2016) social encounters differ from one week to the next. Anne (Interview no. 6, 21 January 2016) also expressed concerns that because many of her friends were not retired like herself, she did not get to see them as often as she would like to and this resulted in her constantly looking for things to keep her busy. She noted that if she did not keep herself busy, her mood would significantly decrease. The facilitator noted that socialization was something that could be gained by attending a recreational drama group:

Socialization which is the obvious one, you know, people come here each week and they meet their friends and so that’s a really important thing. They’ve got a group of people that they’ve got something in common

with. They're also the same sort of people, they're fun, they're lively, they're vibrant. (Interview no. 8, 21 January 2016)

During the session itself, communication and socialization was a key component of all of the tasks that were set. To begin the class, participants played a word association game where they were required to match a descriptive word to their peers' first name. This game allowed the members to acknowledge one another on a personal level. The facilitator asked members to devise a scene in groups of three. This allowed the participants to discuss and consider the scene within their groups. The participants worked together to communicate and play around with different ideas. Throughout the whole time that this task was underway, the room was filled with laughter and discussion. Even though Elvira (Interview no. 3, 21 January 2016), Pertulia (Interview no. 7, 21 January 2016) and Tinkerbelle (Interview no. 1, 21 January 2016) all felt that they had enough social encounters in a week, data suggests that this recreational drama group provides its members with a certain degree of socialization. For those members who were unsure about whether they were content with their weekly amount of social encounters, it may be that access to more recreational drama groups could benefit their wellbeing.

Even though some participants expressed feeling de-motivated to come to the class at times, they assured me that once they were there they were glad that they had attended. Learning and developing skills during a participatory arts programme for older adults can give meaning and purpose to their lives (The Baring Foundation). If the participants did not have the recreational drama group to motivate them, they may not have any other means of energizing themselves in the same way.

Sometimes you can come and you can feel a bit low or something's happened, hasn't it? But I think when you're acting or doing anything really that you have to concentrate on, it puts everything else behind, doesn't it? (Anne, Interview no. 6, 21 January 2016)

From what some of the participants have said, it is almost as if the recreational drama class is a means of emotional outlet for them. Therefore, there is reason to believe that attending the recreational drama group supports the participant's wellbeing by motivating them and providing them with a creative outlet. If we were to develop this study further, it would be interesting to find out how long this significant improvement in mood lasted on the participants. The long-term impact of recreational dramatic activities on older adults' wellbeing needs to be further investigated.

The large array of activities that the members pursue alongside the recreational drama class resulted in most of the participants feeling content with their weekly amount of social engagement. With hindsight, it is suggested that none of the members are particularly lonely or isolated within their lives. However, it is apparent that attending the group gives the participants an opportunity to enjoy a substantial amount of social interaction. As noted before, participants take time to listen and talk to one another on a personal level throughout the session and during the coffee break. Even though the group in question did not seem to class themselves as lonely or seriously lacking socialization, the social benefits of the recreational drama group are evident in my data. With these findings in mind, attendance to a recreational drama class could potentially decrease the concerning numbers of chronically lonely older adults in the UK (BBC).

285

On the day of the visit, Stanislavski's given circumstances (*passim*) were the primary focus of the session. The facilitator explained some brief objectives of the session to the class. The group started with a discussion on what they considered to be naturalistic acting. The facilitator then gave smaller groups a scenario and asked them to improvise a very natural and realistic scene. They were then asked to use the same scene but to act in an over the top and unrealistic way. It was observed that after each task, the group shared their ideas and findings. The group's approach to drama seemed very academic. Considering the characteristics of the group, the facilitator expressed that:

They've still got questions, they've still got a desire to learn, they've still got a desire to get up and do it. (Interview no. 8, 21 January 2016)

Later on in the interview she suggested that this kind of work does involve mental attributes such as remembering things and concentrating, which can help to keep an aging mind active. The facilitator (Interview no. 8, 21 January 2016) also noted that some of the participants primarily attended the class because they wanted to learn and develop their understanding of drama practices. As well as being mentally stimulating, it was observed that learning and experiencing something new together may encourage closer bonds and friendships in the class. As individuals started to understand the activities more, they were helping others and an academic negotiation was taking place. There were clear set outcomes of the session which almost feels as if the participants are on a personal and educational journey together. Helping one another and learning something new together seemed to be a productive way of forging and solidifying friendships that existed within the class.

