

TWO

Ages and Stages: creative participatory research with older people

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Editorial introduction

This chapter provides insight into a long-running programme of research exploring the value for people's sense of well-being and resilience of being involved in theatre. The project represents a successful example of a creative, participatory research programme. The authors focus mainly on the process of the research and their reflections on that process. None the less, the chapter also indicates that taking part in such a research programme may have consequences that arise out of the act of participation.

Introduction

Ages and Stages is a continuing collaboration between researchers at Keele University and colleagues at the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme. Funded initially by the national cross-council New Dynamics of Ageing programme (Oct 2009–July 2012) and, subsequently, by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)'s Follow-on Funding Scheme (2012–13) and Cultural Value Project (2013–14), we have explored historical representations of ageing within the New Vic's well-known social documentaries; examined the role that the theatre has played – and continues to play – in the creative lives of older people living in the Potteries; devised and toured four different theatre pieces to date; developed, delivered and evaluated a pilot inter-professional training course; and established the Ages and Stages Theatre Company. In this chapter we focus primarily on one of our two awards under the AHRC's Cultural Value Project in which we employed creative participatory methods to turn Ages

1 and Stages members into a ‘company of researchers’. The aim of
2 the award was to co-explore the cultural value that members place
3 on their experiences of theatre-making (Bernard, Rezzano and the
4 Ages and Stages Company, 2014). Here, we describe the design
5 and conduct of this project; discuss how the research findings were
6 turned into performance; and reflect on the challenges of working in
7 these creative and collaborative ways. In doing so, we show how our
8 approach and findings add to earlier Ages and Stages work that has
9 already highlighted the benefits of theatre engagement for older people
10 in terms of: enhancing identity, belonging, well-being, self-esteem
11 and self-confidence; challenging deficit, negative and stereotypical
12 views of ageing and late-life creativity; promoting dialogue between,
13 and facilitating the inclusion of, both older and younger people;
14 building supportive social networks, trust and reciprocity; extending
15 skills, widening horizons and challenging capabilities; and supporting
16 involvement during times of transition such as retirement and
17 widowhood (Bernard and Munro, 2015; Bernard et al, 2015; Bernard
18 and Rickett, 2016; Bernard et al, 2017). We would contend that
19 outcomes such as these resonate strongly with the central ideas in this
20 book around promoting resilience in later life (Centre for Policy on
21 Ageing, 2014), demonstrating the value of applied and socially engaged
22 theatre practice at both individual and group levels (McCormick,
23 2017).

24

25 **The academic context**

26

27 For the purposes of this chapter, we briefly draw attention to three
28 areas of literature that provide pertinent background to the work of
29 the project we go on to discuss. We consider the growing international
30 literature about the benefits of arts engagement in general for older
31 people, and of theatre and drama in particular; current understandings
32 around the cultural value of such engagement; and the use of creative
33 participatory research methodologies.

34 The pioneering work of Gene Cohen, a US-based psychiatrist who
35 published extensively on the subject of creativity and ageing before
36 his death in 2009, provided early evidence about the benefits of arts
37 participation. The research of Cohen and his colleagues focused largely
38 on health and well-being: on understanding the physiological and
39 psychological effects of arts participation. It also challenged deficit
40 models of ageing by drawing attention to the potential – as opposed
41 to the problem – of ageing in relation to creativity (Cohen, 2006). Yet,
42 while the evidence base on arts and ageing has increased exponentially

in recent years (Bernard and Rickett, 2016), at the time when we began developing the original Ages and Stages project (from 2007 onwards) there was little UK research examining the value of engaging in theatre and drama specifically, and none that considered overtly how it may promote and enhance resilience. Even by the time of the Mental Health Foundation's evidence review of the impact of participatory arts on older people in 2011, only five of the 31 included studies were in its 'drama' category. By contrast, our critical review of Ageing, Drama and Creativity a few years later (Rickett and Bernard, 2014) demonstrates a sharp increase from the year 2010 onwards, with a third (n=25 or 32.5%) of the 77 documents selected for inclusion having been published between 2010 and 2014.

