

Chapter 2

'Ages and Stages': Creative participatory research with older people

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<1> Editorial introduction

This chapter provides insight into a long-running programme of research, exploring the value of being involved in theatre for people's sense of well-being and resilience. 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. Nonetheless, the chapter also indicates that taking part in such a research programme may have consequences which arise out of the act of participation.

<1> 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 Vic's well known social documentaries; examined the role 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 and Stages*

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

<1> The academic context

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

The pioneering work of Gene Cohen, a US-based psychiatrist who published extensively on the subject of creativity and ageing before his death in 2009, provided early evidence about the benefits of arts participation. The research of Cohen and his colleagues focussed largely on health and well-being: on understanding the physiological and psychological effects of arts participation; it also challenged deficit models of ageing by drawing attention to the

potential – as opposed to the problem – of ageing in relation to creativity (Cohen, 2006). Yet, whilst the evidence base on arts and ageing has increased exponentially in recent years (Bernard and Rickett, 2016), at the time 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 which considers 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 their ‘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 2000 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 for examining both 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 (Bernard and Munro, 2015; Mangan, 2013). 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 focussed 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 USA (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 intergenerational relations and intergenerational learning (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2010; Johnson, 2011) and on the wider community (Schweitzer, 2007; Cutler, 2009; Magic Me, 2009); and enhances older people's skills and learning ability, improves confidence and self-esteem, and supports the development of new social connections and friendships (Pyman and Rugg, 2006). All these, it could be argued, are also mechanisms through which resilience can be developed both individually and collectively.

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

In their final report of the national *Cultural Value Project* of which our work was a part, Crossick and Kaszynska (2016, p.7) reassert the need 'to reposition first-hand, individual experience of arts and culture'. They go on to explain how, between them, the projects have identified a range of components of cultural value, some of which are familiar and some of which have been too little acknowledged. In our critical review of the field of ageing, creativity and drama, we uncovered three familiar dimensions of cultural value which,

perhaps unsurprisingly, echo some of the existing literature around benefits and, indeed, the underlying components of resilience (Rickett and Bernard, 2014). Cultural value was viewed and conceived of in terms of health and well-being; in the development of group relationships; and in learning and creativity. The fourth area, which was only starting to emerge in the literature, concerned the aesthetic value and quality of 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 which involve older people in co-creating research through from initial design 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 benefitting 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 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.

<1> 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 which has followed from it. For the very first *Ages and Stages* project (2009-2012), 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, 2017). Together, we set out to examine historical representations of ageing within the Vic's ground-breaking documentaries and docu-dramas (produced between 1964 and 1995) and to explore the recollections and experiences of older people who are, or had been, involved with the theatre in different ways. Employing a conventional mixed-method case study research design, we worked in the theatre's archive, housed at Staffordshire University, as well as conducting over 100 individual and group interviews.

The archival strand focussed on the 11 pioneering social documentaries and five docu-dramas developed under the artistic directorship of the late Peter Cheeseman during his 36-year tenure at the Victoria and New Vic Theatres (1962-1998). Between them, these social documentaries chart social, economic and political changes in the Potteries over a 40-year period. They are based on a variety of source materials including a remarkable collection of taped interviews with members of the community. For our interview strand, we managed to track down a number of these people and re-interview them, together with three other groups of older people: long standing audience members; current or former theatre volunteers; and theatre employees and actors who continue to live in the area. In the individual interviews, participants spoke about how they had come to be involved with the theatre; what part it had played – and continues to play – in their lives; and recalled their memories of, and involvements with, the social documentaries. The group interviews focussed on three emerging themes: ageing, intergenerational relationships, and the place of the theatre in the community and in individual lives. As noted in the introduction, the interviews we conducted yielded a series of findings which resonate with the resilience literature and demonstrate the value of participation at both an individual and group level.

In the third and final strand, we departed from our conventional research design and instead of then analysing and writing up our findings, we extended an invitation to everyone who had been interviewed to come back and help us draw together the archival and

interview materials into what became the *Ages and Stages Exhibition* and a new, hour-long, intergenerational documentary drama *Our Age, Our Stage*. We deliberately avoided asking people to 'come and perform' and, in the event, 16 older people (aged 59-92) joined nine 'senior' members (aged 16-19) of the New Vic Youth Theatre to help with both the production and the exhibition. Under the directorship of the Vic's Head of Education and research team member, Jill Rezzano, a series of weekly workshops were held at the theatre between September 2011 and May 2012 during which the whole group (participants, researchers and artistic director) shaped the materials into the documentary piece. As the weeks went by, those who were interested in performing began to emerge and, in the end, ten people became the main cast: six older participants and four Youth Theatre members. Following an intensive two-week rehearsal period in June, *Our Age, Our Stage* toured to the local 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 June 25th to July 20th 2012.

Having 'got the acting bug', the group were understandably reluctant to disband. Fast forward two years to 2014 and we find – through a series of other funded projects – that we have been able to transform the group into the *Ages and Stages Company*. A year of 'follow-on' funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council 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 their *Truth about Youth* programme (for details of this see: Bernard, Rezzano and the Ages & Stages Company, 2014).

Set against these developments, the main aim of the project 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 company

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

- What has the experience of being involved with *Ages and Stages* been like?
- How has participants' involvement helped shaped them as people?
- How has their involvement helped shape their understandings of ageing?
- What value/benefits have they derived from being involved with *Ages and Stages*?