When asked if they would attend more than one recreational drama session a week, Annabelle (Interview no. 4, 21 January 2016), Jasmine (Interview no. 5, 21 January 2016), Tinkerbell (Interview no. 1, 21 January 2016) and Star (Interview no. 2, 21 January 2016) all answered “yes.” Pertulia (Interview no. 7, 21 January 2016), Elvira (Interview no. 3, 21 January 2016) and Anne (Interview no. 6, 21 January 2016) said that they might attend more than one a week. It is noteworthy that none of the participants interviewed said that they would not attend more than one session a week. When questioned if there are enough recreational drama groups available to older adults, some participants and the facilitator (Interview no. 8, 21 January 2016) expressed concerns that the idea of drama might scare potential members away. The facilitator tackled misconceptions stating that:

When it comes to drama I think people’s perception of what it is that it’s scary, it’s frightening, I’m going to be on stage. (Interview no. 8, 21 January 2016)

Annabelle (Interview no. 4, 21 January 2016) voiced that getting new members to join was difficult as people felt that they might be exposed or frightened by the art form. However, once they join she feels that they quickly begin to feel comfortable and start to enjoy the sessions. Elvira feels that drama groups are more likely to attract younger people and states:

Well I don’t know whether it’s a bit of a niche thing for older people whether because, you know, we have quite a job to get people to come to us and we’ve had people who have come to try out the class and it’s not really their thing. (Interview no. 3, 21 January 2016)

Star felt that lots of recreational drama opportunities were available for younger people but not enough for older adults.

I look at every site that mentions children and they go up to 18 and I think what about us old people? (Interview no. 2, 21 January 2016)

Star is not alone with her concerns, as The Baring Foundation also deliberates why recreational drama work with older adults struggles for financial support when so much more funding is available for drama with younger people. Their report considers the unsettling idea that the little support available for arts with older adults may be due to organizations harbouring ageist and negative misconceptions. The *Fallen An-*

gels sessions are primarily devoted to “bursting the myths of ageism” (Telander, Quinlan and Verson 5) due to the scrutiny that they have come under for practicing drama with members past a certain age. Even though some of the participants observed had mobility issues with one member using a walking stick, this did not affect the class as chairs were available at all times and members had regular breaks from being on their feet. Out of all of the participants that were interviewed, every member felt that there were not enough recreational drama groups available for older adults. If age is indeed a factor as to why there is not more drama classes available for this specific age group, this research would suggest that age is irrelevant as drama is well within older adult’s physical and mental capabilities.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In the limited spine of this study, we bring anecdotal evidence to argue that recreational drama sessions that take place in community venues can be enjoyable for older adults, may hold benefits for old people including, enjoyment, and improvement of mood through social interaction, growth of relationships and a sense of belonging to a community. The study shows that older adults may develop an ongoing loyalty and dedication to drama sessions. Not only have some of the members been partaking in the group for up to 20 years but participants continue to attend regardless of physical and mental hindrances. It is promising, in our view, to see drama becoming part of the weekly routine of older people, and it encourages us to believe that dedication to drama sessions shows more than loyalty to drama. It indicates a growing sense of belonging in a safe, non-judgmental, respectful social environment where enjoyable and creative activities happen and people feel strongly as members of a community. This is an important finding because it makes a proposition. It proposes drama as a possible way of combating loneliness in mature life and enhancing healthy socializing and potentially an improved wellbeing especially for those who are alone in life. The study also suggests that the friendships transcend the class as most of the participants meet up in between sessions. This would suggest that the class not only forged friendships but also supported and benefitted most of the participants on a social level. The participants are not only meeting up and socializing for two hours a week but are also visiting each other’s houses and arranging leisurely outings together regularly. Every participant that was studied had previous experiences within the field of drama which suggests that the individuals may hold a desire to continue something that they have always enjoyed. A desire to fulfill a life’s dream and participate

in drama actively appears to motivate them to become creative, find companionship and inspiration through interaction with others in drama. In conclusion, joining the recreational drama group has supported the members in breaking their isolation, meeting new people of the same age group, sharing, making friends and has built the foundations for what seems to be an ongoing social circle.

The study has highlighted some potential benefits of recreational drama work with older adults and contributed some ideas to a lacking field of research. Given the small sample, further investigation with larger groups of participants across the country is required to collect wider evidence about the role of recreational drama in the wellbeing of older adults. There are still questions to be answered such as how long the improvement of mood lasts after a drama session, what impact drama might have on those who have no previous experience of drama, and whether attendance to the group substantially improves the member's physical health and emotional wellbeing. However, this branches out into other fields of healthcare and wellbeing, and would need further cross-disciplinary research and resources to pursue. Equally, further investigation of the impact of dramatic activities with a group of mature adults could give the groups a wider scope, more evidence on the positive impact of drama on older people, so as to allow the recreational drama groups to grow further both nationally and internationally. Drama is for life!

