FIFTEEN

The place of theatre in representations of ageing

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Prologue

The interdisciplinary 'Ages and Stages' project, funded initially under the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) programme, has evolved into a continuing collaboration between Keele University and the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme. The first 'Ages and Stages' project (2009-12) examined historical representations of ageing within the Vic's ground-breaking documentaries and docudramas (produced between 1964 and 1995), and explored the contemporary recollections and experiences of older people who are, or have been, associated with the theatre in different ways. Archival and interview material was drawn together to create the 'Ages and Stages' exhibition and a new, hour-long, documentary drama, 'Our Age, Our Stage'. Between 2012 and 2013, further funds were secured from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) follow-on scheme to focus on translational work, and we were subsequently awarded two additional grants by the AHRC under their Cultural Value Project. In this chapter we concentrate on the first three-year project; readers interested in following through what we have done subsequently are invited to visit the 'Ages and Stages' and 'Live Age Festival' websites (www.keele.ac.uk/agesandstages and www.liveagefestival.co.uk).

Act One: Setting the scene

Social and critical gerontologists, as well as literary and cultural scholars, are increasingly interested in the artistic engagement of older people, and in how the arts may construct, perpetuate or challenge stereotypical views of old age and existing models of the ageing

process (Gullette, 1997, 2004, 2011; Basting, 1998, 2009; Small, 2007; Lipscomb and Marshall, 2010; Mangan, 2013). While recent reviews (Cutler, 2009; Castora-Binkley et al, 2010; Mental Health Foundation, 2011; Noice et al, 2014) affirm the value of older people's engagement in cultural activities, they also point to a lack of research on theatre and drama more specifically. This is despite the fact that, as Lipscomb (2012) argues, theatre provides us with an untapped potential for interdisciplinary collaborations and investigations; it is a cultural arena in which both ageing and older people are highly visible as audience members, participants, characters and increasingly, as performers (Bernard and Munro, 2015).

In terms of representations, there is a long tradition of theatre drawing heavily on stereotypes of older people and on deficit models of the ageing process, extending back to early Greek tragedies (Charney, 2005; Robson, 2009). In addition, there have been shifting fashions in respect of whether actors can or cannot play certain ages on stage. As Mangan (2013, p 45) notes, today's actors receive far less training in 'how to act old' than they once did, although some notable theatre productions have sought to engage directly with the process of ageing and to question realist approaches to theatrical age. These include the Bristol Old Vic's 'Juliet and her Romeo' and Fevered Sleep's/the Young Vic's 'On Ageing', both performed in 2010.

An allied development has been the remarkable growth of what has come to be called 'senior theatre' (Basting, 1998; Vorenberg, 1999). Anne Basting charts the evolution of this movement in her path-breaking book, *The stages of age*, and her critique in this, and subsequent writings (Basting, 1998, 2000, 2009), echoes and parallels the work of Margaret Morganroth Gullette (1997, 2004, 2011) around the cultural aspects of ageing and ageism, with both sharing a desire to integrate performance studies and performance theory with gerontological debates. By 2011, there were over 800 senior theatre groups in North America (Vorenberg, 2011), mostly amateur in nature, but often linked with community theatres. In the UK, too, community-based theatre, rooted in oral traditions and often connected to the growth of socially and politically aware theatre, is the basis of much contemporary drama work with older people. Pam Schweitzer's (2007) development of reminiscence theatre with older people is perhaps the best known example of this heritage. Interestingly, too, in the context of our own project, Schweitzer (2007, p 15) acknowledges the influence on her work of what came to be dubbed the 'Stoke method': the verbatim documentary drama techniques developed by the late Peter Cheeseman during his 36 years as artistic director at the Victoria and New Vic

Theatres (1962-98). As we shall see, his 11 social documentaries and five docudramas were the basis for one of the three main strands of the 'Ages and Stages' project.