Our own and others' work has also demonstrated that theatre and drama are rewarding areas both for examining the artistic outputs of older people and for uncovering some of the ways in which the arts may construct, perpetuate or challenge conceptions and experiences of ageing (Mangan, 2013; Bernard and Munro, 2015). For example, in 2010, the Bristol Old Vic staged the radical *Juliet and her Romeo*, which, by recasting Shakespeare's play with well-known older actors in the lead roles, and by setting it in a care home called 'Verona', deliberately plays with our expectations about ageing. Also in 2010, UK theatre companies Fevered Sleep and the Young Vic together developed *On Ageing*: a production focused on the experiences of growing older in which the words of the older people who had been interviewed were spoken, on stage, by a cast of children. Evaluation of the production echoes the resilience literature in that it facilitated reflection for participants and audience members, and encouraged people to question assumptions about ageing (Johnson, 2011).

Historically too, theatre is a cultural arena in which older people actively participate as audience members, employees and volunteers. By contrast, participation opportunities as co-creators and performers are far more limited – apart, that is, from involvement in specific senior theatre groups. Such groups are much more common in North America than in the UK. Bonnie Vorenberg, one of the pioneers of the senior theatre movement, compiled the very first directory of information, at which time there were some 79 senior theatre groups in the US (Vorenberg, 1999); by 2011, there were over 800 registered groups (Vorenberg, 2011). In addition, research on both sides of the Atlantic now provides compelling evidence of the benefits of engaging in theatre and drama work: it has demonstrable cognitive, social, physical and emotional benefits (Basting, 1998, 2009; Schweitzer, 2007, 2010; Vorenberg, 2011; Noice et al, 2013); positive effects on

1 intergenerational relations and intergenerational learning (Hafford-
2 Letchfield et al, 2010; Johnson, 2011) and on the wider community
3 (Schweitzer, 2007; Cutler, 2009; Magic Me, 2009); and enhances
4 older people's skills and learning ability, improves confidence and self-
5 esteem and supports the development of new social connections and
6 friendships (Pyman and Rugg, 2006). All these, it could be argued,
7 are also mechanisms through which resilience can be developed both
8 individually and collectively.

9 Researching the benefits of engagement, however, is not necessarily
10 the same thing as assessing the value of participation. Indeed, in the
11 UK, the 'value' of the arts in general, and 'cultural value' in particular,
12 tends to be concerned more with the impacts of cultural engagement
13 in policy terms, rather than being related to – and drawing from – the
14 experiences of individuals (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016). Although
15 Holden (2004, 2006) argued over a decade ago that research and
16 analysis should focus on affective experiences as well as on quantifiable
17 social and economic impacts and outcomes, we are still bedevilled by
18 the tendency of many cultural institutions to write off the myriad and
19 varied capabilities of older people – including creative and cultural
20 ones – which in turn constrains their opportunities to build resilience
21 and engage in, develop and share the cultural capital they may have
22 accumulated over a lifetime (Goulding, 2012). Moreover, simply
23 focusing on health and well-being, as much arts work with older
24 people still does (AHRC, 2014), both reinforces stereotypical notions
25 of what later life might offer and presents a reductionist assessment
26 of the potential cultural value of older people's participation in arts
27 activities (Fraser et al, 2015).

28 In their final report of the national Cultural Value Project, of which
29 our work was a part, Crossick and Kaszynska (2016, p 7) reassert
30 the need 'to reposition first-hand, individual experience of arts and
31 culture'. They go on to explain how, between them, the projects have
32 identified a range of components of cultural value, some of which
33 are familiar and some of which have been too little acknowledged.
34 In our critical review of the field of ageing, creativity and drama, we
35 uncovered three familiar dimensions of cultural value which, perhaps
36 unsurprisingly, echo some of the existing literature around benefits
37 and, indeed, the underlying components of resilience (Rickett and
38 Bernard, 2014). Cultural value was viewed and conceived of in terms
39 of health and well-being; in the development of group relationships;
40 and in learning and creativity. The fourth area, which was only starting
41 to emerge in the literature, concerned the aesthetic value and quality of
42 older people's drama: what it feels like to have an aesthetic experience

and the meaning and purpose people derive from that experience. Our conclusion and contention was that this dimension was important for understanding the cultural value provided *by* older people, rather than just the value they derive *from* their participation. Moreover, the experience of producing cultural value, and being valued for it, may in turn contribute positively to changing older people's views of themselves, their circumstances and capabilities, and to challenging negative societal expectations of what may be possible in later life. Thus, in the case of our research with the Ages and Stages Company, which we present later, we were particularly interested in trying to get at what older members felt about their theatre-making experiences – especially given that many of them had never set foot on stage before.

