

Late Life Creativity: assessing the value of theatre in later life

Miriam Bernard and Michelle Rickett

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to consider the relationship between late life creativity and our understandings of cultural value. Drawing primarily on findings from two projects funded under the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) 'Cultural Value' programme, we focus on what the existing literature tells us about theatre in later life; and on what we have learned through our own explicit – and methodologically innovative – arts-based approach to the evaluation of project participants' experiences. We begin by exploring the concept of cultural value, consider the scope of research in this area to date, and set the scene for an examination of the ways in which late life creativity contributes to cultural value. We then show how our use of theatre and drama, as a form of collaborative research enquiry into cultural value, puts older people at the centre of the research and performance process and has the potential for capturing and conveying some of the affective and intrinsic dimensions of older people's creative experiences. It also helps us explore the extent to which late life creativity can be seen as something that arises from an interaction between instrumental, institutional, and aesthetic forms of cultural value.

Our examination of late life creativity and cultural value is set against the growth of interest amongst gerontologists and literary and cultural scholars alike, in arts participation and the artistic outputs of older people. That said, comparatively little attention has yet been paid to theatre and drama. Likewise, community or participatory theatre has long been used to address issues affecting marginalised or excluded groups, but is a presently under-utilised medium for exploring ageing or for conveying positive messages about growing older. In order to respond to this gap in research and practice, we have been involved, since 2009, in a continuing collaboration with colleagues at the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme. Developed under the generic title of 'Ages and Stages', we have undertaken a series of multidisciplinary research projects investigating the role that theatre and drama can play in experiences of ageing and later life, whilst simultaneously co-creating innovative drama-based engagements with older people.

The first 'Ages and Stages' project was funded by the national cross-council New Dynamics of Ageing programme from October 2009 until July 2012. In it, we explored historical representations of ageing within the Victoria Theatre's well known social documentaries and conducted narrative interviews with 95 older people who had been involved with the theatre as volunteers, actors and employees, audience members, and sources for the documentaries (Bernard et al., 2014). The interviews were designed to encourage participants to 'tell their stories' (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013; de Medeiros, 2013) about the role the theatre had played, and continued to play, in their creative lives. That initial archival and empirical research was drawn together to create an interactive exhibition narrating the theatre's 50-year history and a new hour-long verbatim documentary drama *Our Age, Our Stage* performed by older people (aged 59-92) interviewed for the project together with members of the New Vic Youth Theatre (aged 16-19). This was followed by a year of knowledge translation activities (2012-2013), funded by

the AHRC, in which we established the 'Ages and Stages Company'; devised and toured a new forum theatre piece: *Happy Returns*; developed, delivered and evaluated a pilot inter-professional training course; and scoped out, with a range of partners, the potential for a 'Creative Age Festival' in Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire. In 2013-2014 we were awarded further funding for two linked projects under the AHRC's 'Cultural Value' programme: a research development award which aimed to develop the 'Ages and Stages Company' into a 'company of researchers' capable of examining and interrogating their own – and each other's – experiences of theatre-making (Bernard, Rezzano and the Ages and Stages Company, 2014); and a critical review on *Ageing, Drama and Creativity* (Rickett and Bernard, 2014).

Researching Cultural Value

The overarching AHRC 'Cultural Value Project' (2013-2015) sought to make a major contribution to how we think about 'the value associated with people's engaging with and participating in art and culture' (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016: 13). 72 awards were made comprising 19 critical reviews of existing literature and research; 46 research development awards for new empirical projects; and seven specialist workshops which brought together academics and practitioners. The findings from these wide-ranging awards were then drawn together to articulate the components of cultural value, to uncover the myriad ways in which cultural value has been evidenced and evaluated, and to explore how we think about the value of arts and culture to individuals and to society (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016).