Yet, we still know comparatively little about what participation in theatre and theatre-making means to older people and what benefits they derive from it. Such evidence as we do have comes from a combination of practitioner knowledge and experience, from existing small-scale evaluations and research projects, and from some academic research. Practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic have shown that theatre and drama work have demonstrable social, physical and emotional benefits (Basting, 1998, 2009; Schweitzer, 2007, 2010; Vorenberg, 2011); they also have positive effects on intergenerational relations and on the wider community (Schweitzer, 2007; Cutler, 2009; Magic Me, 2009). Academic research in the UK further demonstrates how working with older people through drama activities enhances intergenerational learning (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2010); helps create positive impressions among children of older people as active and fun (Johnson, 2011); and, for older people, enhances their skills and learning ability, improves confidence and self-esteem and supports the development of new social connections and friendships (Pyman and Rugg, 2006). In North America, research carried out by Tony and Helga Noice and their colleagues over the last 25 years (see Noice and Noice, 2008, 2013; Noice et al, 1999, 2004), leads them to conclude that studies on theatre and drama produce 'converging evidence of cognitive/affective benefits' and 'present a fairly cohesive picture compared with those of other art forms' (Noice et al, 2014, p 750). As Mangan (2013, p 169) observes, their work 'gives good experimental and empirical reason to think what many have long suspected: that acting is good for you.'

Finally, it is important to make mention of the policy context against which our study took place. In the run-up to start of the project, it was evident that government policy was beginning to recognise positive links between the arts, health and wellbeing (DCLG, 2006; DCMS, 2006; Bunting, 2007; DH/ACE, 2007). There were also important national and local policy initiatives related to 'an ageing society' (HM Government, 2005, 2009; Staffordshire County Council, 2007; Stoke-on-Trent City Council, 2007) which were of potential relevance to what we were planning to do. However, it was notable that these two policy arenas – the arts and ageing – were yet to be brought into one field of engagement: the role of the arts in 'active ageing' or in effecting cultural change was, and still is, neglected, despite calls from organisations such as the Baring Foundation (Cutler, 2009, 2013)

and the Mental Health Foundation (2011), which affirm the value of participation in the arts for older people, and point out that this is often overlooked in policy and service provision.

With this as a backcloth, the initial 'Ages and Stages' project sought to undertake a detailed case study of the place of one particular theatre – the Victoria/New Victoria Theatre in North Staffordshire – in the lives of older people. The project aimed to explore:

- How age and ageing have been constructed, represented and understood in the theatre's social documentaries from the 1960s to the present day.
- The part the theatre has played in constructing individual and community identities and creating and preserving community memory.
- The relationship between older people's involvement in the theatre and continuing social engagement in later life.
- The practical and policy implications of our findings.

Act Two: The project takes shape

'Ages and Stages' was based in the Potteries, North Staffordshire, an area with a long history of heavy industry (ceramics, coal, steel and tyre manufacture) that, over the past 50 years, has undergone considerable social and economic change and decline. These changes have had marked effects on the expectations and opportunities of the area's residents, and local cultural institutions – not least the Victoria Theatre (now the New Vic Theatre) – have both reflected and reconstructed these changes. Working in partnership with local older people, with the theatre and with its archive housed at Staffordshire University, we brought together an interdisciplinary research team with backgrounds in social gerontology, cultural theory and history, social and health psychology, social anthropology and theatre studies to jointly organise the research programme around three interrelated strands: historical representations; recollections and contemporary representations; and performing and re-presenting ageing.

Strand 1: Historical representations

As noted earlier, the Victoria Theatre pioneered a distinctive form of social documentary under artistic director Peter Cheeseman (Elvgren, 1974; Rowell and Jackson, 1984; Schweitzer, 2007). It is also an important theatre-in-the round and, when it moved to its

current premises in 1986, was Europe's first purpose-built theatre of this kind. The social documentaries draw on print, manuscript and oral source materials to chart social, economic and political changes in the Potteries. Between them, they reflect the community's self-image at various points in the area's history, and illustrate the roles and positions of different generations within the community. Much of this historical material is housed in the archive that contains not only scripts, programmes, photographs, audio recordings, correspondence and an extensive collection of reviews and press cuttings, but also the original research materials on which the documentaries were based. This includes newspaper reports and a remarkable collection of taped interviews with members of the community, many of whom were older people. For our purposes, these older members of the community were thus an important source for the theatre's documentaries: their testimonies and life stories woven into broader narratives, and preserved in the archive.