Theoretically and practically, it was also important for us to continue to work – as we have done for many years – with creative and participatory research methodologies. Participatory methods that involve older people in co-creating research from initial design through to execution, analysis and dissemination of findings have become increasingly common in gerontological work (Barnes and Taylor, 2007; Ray, 2007; Ward et al, 2012), even if they are less accepted or familiar ways of researching in other disciplines. Participatory research tends to focus on work with groups or communities, with the aim of benefiting and enriching participants as well as researchers (Bhana, 2006; Wassenaar, 2006). More recently, Helen Kara's (2015) practical guide to creative methods in the social sciences presents participatory research as one aspect of what she terms 'transformative research frameworks'. The other creative techniques and approaches that she discusses include arts-based research; research using technology; and mixed-methods research. In her typology, our work is located at the intersection of arts-based and transformative approaches.

The creative context

We now turn our attention to the creative context against which our Cultural Value project was developed, providing a broad-brush picture of the original Ages and Stages project and the work that has followed from it. For the very first Ages and Stages project (2009–12), we brought together a large interdisciplinary research team with backgrounds in social gerontology, cultural theory and history, social and health psychology, social anthropology and theatre studies (Bernard et al, 2011). Together, we set out to examine historical representations of ageing within the New Vic's ground-breaking documentaries and docu-dramas (produced between 1964 and 1995) and to explore the

1 recollections and experiences of older people who are, or had been,
2 involved with the theatre in different ways. Employing a conventional
3 mixed-method case study research design, we worked in the theatre's
4 archive, housed at Staffordshire University, and also conducted over
5 100 individual and group interviews.

6 The archival strand focused on the 11 pioneering social
7 documentaries and five docu-dramas developed under the artistic
8 directorship of the late Peter Cheeseman during his 36-year tenure at
9 the Victoria and New Vic Theatres (1962–98). Between them, these
10 social documentaries chart social, economic and political changes in
11 the Potteries over a 40-year period. They are based on a variety of
12 source materials, including a remarkable collection of tape-recorded
13 interviews with members of the community. For our interview strand,
14 we managed to track down a number of these people and re-interview
15 them, together with three other groups of older people: long-standing
16 audience members; current or former theatre volunteers; and theatre
17 employees and actors who continue to live in the area. In the individual
18 interviews, participants spoke about how they had come to be involved
19 with the theatre, and what part it had played – and continues to play
20 – in their lives; and recalled their memories of, and involvements
21 with, the social documentaries. The group interviews focused on three
22 emerging themes: ageing, intergenerational relationships and the place
23 of the theatre in the community and in individual lives. As noted in
24 the introduction, the interviews that we conducted yielded a series of
25 findings that resonate with the resilience literature and demonstrate
26 the value of participation at both individual and group levels.

27 In the third and final strand we departed from our conventional
28 research design and, instead of then analysing and writing up our
29 findings, extended an invitation to everyone who had been interviewed
30 to come back and help us draw together the archival and interview
31 materials into what became the Ages and Stages Exhibition and a new,
32 hour-long, intergenerational documentary drama *Our Age, Our Stage*.
33 We deliberately avoided asking people to 'come and perform' and, in
34 the event, 16 older people (aged 59–92) joined nine 'senior' members
35 (aged 16–19) of the New Vic Youth Theatre to help with both the
36 production and the exhibition. Under the directorship of the New Vic's
37 Head of Education and research team member Jill Rezzano, a series of
38 weekly workshops were held at the theatre between September 2011
39 and May 2012 during which the whole group (participants, researchers
40 and artistic director) shaped the materials into the documentary piece.
41 As the weeks went by, those who were interested in performing began
42 to emerge and, in the end, 10 people became the main cast: six older

participants and four Youth Theatre members. Following an intensive two-week rehearsal period in June 2012, *Our Age, Our Stage* toured to the local borough council, a school, a college and a retirement community before playing to a capacity audience on the theatre's main stage in early July. This final performance was attended by families and friends of everyone who had taken part, members of the project's Advisory Group, and delegates to the British Society of Gerontology's annual conference, being hosted that year at Keele University. The performance was filmed and turned into a DVD; over 700 people saw the productions and engaged in discussions with the cast, crew and research team after each performance; and the parallel exhibition ran for a month at the theatre, from 25 June to 20 July 2012.