WORKS CITED

- Age UK. "Evidence Review: Loneliness in Later Life." *Ageuk.org.uk*. 2014. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.
- . "Later Life in the United Kingdom." *Ageuk.org.uk*. Feb. 2016. Web. 09 Feb. 2016.
- The Baring Foundation. "Ageing Artfully: Older People and Professional Participatory Arts in the UK." *Baringfoundation.org.uk*. 26 Aug. 2009. Web. 11 Jan. 2016.
- BBC. "Jeremy Hunt Highlights Plight of 'Chronically Lonely.'" *Bbc.com*. BBC 18 Oct. 2013. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.
- Crimmens, Paula. *Storymaking and Creative Groupwork with Older People*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 1998. Print.
- Dunn, Julie, Penny Bundy, and Madonna Stinson. "Connection and Commitment: Exploring the Generation and Experience of Emotion in a Participatory Drama." *International Journal of Education & the Arts* 16.6 (2015): 1–22. Print.

- Dury, Rona. "Social Isolation and Loneliness in the Elderly: An Exploration of Some of the Issues". *British Journal of Community Nursing* 19.3 (2014): 125–28. Print.
- Golden, J., et al. "Loneliness, Social Support Networks, Mood and Wellbeing in Community-Dwelling Elderly." *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 24.7 (2009): 694–701. Print.
- Greetham, Bryan. *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.
- Mayo Clinic. "Friendships: Enrich Your Life and Improve Your Health." *Mayoclinic.org*. 28 Sept. 2014. Web. 15 Feb. 2015
- Nolter, Martin. "Drama for the Elderly: They Can Do It." *The Gerontologist* 13.2 (1973): 153–57. Print.
- Pitkala, Kaisu, et al. "Effects of Psychosocial Group Rehabilitation on Health, Use of Health Care Services, and Mortality of Older Persons Suffering from Loneliness: A Randomized, Controlled Trial" *Journals of Gerontology Series A: Biological Sciences & Medical Sciences* 64A.7 (2009): 792–800. Print.
- Prentki, Tim, and Sheila Preston. "Applied Theatre: An Introduction." *The Applied Theatre Reader*. Ed. Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston. Oxon: Routledge, 2009. 9–15. Print.
- Preston, Sheila. "Introduction to Ethics of Representation." *The Applied Theatre Reader*. Ed. Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston. Oxon: Routledge, 2009. 65–69. Print.
- Sleigh, Sophia. "Sutton Drama Group for the Elderly Seeks Help." *Suttonguardian.co.uk*. Sutton Guardian 9 Dec. 2011. Web. 14 Jan. 2016.
- Stanislavski, Constantin. *My Life in Art*. London: Methuen, 1980. Print.
- Telander, Marcie, Flora Quinlan, and Karol Verson. *Acting Up!: An Innovative Approach to Creative Drama for Older Adults*. Chicago: Coach, 1982. Print.
- Thompson, James. *Digging Up Stories: Applied Theatre, Performance and War*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005. Print.
- Wisker, Gina. *The Undergraduate Research Handbook*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.

Persephone Sextou (PhD) is Reader in Applied Theatre and Director of the Community and Applied Drama laboratory (CADLab) at Newman University (UK). She is currently leading a theatre project for children in healthcare with a prestigious grant from BBC Children in Need in collaboration with the National Health System of

England (NHS). She is member of Editorials for *Arts & Health Journal*, *Applied Theatre Research Journal*, *Arts in Society* Series, and a reviewer for National Drama and Palgrave Educational Series NY etc. She is widely published in English and Greek. Her work is cited more than 25 times in 6 languages. Her most recent monograph is *Theatre for Children in Hospitals. The Gift of Compassion* (Intellect, 2016).

p.sextou@newman.ac.uk

Cory Smith is a former student of Newman University. Whilst studying at university, she was particularly interested in the impact that participative drama could have within the wider community. She obtained a first class degree within this field. She has since gone on to work within the special educational needs and mental health sectors. She will be starting her postgraduate study of social work in September and hopes to make a big impact within the social care sector throughout her blossoming career.

coryrose94@hotmail.com