Strand 2: Recollections and contemporary representations

As well as investigating the archive and studying the social documentaries, the project explored the recollections and experiences of older people who are, or have been, associated with the theatre in different ways. In order to do this, we undertook 79 individual or couple interviews (93 people in total) with 29 longstanding audience members; 26 current or former theatre volunteers; 23 theatre employees and actors who continue to live in the area; and 15 people who were sources for some of the original documentaries. Guided by a loosely constructed interview schedule, participants told us how they had come to be involved with the theatre, what part it had played – and continues to play – in their lives, and what recollections and involvements they had had with the documentaries. In addition, we held 10 group interviews involving 51 people (two each with audience members and sources, and three each with volunteers and employees). These focused on three emerging themes – ageing, intergenerational relationships, and the place of the theatre in the community and in individual lives – and discussions were stimulated by using (anonymised) quotations from individual interviews. All interviews (both individual and group) lasted for between one and two hours on average, and all were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo. Alongside the interviews, our research associate carried out participant observation with New Vic volunteers for several months, exploring their continuing social and creative

engagement in later life. In the reporting of our findings, pseudonyms have been given to all participants.

Strand 3: Performing and re-presenting ageing

Building on work begun in 2004 (Harding, 2005), our intention in the final part of the project was to recruit an intergenerational group of participants to work with us on a new social documentary and an associated exhibition, drawing on the findings and materials from the archival and interview work. In the event, 25 people volunteered to take part: 16 older people (aged 59-92) who had been interviewed earlier in the project and 9 'senior' members (aged 16-19) of the New Vic Youth Theatre. Through a series of regular workshops held at the New Vic between September 2011 and May 2012, the material was honed into a one-hour documentary, 'Our Age, Our Stage', under the directorship of the Vic's Head of Education and research team member, Jill Rezzano. An intensive two-week rehearsal period in June was followed by four performances to the local council, at a school, a college and a retirement community. At the conclusion of the tour in July, 'Our Age, Our Stage' played to a capacity audience on the theatre's main stage, attended by participants' families and friends, members of the project's Advisory Group, and delegates to the British Society of Gerontology's annual conference being hosted at Keele University. In total, over 700 people saw the productions across the two weeks and engaged in discussions with us and the group members after each performance.

Alongside 'Our Age, Our Stage', some of the 25 participants worked with us to put together the associated 'Ages and Stages' exhibition. While it had always been our intention to hold an exhibition, what we had failed to realise at the time we submitted the original research proposal was that 2012 would mark the 50th anniversary of both the theatre and Keele University. This was a happily serendipitous and evocative moment for an exhibition charting and celebrating the theatre's work and recalling its place in the lives and histories of the people of the Potteries. The theatre's designer envisaged the exhibition as a 'visual scrapbook', starting with the archive and a timeline of the key productions out of which the memorabilia people had saved over the years would 'explode'. This chimed with our earlier experiences of interviewing people, many of whom spontaneously shared physical memorabilia with us, part of their 'personal archives'. In addition, we held a 'bringing-in-day' on one Saturday in May 2012 from which we were able to select additional materials to be included. Those

who brought memorabilia that day were filmed talking about their objects and about what the theatre meant in their lives; a DVD of these recollections played throughout the exhibition which ran for a month from 25 June to 20 July 2012.

Not surprisingly, these three strands yielded a rich and complex set of data that we worked on – and continue to work on – collaboratively and individually within, and across, disciplines. It is difficult to do justice here to the complex and multilayered nature of these analyses so, for the purposes of this chapter, we simply focus on findings around two key themes: the place of the theatre in people's lives, and understandings of ageing and later life. Other themes and perspectives, for example, around narratives and ageing, representations, the perspectives of volunteers, intergenerational relations, specific documentaries or the policy dimensions of our work, form the basis of papers and chapters already published or in press and in preparation, as well as a doctoral thesis (Amigoni, 2013; Basten, 2014; Murray et al, 2014; Bernard and Munro, 2015; Bernard et al, 2015).