The starting point for our own projects resonates most closely with Crossick and Kaszynska's (2016: 124) simple definition of cultural value as "the effects that culture has on those who experience it and the difference it makes to individuals and society." However, we also acknowledge that cultural value is a much contested term with a long history, and there is a continuing lack of agreement over how to assess it or what counts as valid evidence (O'Brien, 2010). Forms of analysis of cultural value have been much debated with some commentators focussing on the potential of economic valuation methodologies to capture cultural value, stressing the compatibility of this type of evidence with policy maker agendas (Bakhshi, 2012; O'Brien, 2010). In contrast, Belfiore and Bennett (2010) argue for more disinterested research (as opposed to advocacy-driven research) that provides reflexive, open-ended critique while, a decade ago, Holden (2006: 56) also called for more *public* engagement in the conceptualisation and generation of cultural value. He delineated three interdependent elements of cultural value: instrumental values relate to social and economic impacts; institutional values relate to the esteem generated by institutions; and intrinsic values relate to the unique qualities of art forms (Holden, 2004; 2006). Holden asserted that all three elements are important and called for analysis that not only focuses on quantifiable outcomes, but also on affective experiences. However, in contrast to this expansive definition, the 'value' of the arts, and cultural value in particular, has increasingly come to be seen as a construct of policy within the UK context, driven by economic concerns rather than taking account of – and arising from – the experiences of participants: experiences which Crossick and Kaszynska (2016: 7) assert now need to take centre-stage.

With regard to how older people perceive and understand cultural value, our difficulties are compounded by the negative and limited ways in which we tend to view later life and the

engagement of older people in creative activities. Many cultural institutions, the general public and, it has to be said, older people themselves, hold stereotypical and deficit views of what older people are or are not capable of. As Cutler (2009) has argued, this means that their contributions to their communities and localities, in cultural as in other arenas, tend to get ignored or written off. Such ageist attitudes narrow the opportunities for older people to engage in cultural activities and/or develop and share the cultural capital they may have accumulated over a lifetime (Goulding, 2012). Our two interlinked projects were aimed at challenging these limited and limiting views, and developing a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which late-life creativity – as expressed through drama and theatre – bring value to older people and those around them.

The Cultural Value of Older People's Experiences of Theatre-making: A Review

Our critical review, *Ageing, Drama and Creativity* (Rickett and Bernard, 2014), explored what the research literature to date tells us about the cultural value older people derive from their involvement in theatre and drama. It built on our previous research for 'Ages and Stages' and on the findings, experiences, learning, and networks we had established. It was also set within a wider academic context which, as this volume attests to, has been increasingly drawing together critical gerontological perspectives with the arts and humanities in order to explore the experience of, and meanings associated with, later life (Cole, Kastenbaum and Ray, 2000; Twigg and Martin, 2014, 2015; Goulding and Newman, in press).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our first searches using the term 'cultural value' in relation to older people's experiences of theatre and drama, brought up no results. 'Cultural value', it seems, has not yet been used as an explicit framework for analysing late life creativity as expressed through older people's drama participation. Nor have older participants been asked to reflect on their experiences in this way. We therefore had to broaden our search and, instead, looked for literature which focussed on the 'value' or 'benefits' of older people's drama involvement. Given the lack of scholarly attention to date, we took an expansive approach exploring both the academic and grey literature and including descriptive pieces and short overviews as well as research studies. We excluded literature not in English as well as practical guides to producing seniors theatre, arts and creative interventions where drama was just one component (e.g., arts workshops which include drama exercises alongside other arts forms), and literature which took an explicitly therapeutic approach^[WU1].

77 documents (from 1979 to 2014) formed the basis for the final review and a key finding was that the literature in this area has increased exponentially in recent years. There was a sharp increase from 2000, with a third (n=25 or 32.5%) of the included documents having been published between 2010 and 2014. The literature we selected included: four existing reviews; 35 research articles and books; 11 evaluation reports; and 27 descriptive overviews. As expected, a wide range of academic disciplines featured including drama/theatre, education, psychology, social work, health studies, nursing, and social gerontology; and a number of the studies were multidisciplinary. Several studies were focused on pre-existing senior or intergenerational theatre groups; and several studies

brought together academic researchers with theatre companies, drama groups, and practitioners of various kinds in both residential and community settings.