Having 'got the acting bug', the group were understandably reluctant to disband. Fast-forward two years to 2014 and we found – through a series of other funded projects – that we had been able to transform the group into the Ages and Stages Company. A year of 'follow-on' funding from the AHRC supported this development, alongside increasing requests and opportunities for the Company to create and perform other pieces. These developments included: the Company working further with the research team on the existing research materials to devise and tour a new interactive, 40-minute-long, forum theatre piece, *Happy Returns*; their involvement in helping deliver a pilot inter-professional training course, which we devised and evaluated (Reynolds, 2013); scoping out, with a range of partners, the potential for holding a Creative Age Festival in Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire; and, late in 2013, an invitation from the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester to take part in its Truth about Youth programme (for details of this see: Bernard, Rezzano and the Ages and Stages Company, 2014).

Set against these developments, the main aim of the project that we discuss later was to then co-explore and co-research the Company's theatre-making experiences over the previous four years. Our intention was for members to work collaboratively with the project team (in this case one researcher and the artistic director) to identify the benefits, drawbacks and cultural value of what they had been engaged in. As with the earlier projects, a key element was that the Company would also be supported to show to us and others, through live performance, any new piece or pieces that arose from the work. In other words, we would again be using the medium we work in – theatre and drama – to directly convey research findings by performing the pieces as part of an invited symposium at the conclusion of the project.

1 **Creating a company of researchers – researching the** 2 **company**

3
 4 At its heart, this project sought to analyse the experiences, meanings
 5 and value that Company members attach to their engagement with
 6 the arts as seen through their involvement with a notable cultural
 7 institution (the New Vic Theatre) and a particular ongoing project
 8 (Ages and Stages). As we have seen, Company members were already
 9 theatre makers but, in this instance, our intention was to move away
 10 from academic-driven research agendas about cultural value and
 11 to support them to work with us as co-researchers to explore the
 12 following research questions:

13

- 14 • What has the experience of being involved with Ages and Stages
 15 been like?
- 16 • How has participants' involvement helped to shape them as people?
- 17 • How has their involvement helped to shape their understandings
 18 of ageing?
- 19 • What value/benefits have they derived from being involved with
 20 Ages and Stages?

21

22 As a first step, in late November 2013, 10 core members of the
 23 Company agreed to participate in a research skills training day at
 24 the University facilitated jointly by us. Three weeks ahead of the
 25 training day, we asked Company members to begin to think about
 26 their experiences of undertaking interviews and/or being interviewed
 27 and to come prepared to share their thoughts. Specifically, we asked
 28 them to consider the following questions:

29

- 30 • What makes for a good interview?
- 31 • What makes for a bad interview?
- 32 • Is there an interviewer – or interviewers – you particularly admire?
 33 If so, what is it about her/him/them that you think is so good?
- 34 • What does the phrase 'cultural value' mean to you?

35

36 The training day was structured around six sessions, beginning with an
 37 introduction to the overall Cultural Value Project, a reminder of the
 38 aims and objectives of our own award and what we were all hoping to
 39 achieve by the end of the day. We also gave out a pack of information
 40 for everyone to take away, which included background information
 41 about research interviewing, as well as literature introducing
 42 participants to notions of 'resourceful ageing' and ideas about social

and cultural capital (see, for example, Putnam, 2000; Daly, 2005; Field, 2005; Reynolds, 2011). ‘Resourceful ageing’ contrasts with the problematic concepts of ‘successful’ or ‘active’ ageing (influenced by bio-medical perspectives and critiqued for their prescriptive nature) and acknowledges that later life cannot be understood in isolation from other phases of the lifecourse. It also resonates with ideas about social and cultural capital and is especially useful in challenging the tendency in existing literature to focus on older people as consumers, rather than generators, of social and cultural value and capital.

In the next session we spent an hour discussing the ‘homework’ questions we had set. This resulted in a lively discussion of who were good interviewers and what it is that good interviewers do to make a good interview. The most frequently mentioned names were familiar TV and radio personalities such as Michael Parkinson, Jenni Murray, Kirsty Young, John Humphrys and the late David Frost. Company members identified the qualities of a good interviewer as: being well prepared and listening; showing interest, respect and being non-judgemental; not talking too much themselves but being able to adapt and respond to what was being said; and being able to establish a warm and pleasant relationship which would draw people out.