As a first step, in late November 2013, ten core members of the Company all agreed to participate in a research skills training day at the University facilitated jointly by ourselves. Three weeks ahead of the training day, we asked Company members to begin to think about

their experiences of undertaking interviews and/or being interviewed and to come prepared to share their thoughts. Specifically, we asked them to consider the following questions:

- What makes for a good interview?
- What makes for a bad interview?
- Is there an interviewer – or interviewers – you particularly admire? If so, what is it about her/him/them you think is so good?
- What does the phrase ‘cultural value’ mean to you?’

The training day was structured around six sessions beginning with an introduction to the overall Cultural Value project; a reminder of the aims and objectives of our own award; and what we were all hoping to achieve by the end of the day. We also gave out a pack of information for everyone to take away which included background information about research interviewing, as well as literature introducing 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 life course. 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-judgmental; 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) ten criteria for what makes a successful research interviewer, plus two additional criteria derived from Bryman (2008) which emphasise the importance of 'balance' (not talking too much and not talking too little) and being 'ethically sensitive' (ensuring 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 ten minutes in which to try and 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 play with the interview strategies everyone had identified earlier, and the observers made notes and provided feedback about the kinds of questions that worked best, what didn't work so well, and what was happening in terms of body language and other non-verbal aspects. Back in the larger group, we discussed what the experience of being both an interviewer and interviewee had been like, what kinds of questions people wished they had asked but hadn't, and what they had learnt from this (brief) exercise. This enabled us, together, to begin to collate and draw up a set of pointers/guidelines for the conduct of the interviews the Company would be undertaking with each other and, potentially, with one or two family members and younger people with whom they had worked on *Ages and Stages* productions.

The afternoon was devoted to the technicalities of constructing an interview guide and the practicalities of who was going to do what, with whom, when and where. It was essential to the project that Company members would not just carry out interviews but that they would also decide what questions needed to be asked and co-design the guide. We began the first of the afternoon's sessions by revisiting the project's four main research questions to which

we added two others: ‘What impacts has being involved with *Ages and Stages* had on participants (emotionally, cognitively, physically, reflexively)?’ and ‘What impacts has being involved with *Ages and Stages* had on others (families, friends, the younger people you have performed with)?’

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

The last two sessions explored and discussed a range of other issues including the pros and cons of being an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ researcher. Here, we stressed the importance of not assuming that because Company members had a shared experience of *Ages and Stages*, that they would necessarily view that experience in the same way. Ethical issues were also discussed, especially the fact that we needed 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 ten 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 exchanged so that people could set up the interviews with each other; and details passed on of other family members who were willing to be interviewed. Finally, we tried out the digital recording equipment and agreed we would try and 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 (ten with each other and one with a family member); and five by ourselves (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, though some were carried out at the theatre when this was more convenient.

<1> 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, reflect on what they had done and how they had done it.

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

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

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

MB: 'Why was that?'

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

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

A&S1: 'Yes!'

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

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

A&S6: 'That's right.'

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

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

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

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.'

Whilst some members found it difficult being the interviewer, others preferred this to being the interviewee as illustrated in this 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 before becoming involved with *Ages and Stages* – the interviews uncovered things they did not know and stimulated them to think in different ways about what they had been doing. These two comments, from different points in the group discussion, are illustrative:

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

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

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

Participatory creative research: reflecting back findings

Using the transcribed interviews, discussions from the research skills training day, and the reflections noted earlier, a programme of devising workshops were held between January 13th and the end of April 2014. The workshops mixed drama exercises, debates and discussions, exploring further the Company’s experiences of their time with *Ages and Stages*. As always, we worked gently and gradually looking first at the research findings around ‘beginnings’ and at ‘motivations’ for taking part. To give one example of the devising process, we selected 12 contrasting quotations from the transcripts illustrating how people had got involved and what stood out for them. In small groups, the Company discussed which quotations struck a particular chord, and which they thought would sound best to an

audience. We then 'heard' and listened as members spoke each in turn round a circle, deciding together which quotations went with each other; which cut across 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 was decided would be three short pieces, gradually took shape 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 which 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 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 some 60 people. The performances and the audience's responses were all captured on film and turned into a DVD.

Creative Participatory Research: Benefits and Challenges

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

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

Second, using the artistic medium in which we were working – namely theatre and drama – to 'show' rather than just describe or write up the research findings was, for us, a logical approach to take. After all, it is what we had been doing since the initial *Ages and Stages* project. What we had not fully appreciated was how unusual an approach this was. Indeed, our companion critical review (Rickett and Bernard, 2014) found only two projects with older people which had explicitly used arts-based methods to convey research findings: an evaluation of Anne Basting's *Penelope Project* set in a Wisconsin nursing home in the United States (Mello and Voigts, 2013); and 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). In our own case, the performance pieces and scripts we co-produced arose directly from our research; encapsulate and communicate the knowledge which, together, we generated over the project; and, we would also 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. As 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 we have touched on here, or which 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 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. 598a

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

Are thrown shaped or formed.

The materials here are words,

Ideas, expressions, which are

Woven, cast or hammered into

shape.

Another challenge

Share with a younger generation!

It took some time

Finding what makes them tick,

Their reaction to us,

Their energy and perspective.

But together we worked it out.

Then by request to Manchester

To strut the Royal Exchange.

[Well it was in the Studio at least]

And weren't we chuffed.

Cultural Value:

Discuss.

Oh dear what's this,
Semantics and philosophy.
But by degrees we ventured
Into the *unknown*.
And past *experience*
And the *loyalty* of the team
The words and ideas
Gained form and shape.
With a nudge from Jill
And a prompt from Mim
A scenario emerged
And tackled with *enthusiasm*
Our theatre making
Does have a cultural value.

Can we convince an audience?

In *anticipation*

We await your verdict.

<1> Note

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

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