We found that three elements of cultural value were particularly prevalent in the literature: it was viewed in terms of benefits to **health and well-being**; in the development of **group relationships**; and in opportunities for **learning and creative expression**. These elements fit most closely with what Holden (2004; 2006) terms the 'instrumental' dimension of cultural value: its social and economic benefit. However, they also encompass elements of intrinsic value: the subjective and transformative effects of drama on people's lives and viewpoints. A fourth area, the **aesthetic value and quality** of older people's drama, was touched upon in the literature but is under-researched to date.

Health and well-being: Many of the included studies were specifically designed to assess the benefits of theatre and drama to older people's health and well-being. A substantial body of evidence shows improvements in mental health, quality of life and well-being with participants reporting decreased anxiety, decreased loneliness, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, and increased sense of value and purpose. The long-established research of Helga and Tony Noice in the USA also demonstrates the cognitive value of older people's involvement in drama workshops and training. Their findings consistently evidence improvements in cognitive functioning, memory, word generation and comprehension, and problem solving (see for example, Noice and Noice, 2006) while other work shows older people associating their theatre participation with feelings of excitement, fun, happiness, and freeing of the imagination. These findings resonate with other literature which shows that involvement in the arts in all its forms has multiple benefits for the health and well-being of individuals and society (Fraser et al., 2015). However, research to understand and capture the specific merits of theatre and drama is lacking; nor have the longer-term health and well-being outcomes been explored to date.

Group Relationships: The review highlighted the role of theatre and drama in enhancing or transforming group relationships and we identified four types of project as being important: those that bring generations together; those that bring people from different racial and cultural backgrounds together; those that focus on relationships between older people in residential care and their carers and families; and those that focus on the relationship between people with dementia, their families, and health and social care professionals. The focus of such projects is on enabling people to exchange stories and experiences and develop positive views of themselves and others. Increased trust, improved communication and understanding, and a sense of togetherness are valued most. Opportunities to develop new intra, intergenerational and intercultural friendships, or enhance existing relationships through improved understanding and empathy, were also valued. The use of dramatic role play and devising appear to be key: providing a safe space for expressing and challenging age-related stereotypes and for finding commonalities and accepting differences. That said, research has not yet explored the specific processes and practices through which theatre and drama facilitates this kind of reflection, empathy, and transformation, both for participants and audience members.

Learning and Creativity: The value of theatre and drama was also articulated in terms of the opportunities it provides for older people to learn and creatively express themselves. This

partly relates to improved cognition but, more importantly, was about developing new skills, being challenged, and taking risks in later life through which older people then gain a sense of achievement, enrichment, and fulfilment. Creative, drama-based activities provide opportunities for self-expression, play and fun, broadening people's horizons and impacting positively on other areas of their lives. Finally, as well as the impact on older people's own lives, there is a potential wider social impact through the challenging of ageist stereotypes.

Aesthetic Value and Quality of Older People's Drama: Very little of the research discussed in our review focuses on this fourth area: the aesthetic quality of older people's drama or what it feels like to have an aesthetic experience. Anne Basting's research (1995, 1998) is the exception. In her work, she explores the power and complexity of images of age and ageing produced by older people's performances: an area which has been subsequently developed by Valerie Lipscomb (2012) but in which more analysis is still needed. In similar vein, we would contend from our experience that the aesthetic value and transformative potential of devised productions, derived from creative co-constructed research with older people, also merits further development and exploration. As we hope to illustrate below, this would help enhance our understanding of the cultural value provided *by* older people, rather than just the value they derive *from* their creative engagement and participation.

Moreover, our review also revealed a number of gaps in the literature which we have alluded to in the above discussion. In particular, more **comparative** research is needed to elucidate the specific cultural value and benefits of drama for older people in comparison with other creative activities. **Longitudinal** research is also required to assess the potential longer term benefits of drama interventions or ongoing participation in older people's theatre and drama groups. More nuanced and comparative research exploring the effects of **gender, race, age** and **social class** on creativity and participation would also be beneficial.