Act Three: Theatre and ageing

A theatre such as the Vic, which has been at the heart of its community for 50 years, was recalled in many and varied ways by participants and through examination of materials in the archive. Although the theatre was obviously a 'young' institution when it was established in the early 1960s, its artistic director Peter Cheeseman believed passionately that theatre had, as he put it, a responsibility to take the place of 'old men' and to 'show people the past of their community' (Elvgren, 1974). A number of the documentaries return to the Potteries' 19th-century foundations as a large-scale industrial community, while others feature events which were within living memory such as the 1910 formation of Stoke-on-Trent (depicted in 'Six Into One' [1968]), the incorporation of the North Staffordshire Railway into the London, Midland and Scottish Railway in 1921 (depicted in 'The Knotty' [1966]), and the Second World War (depicted in 'Hands Up: For You the War is Ended!' [1971]). Some of the most famous documentaries depict industrial disputes, notably 'Fight for Shelton Bar!' (1974), which focused on the struggle to save the North Staffordshire steel works, 'The Dirty Hill' (1990) concerning the community's outcry against British Coal's plan for open-cast mining on Berryhill, Stoke-on-Trent, and 'Nice Girls' (1994), which portrayed the protest against pit closures mounted by members of the North Staffs Miners' Wives Action Group. The theatre and the documentaries therefore lie at

the intersection between individual and family histories, and the trajectories of changing and declining local industries.

The documentaries played an important role in bringing together different groups of people, both in the process of their creation – which brought theatre employees into contact with people working in different local industries – and in the staging of them, which attracted diverse audiences to the Vic. For newcomers to the Potteries, the documentaries could help people settle in; for local people who had family connections to the industries portrayed, they helped them to feel more bonded with the theatre, as these two audience members comment:

> 'As a newcomer to Stoke, that sort of helped root you into the local community in a way, as you'd learned about it … they kind of earthed you in Stoke in a way, so you understood something about the culture and the background of Stoke.' (Patricia Oakes)

> 'I think the particularly interesting thing was that they'd gone out and actually spoken to local people about their experiences and then out of that created the plays … that was bonding with the community but also celebrating what this area had been all about, you know, the various occupations and experiences people had.' (Emily Parker)

The intimacy of the theatre, both in its original venue (a converted former cinema in Stoke) and within the current purpose-built theatre (opened in 1986 in Newcastle-under-Lyme), was important to the older people we interviewed. The theatre-in-the-round format meant that people were literally and metaphorically 'close to' the action on stage and they valued the sense of being part of the life of the theatre. Those who had been sources for some of the original documentaries spoke about being valued and recognised when they went to the theatre, while audience members and volunteers feel welcomed and part of a shared community of theatre-goers and supporters:

> 'There's this sort of sense that you are all coming in here together and you are all part of the same thing.' (Michael Hall, audience member)

> 'I can't think of many times I've been here and I've not seen somebody that I know from somewhere. It's just lovely isn't it?' (Diana Holmes, volunteer)

Many people we interviewed described the theatre as 'homely', 'like a home from home', 'like going home' and 'feeling like home', and the metaphor of the theatre as 'family' was especially common. For volunteers and audience members, the theatre was – and still is – a familiar and comfortable place, while former and current employees, many of whom moved to the Potteries as young people but then stayed and made their lives in the area, spoke about the family nature of the theatre. This sense of family was related to Peter Cheeseman's vision of a permanent company rooted in the area and, as one former actor told us, "You're a family, you were part of a family that stretched decades" (John Carter).

Here, too, is another former actor, vividly recalling his first impressions of arriving in the Potteries and becoming part of the community and the 'Vic family':

> 'So I arrived at Stoke-on-Trent and it was winter and there was snow on the ground at Stoke-on-Trent station. I thought "Oh no what is this?"… I had digs in Etruria for a couple of nights and I was looking out on to the pot banks and I thought "Oh I can't stay here." I'd been in London for 10 years or more and I thought "No I can't stay", and then … I walked down Hartshill Road. That's where we all met and then things began to get better and the lovely thing, I suppose it's still the same, is the atmosphere, and you had a very communal atmosphere.' (Thomas Cook, former actor)