Next, we then compared these responses with selected research methodology literature. Specifically, we looked together at Kvale’s (1996) 10 criteria for what makes a successful research interviewer, plus two additional criteria derived from Bryman (2008) that emphasise the importance of ‘balance’ (not talking too much and not talking too little) and being ‘ethically sensitive’ (ensuring that the interviewee appreciates the purpose of the research and that his/her responses will be treated confidentially). Although the language used in research methods texts may be somewhat different from everyday speech it was evident that, between them, Company members had drawn out a very comprehensive set of interview strategies, displaying considerable understanding and insight into how to go about undertaking an interview.

However, it is one thing to appreciate the theory behind good interviewing, another to be able to actually do it. In the third and last session of the morning, therefore, the Company were invited to put the theory into practice. Working in threes (one interviewer, one interviewee and one observer) – and with the interview topic being ‘your best holiday ever’ – each interviewer had 10 minutes in which to try to get the interviewee’s story. The roles were then revolved around the group so that each person had the opportunity to fulfil all three at different points. The interviewers were encouraged to

1 play with the interview strategies everyone had identified earlier, and
2 the observers made notes and provided feedback about the kinds of
3 questions that worked best, what didn't work so well and what was
4 happening in terms of body language and other non-verbal aspects.
5 Back in the larger group, we discussed what the experience of being
6 both an interviewer and an interviewee had been like, what kinds of
7 questions people wished they had asked but hadn't and what they had
8 learned from this (brief) exercise. This enabled us, together, to begin
9 to collate and draw up a set of pointers/guidelines for the conduct of
10 the interviews that the Company would be undertaking with each
11 other and, potentially, with one or two family members and younger
12 people with whom they had worked on Ages and Stages productions.

13 The afternoon was devoted to the technicalities of constructing an
14 interview guide and the practicalities of who was going to do what,
15 with whom, when and where. It was essential to the project that
16 Company members would not just carry out interviews but that they
17 would also decide what questions needed to be asked and co-design
18 the guide. We began the first of the afternoon's sessions by revisiting
19 the project's four main research questions, to which we added two
20 others: 'What impacts has being involved with Ages and Stages had
21 on participants (emotionally, cognitively, physically, reflexively)?' and
22 'What impacts has being involved with Ages and Stages had on others
23 (families, friends, the younger people you have performed with)?'

24 Working in pairs, members discussed what detailed questions one
25 might need to ask in an interview to get answers to these bigger
26 research questions. Each pair focused on just one of the first five
27 research questions and, if they ran out of ideas, they then discussed
28 the sixth and final question. Each pair gave feedback to the whole
29 group and discussed what to prioritise and include. We concluded the
30 session by comparing the form of the draft interview questions that
31 we had generated with Kvale's (1996) nine types of research interview
32 questions. This enabled participants to see something of the process
33 that they had been through to turn questions into a workable schedule
34 and accompanying guidance, which they would then be comfortable
35 using.

36 The last two sessions explored and discussed a range of other
37 issues, including the pros and cons of being an 'insider' or 'outsider'
38 researcher. Here, we stressed the importance of not assuming that,
39 because Company members had a shared experience of Ages and
40 Stages, they would necessarily view that experience in the same way.
41 Ethical issues were also discussed, especially the fact that we needed
42 to (re)seek consent for these interviews. We talked too about how

best to support each other through the fieldwork and debrief after all the interviews were completed; a date was also arranged to get everyone back together early in the New Year to co-evaluate the research process.

All 10 core Company members agreed to be interviewed and, with one exception, everyone volunteered to try their hand at being an interviewer. The research team were also to be involved in conducting these interviews. Names were drawn to decide who would interview whom; contact details were exchanged so that people could set up the interviews with each other; and details were passed on of other family members who were willing to be interviewed. Finally, we tried out the digital recording equipment and agreed that we would try to complete as many interviews as possible before Christmas.

Immediately following the training day, the draft interview schedule and guidance was tidied up and finalised. In addition to the final schedule, we produced two variations, as we were aware that one or two Youth Theatre members who had worked with us on previous productions, as well as some family members, were also agreeable to being interviewed. The core Company members were already in possession of the project's information sheet and had consented to research discussions, workshops, evaluation sessions and performances being audio and video documented. Other potential interviewees were sent the final paperwork and consent forms.

In total, 16 interviews were carried out: 11 were undertaken by Company members (10 with each other and one with a family member); and five by us (one with a Company member; two with Youth Theatre members; and one with a family member). The interviews varied between 30 minutes and an hour and a half; all were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Most interviews took place in participants' own homes, although some were carried out at the theatre when this was more convenient.