The review also highlights important areas for development in **theory** and **research methods**. Only a small minority of the studies identified a theoretical or conceptual framework guiding their work. This lack of focus on theory potentially limits the development of the field and its capacity to contribute to wider discourses around ageing, the arts, late life creativity and cultural value (Lipscomb, 2012); it is also an important element in improving the quality of research and evaluation across the arts more generally (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016). Methodologically, although the existing literature uses a wide range of both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate late life creativity and capture cultural value, our concern here is two-fold. First, in many instances, older people are directed to articulate their experiences of what they value in theatre and drama largely in terms of its benefits to their health and well-being. What is missing are approaches which encourage older people to set the research agenda and to reflect on the cultural value of their creative participation in broader and less directive ways. Second, **arts-based research methodologies** were notable by their absence. Only two studies in the review explicitly took an arts-based approach to the evaluation of participants' experiences. One is an evaluation of Anne Basting's 'Penelope Project': a devised theatre project set in a Wisconsin nursing home in the United States (Mello and Voigts, 2013); the other is an evaluation of a 10-week drama intervention for older people in Coventry in the UK, delivered by a theatre company (Savin-Baden et al. 2013; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2013). It was also evident from most of the studies that older people had rarely, if ever,

been actively involved in devising, conducting or analysing the research on which such findings are based: a situation which we address further below.

In summary, the four dimensions of cultural value identified in our review support and reflect the findings of the wider AHRC Cultural Value Project which stresses the importance of repositioning “first-hand, individual experience of arts and culture” as fundamental to any discussion of cultural value (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016: 7; see also Kaszynska, 2015). From the perspectives of older people, our review also confirms and challenges the range of benefits that might be derived from involvement in theatre and drama – both as producers and consumers. In particular, theatre and drama can help shape reflective individuals, promote understanding and empathy, and stimulate civic and community engagement.

Ages and Stages: developing methodology and empowering older people

This brings us to the development of our own methodological approach to the study of late life creativity and older people’s experiences of theatre and drama. Our theoretical and methodological approach derives from our roots in critical gerontology and in participatory drama-based practice, and from a shared commitment to what Holstein and Minkler (2007) have termed ‘passionate scholarship’. Such an approach aims to counter deficit stereotypes surrounding older people’s creativity and also begins to harness the innovative potential of the arts as a form of enquiry and dissemination, as well as a focus of study in the field of ageing. It involves a commitment to multidisciplinary research, to collaboration with arts-based practice/practitioners, and to the involvement of older people throughout the research process.

Background: developing a multidisciplinary, collaborative approach

The initial three year ‘Ages and Stages’ project brought together social gerontologists, humanities scholars, psychologists, anthropologists and theatre practitioners. Our research included: archival analysis focused on representations of ageing and later life in the Vic documentaries; individual and group interviews and ethnography; and the devising of an original documentary drama, *Our Age Our Stage*, which drew creatively from the research data. Using multiple research methods enabled us to chart a ‘timescape’ of ageing and theatre (Bytheway, 2011), revealing the place of the Victoria Theatre in experiences of ageing, and the shifting relationships between generations and between a theatre community and its older members. The archival ‘timescape’ illuminated the importance of older people as sources for the original Vic documentaries; the ways in which their opinions and experiences were transformed into theatrical narrative and performed on stage; and how both the archive and the documentaries invoke intergenerational exchanges of meanings. Our contemporary research interviews and observations highlighted the importance of emotional and affective connections with this particular theatre, and the sense of belonging, well-being and self-value it can provide. We uncovered the importance of theatre participation as people negotiate later life transitions such as widowhood and retirement. We also found that the theatre provides an opportunity for broadening horizons, taking risks and developing new social connections and intergenerational exchanges from within an environment described as intimate, ‘homely’ or like ‘family’.

The final phase of the project, the devising of a new documentary drama, enabled us to bring our historical and contemporary narratives into one space of engagement, while also showcasing the creativity and skills of our older participants. A group of our interviewees (most of whom had never performed on stage before) were brought together with members of the New Vic Youth Theatre for a series of drama-based workshops facilitated by Co-I Dr Rezzano (Head of Education at the New Vic), through which our research materials were brought to dramatic life, the new production took shape, and participants developed skills in performance and the dramatic process.