Reflections on the creative participatory research process

Towards the end of January 2014, we devoted one of our regular Monday workshops to a recorded group discussion about what Company members had made of the research-skills training they had undergone, and what their experiences of co-designing and interviewing each other had been like. Each member was sent copies of their transcripts in advance so that they could see and read their interview/s and reflect on what they had done and how they had done it.

1 Without exception, everyone said how much they had enjoyed
 2 the training day and how valuable they had found the preparation.
 3 However, being asked by their peers to reflect back on their experience
 4 was challenging. This was despite their having all been interviewed for
 5 the first Ages and Stages project (2009–12), and having worked closely
 6 together over the previous three years. In the following discussion,
 7 for example, Company members express concerns about being the
 8 interviewee; reflect on what seeing a written transcript is like; and have
 9 a new-found appreciation for what is involved in research interviewing.

10

11 A&S2: I was very hesitant to give answers ... a bit like
 12 a rabbit in the headlights and I actually kept
 13 switching off the machine because I thought I
 14 can't leave a 10-minute gap while I try and think
 15 of something to say, which proved to be a bit of a
 16 problem for the little machine, but still.

17 A&S9: I found it more difficult being interviewed.

18 MB: Why was that?

19 A&S9: I wasn't terribly sure what I wanted to say, which
 20 sounds pathetic. ...

21 A&S2: And also I didn't want to let you down by just
 22 talking drivel.

23 A&S1: Yes!

24 A&S6: That's part of it, yes ... that's what I did all the
 25 time: kept going off the point and thinking out
 26 loud while I was trying to form my answers. ...

27 A&S7: I was like that. Several times I'd started a sentence
 28 and I stopped because a new idea had come into
 29 my head. ...

30 A&S6: That's right.

31 A&S7: And then I'd just start a new sentence half way
 32 through another one. And what I found when I
 33 read through the transcript was I didn't realise I
 34 said 'you know' quite so many times.

35 A&S6: Oh, we're all the same. [Overtalking]

36 A&S4: That was my problem when I looked through
 37 the transcript. I said 'you know' so many times it
 38 was unbelievable, you know ... [overtalking and
 39 laughter] ... You don't realise you're doing it ...
 40 And ... I mean, we were prepared and we'd read
 41 it ... read the questions through. ...

42 A&S6: Yes, that's right.

A&S2: And we'd sort of thought about answers and I'd made one or two notes, but when it's the actual interview, it's a totally different experience.

While some members found it difficult being the interviewer, others preferred this to being the interviewee, as illustrated in the following exchange'

A&S2: I prefer to be the interviewer than to be interviewed, because I felt very hesitant every time I had to think of an answer. But listening to A&S1's answers, I could then build on that and sort of concoct my next sentence ... next question to match what she'd already said, you know. ...

A&S1: I was the other way round and I thought being the interviewer was very hard work. I'd looked at the sheets beforehand and I was anxious about timing, which of course I didn't keep to, but I was so fascinated by A&S2's answers that I did find asking questions possible, but I'm not sure that they were as good as they could have been. And I think on the whole I prefer being interviewed because I just rabbit on then.

Sometimes too, there were unavoidable delays (at most a week or two) between the training day and carrying out the actual interviews, which meant, as this Company member observes: "by the time we came to it, I'd forgotten everything we'd done on the day ... I could have done a lot better if I'd been more prepared" (A&S7). However, others enjoyed both roles as this member comments:

"I did three interviews as the interviewer and I found the first one kind of a bit dry because I was just going through it. ... And then as I got into the second and third ones, I found it quite relaxing ... depending on who I was talking to: if they were kind of quite rolling along, led by you, you could kind of delve a little bit more whereas on others you just kind of like stuck to the set questions really." (A&S8)

They also commented on how interesting it had been to hear one another talk about their experiences. Even if they thought they knew each other well - and one or two members had been good friends

1 before becoming involved with Ages and Stages – the interviews
 2 uncovered things they did not know and stimulated them to think in
 3 different ways about what they had been doing. These two comments,
 4 from different points in the group discussion, are illustrative:

5

6 “I found ... because I interviewed A&S7 first, that she was
 7 saying things and I was thinking, ‘Oh, I never thought
 8 about that’ ... ‘Oh that’s good!’ ... ‘Oh my God, that’s
 9 intellectual’. I hadn’t thought of anything in that depth.”
 10 (A&S9)

11

12 “Something else I wanted to say ... was that during the
 13 interview an idea occurred to me that hadn’t occurred to
 14 me beforehand, and I think that was part of the process:
 15 that it actually did stimulate me to put things together and
 16 have new thoughts.” (A&S7)

17

18 Company members also felt that, given time, they would become
 19 more practised and comfortable, the more interviews they were able
 20 to do. Some said they would like to have gone back and repeated
 21 their interviews – especially when they saw their transcripts; others
 22 were very positive about the possibility of doing more in the future.
 23 As one member unequivocally said, “Well, I’m not going to say no
 24 to anything” (A&S7).

25

26 **Participatory creative research: reflecting back findings**

27

28 Using the transcribed interviews, discussions from the research skills
 29 training day and the reflections noted earlier, a programme of devising
 30 workshops were held between 13 January and the end of April 2014.
 31 The workshops mixed drama exercises, debates and discussions,
 32 exploring further the Company’s experiences of their time with Ages
 33 and Stages. As always, we worked gently and gradually, looking first
 34 at the research findings around ‘beginnings’ and at ‘motivations’ for
 35 taking part. To give one example of the devising process, we selected
 36 12 contrasting quotations from the transcripts illustrating how people
 37 had got involved and what stood out for them. In small groups, the
 38 Company discussed which quotations struck a particular chord, and
 39 which they thought would sound best to an audience. We then ‘heard’
 40 and listened as each member spoke in turn around a circle, deciding
 41 together which quotations went with each other; which cut across
 42 one another; and whether any jumped out. We then amended and

rearranged the circle to hear them again in a different order. The next step was to find a way to visually reflect what the Company does week in, week out. Reflecting what happens at the start of every workshop, it was agreed that one member would come on and make a circle of chairs; each person would then enter, one by one and speak their line before taking their place in the circle. Over successive weeks, this scene was refined further and became the opening of the first performance piece.

Under the generic title of *Out of the Box*, the content of what it was decided would be three short pieces gradually took shape in this way, through the active and full involvement of everyone. The title had come from a comment made on the research-skills training day by one Company member who spoke about how her thinking had been altered by the experience of taking part in Ages and Stages. It seemed, therefore, a particularly pertinent title for a series of theatre provocations that aimed to challenge an audience. We also wanted each provocation to be shaped differently and to engage the audience in different ways, rather than just performing each piece followed by a question-and-answer session. One illustration of how we did this will have to suffice.

Once we had a draft script for the first piece, the Company were invited to look at what they had helped to create and to think about the major themes coming from it. Here, we were borrowing from dramatic techniques, but also reflecting the process of analysis that we apply to qualitative research data. The Company drew out 12 key themes, including, for example, friendship, loyalty, surprise, challenge, feeling valued and curiosity. Through a voting process, they settled on 'challenge' as the one theme to be explored further with the audience. They then worked in small groups to come up with a series of questions to ask the audience about challenge. This led to further lively debate and discussion, ranging from the challenge of coming along to Ages and Stages in the first instance, through to wider concerns about challenging conventional stereotypes of ageing and old people and whether and how we should be challenged throughout our lives. All the questions about challenge were gathered together and were returned to later in the rehearsal process when we firmed up how, exactly, we intended to manage the interactions with the audience on the day of the symposium. Each piece – and the associated interactions with the audience – was developed, devised and shaped through this collaborative and iterative process. They were subsequently performed at the concluding symposium attended by a very mixed audience of

1 some 60 people. The performances and the audience's responses were
2 all captured on film and turned into a DVD.

3

4 **Creative participatory research: benefits and challenges**

5

6 The Cultural Value Project award enabled us to treat Ages and Stages
7 as a case study and to consider what the experience of participating in
8 theatre making has been like for a group of older people and what it has
9 meant to them; what their perceptions and understandings of 'cultural
10 value' are; and, methodologically, what is involved in undertaking
11 co-created and cooperative research. Creative participatory research
12 of this nature has a number of benefits and challenges, three of which
13 we highlight here by way of conclusion.