The Cultural Value of Older People's Theatre Making: further developing arts-based methods and co-constructing research

Our experiences and research findings from 'Ages and Stages', solidified our desire to challenge stereotypes that the capacity for creativity and participation in later life unavoidably and inevitably declines. In particular, we wanted to further develop our use of drama as a form of creative research enquiry into ageing that puts older people at the centre of the research and performance process. After a year of knowledge translation activities, we used our AHRC 'Cultural Value' research development award (Sept 2013-May 2014) to develop the 'Ages and Stages Company' into a 'company of researchers' and to use 'Ages and Stages' as a case study to explore: how older people felt about their experience as participants in the research and performance process; how they understood and engaged with the concept of cultural value; and, methodologically, what is involved in undertaking co-created and co-operative research with older people. To our knowledge, older people themselves had rarely if ever been asked about their perceptions of cultural value, let alone been asked to consider it in respect of the specific cultural activity in which they might be participating. This is despite the fact that cultural gerontology and research on ageing with an Arts and Humanities focus is, as we noted earlier, a growing field.

The project involved company members conducting interviews with each other, and with family members and younger people with whom they had worked on 'Ages and Stages' productions; and then co-creating, with the research team, three new drama pieces/provocations, which were performed by the Company as part of a concluding Symposium held at the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme in May 2014 (Bernard, Rezzano and the Ages and Stages Company, in press). By this stage our participants (now officially the 'Ages and Stages Company') had received a substantial amount of drama and theatre training, but had not been actively involved in undertaking research interviews themselves. We therefore held a research skills training day at Keele University, at which company members co-created the interview schedules and subsequently conducted 11 interviews (ten with each other and one with a family member); while five were undertaken by Prof Bernard and Dr Rezzano (one with a Company member; two with younger Company members; and one with a family member). The interviews varied in length between 30 minutes and an hour and a half; all were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

A series of two-hour drama-based workshops were then held at the theatre, through which the participants explored their experiences of interviewing and used the accumulated interview data to stimulate reflections about their experiences of being involved in 'Ages and Stages'. After these collaborative workshops, the investigators and the Company

worked together to develop three new performance pieces under the generic title of 'Out of the Box'. These pieces aimed to convey, first, something of the experience of taking part in 'Ages and Stages'; second, participants' thoughts and understandings of what 'cultural value' is; and third, the range of things Company members had been involved in, their feelings about them, and how they saw the future. Each piece – and the associated interactions with the audience – was developed, devised and shaped through an iterative process. Parts were allocated and discussed; some members chose to be in some pieces but not all; and everyone agreed to help facilitate discussions. After a three-day intensive rehearsal period, the three pieces were performed to an invited audience of 60 people as part of the Symposium.

In keeping with the focus of this chapter, we concentrate here on one performance piece in particular: 'Out of the Box 2', which specifically explored cultural value. The findings encapsulated in 'Out of the Box 2' represent our contribution to conveying some of the ways in which this particular group of older people are thinking, talking about and showing to others, the cultural value of what they have been creatively engaged in. For the 'Ages and Stages Company', the 'question' of cultural value seemed to lend itself to a quiz panel format, not least because a quiz had been a motif in our performance pieces to date. The piece was framed as a quiz being watched on television by an older couple.

The script for 'Out of the Box 2' was based on the data from the research interviews and the debates we had had during our research skills training day; we also asked audience members to write down, on a card, what they understood by the term 'cultural value', and to post it in a box we provided for that purpose. The piece begins with the older couple settling down to watch the quiz while, in the studio, the five contestants on the panel are arranging everything they need. The (young) host sweeps down the studio steps, box in hand, depositing it at the front before welcoming everyone to: "Out of the Box": the quiz show that takes questions out of their box, unwraps them and then puts them away, neat and tidy.' The question she draws 'out of the box' for that day's show is, 'What is Cultural Value?' Panel members try, in vain, to answer the question – their answers never being quite what the host has on her card. The host then passes the question to the audience to see if they can 'beat the panel with your thoughts'. Should the audience be reluctant to respond to such a direct question, as they initially were on this occasion, the host had also pre-selected some of the answers which had been written on the cards and posted in the box. These were then used to stimulate further discussion and, once this had run its course, the Company returned to the script. At the end of the piece, we asked the audience if what they had seen and heard had stimulated more thoughts.

The ensuing discussion was wide-ranging, some of it reflecting the definitions and debates we had tried to distil from the research and encapsulate in the script: notably how difficult a concept cultural value is to grapple with; whether and how we distinguish between 'cultural value' and 'the value of culture'; the necessity to look beyond economic value and embrace a broader understanding of what culture consists of and what cultural value is; the importance of trying to capture how engagement with a cultural environment (or cultural experience like 'Ages and Stages') makes us feel; and how creative and cultural engagement changes and evolves us as people. The piece also wonders aloud what it would be like if, instead of automatically going to the sports' desk at the end of every television news

bulletin, there was a regular round-up of what is happening in the arts. In addition, it deliberately revisits that age-old chestnut: 'high art' versus 'popular culture', juxtaposing theatre/the arts with football, and asking why it seems that theatre is not valued as much, culturally, as sport.

The lively exchanges with the audience, together with the cards they had written about cultural value, ranged widely around the transformative power of the arts; flagged up issues of access and barriers to engagement which, in the context of our work, are especially important where older people are concerned; reiterated the positive impacts that the arts can have on people's well-being and how it brings out the best in, and can give meaning to, individuals, groups and communities; emphasised the importance of valuing and experiencing other cultures; highlighted the role the internet now plays in altering our ideas of how culture is constituted and reaches people; and, linked with this, how our understanding and conceptualisation of cultural value needs to credit the extent of social change we have experienced over the last 50 years.

For us, discussing and conveying our findings about cultural value in the form of a quiz, was a way of suggesting that there are no simple answers to this question; even having debated and discussed it over very many weeks, the Company still had more questions than answers. The audience too seemed content not to have been provided with pat answers; some in fact commented that it was a question they did not want answering, and that they were comfortable to find that their understanding of it kept shifting, even during the course of the Symposium.

Discussion and Conclusion

The research data from our interviews and workshops, the discussions enacted through our 'Out of the Box' performances, and the findings from our critical review, all demonstrate that the cultural value of theatre-making for older people is complex, nuanced and context-specific involving: participation in the whole creative process; choice and challenge; the benefits for both oneself and the group; and the fun and the fear associated with taking part. We suggest that understanding and conceptualising cultural value needs to put older people at the centre; look beyond the benefits to health and well-being articulated in much of the existing research; and pay more attention to how the intrinsic and affective elements of creative experience may, in turn, have instrumental effects on older people's lives (see also Rickett and Bernard, 2014: 45).

Moreover, in terms of our empirical research, John Holden's (2006: 23-24) discussion about what it is that the public value about culture, perhaps resonates most closely with the range of definitions, debates and discussions we had with the Company and with the audience at the Symposium. He identifies three key things that 'the public' value about culture. The first is the way that it can 'shape and reflect their sense of self and their place in the world'; the second is 'being treated well, and honestly, by the cultural organisations that they choose to engage with'; and the third is 'the rootedness that culture provides...a sense of place and geographical location, where cultural infrastructure can anchor local identities, and...a sense of belonging to a community, either a geographical community, or a cultural community of interest.'

Finally, although our research development award project was driven by pre-set research questions, these had been derived from the collaborative work we had done with the Company over a number of years. In this sense, older people's late life creative experiences, and the limited understanding from the existing literature about what participation meant to them, was the basis for this project. The project, and the research we undertook as an integral part of it, was co-constructed, collaboratively undertaken, co-produced and co-evaluated. Using the artistic medium in which we were working – namely theatre and drama – to show rather than just describe elements of the cultural value of older people's experiences of theatre making was, for us, a logical approach to take. However, as noted earlier, our critical review showed that such approaches are very rare. We believe that arts-based research methods such as these have much potential for capturing and conveying some of the affective and intrinsic dimensions of older people's creative experiences, as well as the interplay between these dimensions and the instrumental value they derive from their participation. Arts-based approaches can also show audiences something of the actual creative process, what happens 'in the moment', and how participants feel and respond. They point too, to the necessity for a more nuanced and encompassing exploration and understanding of cultural value and late life creativity.

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