14 First, this kind of research places older people very much at
15 the centre as opposed to simply being respondents to surveys and
16 interviews. Although the award was driven by pre-set research
17 questions, these were derived from the collaborative work that we
18 had done with the Company over a number of years. Thus, members'
19 experiences were the basis for the project and we – and they – were
20 aware from the start that our aim was to see if we could transform the
21 Company into a 'Company of researchers', if only for a while. The
22 project, and the research we undertook as an integral part of it, was
23 therefore co-constructed, collaboratively undertaken, co-produced
24 and co-evaluated; it also built on the strengths, connectedness, trust
25 and resilience that the group had already developed.

26 Second, using the artistic medium in which we were working –
27 namely, theatre and drama – to 'show' rather than just describe or
28 write up the research findings was, for us, a logical approach to take.
29 After all, it was what we had been doing since the initial Ages and
30 Stages project. What we had not fully appreciated was how unusual
31 an approach this was. Indeed, our companion critical review (Rickett
32 and Bernard, 2014) found only two projects with older people that
33 had explicitly used arts-based methods to convey research findings:
34 an evaluation of Anne Basting's Penelope Project, set in a Wisconsin
35 nursing home in the United States (Mello and Voigts, 2013); and
36 an evaluation of a 10-week drama intervention for older people in
37 Coventry in the UK, delivered by a theatre company (Savin-Baden
38 et al, 2013; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2013). In our own case, the
39 performance pieces and scripts that we co-produced arose directly
40 from our research; encapsulated and communicated the knowledge
41 that, together, we had generated over the project; and, we would also
42 argue strongly, are valid as research outputs in themselves.

Third, there are, of course, challenges for everyone involved: the whole process is a risky one, requiring trust and faith in colleagues; a willingness to try new ways of working; and the ability to relinquish control over at least some aspects of the process. For an academic or researcher, this can sometimes be very hard to do. Working together over a long time, as we have all done, is helpful; the further challenge here is to ensure that we continue to be reflexive and self-critical. Moreover, in the event that presenting findings in these ways is not well received in a public forum, there is also a huge responsibility to be aware of how this might affect participants, not just ourselves as academics and professional theatre-makers.

In conclusion, a small case study such as this has limitations and we make no claims for the generalisability of what we did, or what we found and presented. However, to date, there is comparatively little work on older people's participation in theatre and drama that explores some of the resilience-building mechanisms that we have touched on here, or that has been carried out using a creative participatory research methodology. Our aim was not to privilege any one viewpoint over another; instead, the approach we adopted was in keeping with our roots in critical gerontology and in participatory drama-based practice: its benefit is that it recognises, acknowledges and enhances the skills and abilities that older people have; captures and conveys some of the less tangible aspects of experience and participation; and shows audiences something of the actual creative process: what happens 'in the moment' and how participants feel and respond. In this vein, it seems fitting to leave the last word to Company member Colin Ramsell. Every time we get towards the conclusion of a project, Colin pens a poem for us all; this project was no exception.

Etruria Rd. 598 

Curious:

Well that's why we're here.

An invitation to talk

Is where it began.

Memories of theatre shared

And views expressed,

Their words taken down

verbatim.

Would they come to a workshop?

Not a place where materials,

Clay or metal, wood or cloth

1 Are thrown shaped or formed.
 2 The materials here are words,
 3 Ideas, expressions, which are
 4 Woven, cast or hammered into
 5 shape.
 6 Another *challenge*
 7 Share with a younger generation!
 8 It took some time
 9 Finding what makes them tick,
 10 Their reaction to us,
 11 Their energy and perspective.
 12 But together we worked it out.
 13 Then by request to Manchester
 14 To strut the Royal Exchange.
 15 [Well it was in the Studio at least]
 16 And weren't we chuffed.
 17 Cultural Value:
 18 Discuss.
 19 Oh dear what's this,
 20 Semantics and philosophy.
 21 But by degrees we ventured
 22 Into the *unknown*.
 23 And past *experience*
 24 And the *loyalty* of the team
 25 The words and ideas
 26 Gained form and shape.
 27 With a nudge from Jill
 28 And a prompt from Mim
 29 A scenario emerged
 30 And tackled with *enthusiasm*
 31 Our theatre making
 32 Does have a cultural value.
 33 Can we convince an audience?
 34 In *anticipation*
 35 We await your verdict.
 36

37 **Note**

38 Readers interested in exploring other aspects of what we have done together are
 39 invited to visit the Ages and Stages website (www.keele.ac.uk/agesandstages), and the
 40 Live Age Festival website (www.liveagefestival.co.uk), which showcases the work of
 41 the Company and their participation in this now annual event.
 42

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