What was particularly striking was that even employees who had left the theatre many decades before we interviewed them, or who had only been there for a comparatively short period, felt that their involvement had had a disproportionate and formative effect on their lives. They spoke about the Vic introducing them to a creative world: about it opening up lifelong creative pathways and about learning to be part of a team and taking the values they had been imbued with into other areas of their lives. This social identity, although talked about in very positive ways, could also have its downsides. Actors and other employees felt a great sense of obligation to the theatre and, especially in the early days, it was taken for granted that everyone would work very long hours and weeks. However, one woman left because she

worked such long hours that she barely saw her children, while former actor, John Carter, speaks here about feeling increasingly exhausted:

> 'In the early days when I was younger, acting, loved it, great, fantastic. But then as I got older, it became much more difficult. I think in the end I'd played that many parts that I'd burnt myself out really, and creativeness had gone out of it…. I was on this slow journey to a nervous breakdown, but you don't know it at the time because the discipline is so strong, that you just keep … and you don't want to let anybody down.'

Although this working 'family' can be supportive and affirming, it can potentially be oppressive and constraining as well. John's quote above also raises questions about whether, and how, ageing and growing older might take its toll on people.

In both individual and group interviews, participants responded in varying and contrasting ways to this issue. For some actors and employees, growing older was coupled with diminishing physical capabilities: theatre was spoken of as 'being a young person's business' (Kathleen Davies, designer), and people measured what they were able to do now, physically, against how they had been when they were younger. In one group interview, designer Kathleen Davies spoke about how, when she started working at the Vic, she would think nothing of sprinting round the drum (the circular corridor underneath the seating), but went on to say:

> 'I reckon it's got bigger that circle, now! It's definitely further! So physically … it is quite a physically demanding job … when I was young … I was bringing my energy then and my ability to work long hours and all those things that you've got when you're in your 20s and 30s, and I haven't really got those anymore. If I had to do an all-nighter now it would do me in completely, I'd be no use at all…. I can't sprint up and down stairs endlessly anymore.'

In similar vein, here is Paul Evans, a former stage manager, talking about his awareness of physical limitations on his capabilities:

> 'You just picked up certain things because you needed to do the job…. I've never really thought about it, I just went on … until the muscles started packing up. The last time I did

> a lighting demonstration I was 20 foot up in the air, at the tallest bit, with my last group of first years, and I thought, "I can't get this lantern back on the bar!".... I'd reached out probably further than I should … but I wasn't doing it every day … and I thought "Oh! What do I do now?" And sheer adrenalin I think got it back on the bar and I thought "I've got to be careful", and that's the point where you think, "Well there are some things I sensibly shouldn't do anymore 'cos they're just going to rip bits in my body".'

Although not so prevalent, corresponding views were expressed by some audience members and volunteers: age-related hearing loss, for example, diminished people's enjoyment of the theatre; even with hearing aids, the theatre-in-the-round format is difficult because actors will inevitably have their backs to the audience. Overwhelmingly, however, those we interviewed tended to speak about growing older and their involvement with the Vic in terms of the opportunities for continued creativity, the new challenges it presented them with, and the important role it plays in key transitions in people's lives such as retirement and bereavement. For women in particular, bereavement and the need to connect or reconnect with others had often provided the spur to their volunteering, as encapsulated here by Victoria Mason:

> 'My interest was as a result of bereavement, and the lifeline that it gave to me, which was greatly needed at the time. Still is. So that's really how I came to be involved.'

In this respect, volunteering can offer a new beginning during a time of transition, sometimes deepening, but inevitably changing, a previous involvement, or sometimes providing a totally new experience. Many interviewees talked vividly about becoming 'entangled' or 'caught up' in the life of the theatre in retirement: with more time and (in some cases) money, they could renew their interest in theatre or discover a creative side to their lives, perhaps for the first time:

> 'In my retirement the Vic theatre has been one of the important things in my life.... I think the arts in general really, since I've retired and I've got the time, I am more interested in the arts and the theatre.' (Diana Holmes, volunteer)

In this sense, the theatre provides a forum for widening people's experiences. Indeed, expansive metaphors about 'broadening horizons', 'widening outlooks' and 'entering new worlds' were frequently used. Interviewees talked about the challenges, new knowledge and new skills they had acquired and, as this audio-describer comments, its value lies in the fact that "It's still developing us, and that's what's so great" (Alice Hancock). Audience members also talk about the stimulation that the theatre provides, as captured in this exchange:

> Emma Marsh: '… I find when I get home, after I've been to the theatre, that I can't go straight to bed! It's, you know … it's still there in your head and I have to sit and have a drink and watch a little bit of television. Whereas watching television at night, I fall asleep!'
> Anna Green: 'I think it gives you knowledge as well.'
> Emma Marsh: 'It's better for your brain isn't it?'
> Anna Green: 'I really think it gives you a lot of knowledge as well, coming to the theatre. I mean, you learn things that you've gone all your life and not really gone into in depth, they've all been surface, and now you can really come here, see something, think about it and you think, "Oh gosh, I shall have to look that up", and then you read about it.'

However, ageing and growing older is a complex and multifaceted experience: for some, it has proved positive, while others find themselves encountering age-based discrimination. In one group discussion about ageing and theatre, Janet Barber – who was still acting professionally – finds herself caught between the expectation and the reality:

> 'I think … as long as you can still remember the lines as an actor you can still carry on older than you would in other [professions]. Having said that, I've just been turned down for a job for somebody younger. I mean I was told that, "No, we've gone for somebody younger".'

We also came across other interviewees who seemed to be willing to internalise the decline narrative of ageing, sometimes using age-related stereotypes to explain their withdrawal from engagement with theatre and talking in terms of being 'past it', 'too long in the tooth' or 'losing

their grip'. Terry Rogers, an audience member who had also been active as an amateur director, told us:

> '… I think oldies standing in the way, not a good idea. So you back out and you watch things from a distance.… I gave up directing because I realised that age was, you know, you'd got to be really on top and I couldn't fool myself any longer that I'd got a grip on everything.'

By contrast, others spoke convincingly about how ageing had brought a reassessment of their capabilities and a realisation that they probably had different things to offer now. Here is designer Kathleen Davies again, in one of the group interviews:

> 'Hopefully I've still got other things to offer now.… I think experience and confidence and maybe a different sort of resourcefulness. Maybe the resources that I'm drawing on in myself are different to the ones I was drawing on then, you know, because what I was drawing on then, a lot of it was energy and enthusiasm and, you know, that kind of crazy optimism that you've got, you know, "We can do anything!" Nowadays I wouldn't necessarily think we can do anything, but I think I would, well I hope, I think I probably work with designers better than I used to do.'

As noted earlier, the interviews provided much of the raw material from which the script for 'Our Age, Our Stage' was crafted; excerpts were also used during devising workshops to provoke further debate and discussion. In particular, some of the quotations about ageing and creativity were used in a 'value line exercise' led by facilitator and artistic director Jill Rezzano. Participants were asked to demonstrate their agreement or disagreement by standing close to Jill (if they agreed) or further back (if they disagreed). Quotations used included: 'my age would never stop me doing something creative'; 'if something sounds interesting, I'll take a risk, I'll get involved'; and, echoing Terry Rogers' contention above about 'oldies' not standing in the way: 'there comes a time when you have to step aside'.

The quotation about 'stepping aside' provoked the most diverse responses: some participants reiterated that age does indeed bring (physical) limitations that necessitate stepping aside; others passionately refuted this, one person even going so far as to remove himself completely from the workshop room and stand outside the double

glass doors, telling us "I won't step aside until I'm pushed aside." A former actor/director who stood in the middle of the room (neither agreeing nor disagreeing) suggested that it might be possible "to step aside, but maybe step forward into another area." These lively debates about ageing were subsequently translated into a key scene that appears about two-thirds of the way through the performance piece, and in which both older and younger performers argue heatedly with each other (Rezzano, 2012, pp 26-7):

> Olivia Wood: 'You said earlier that working in theatre was all you wanted to do, is that still the case?'
> John Carter: 'You see theatre's a young person's game.'
> Adam Brown: 'No, no, no!'
> John Carter: 'It is! Professionally, you get tired.'
> William Bates: 'For me, creativity is just part of me, it's what I've always done, it's just part of…'
> Charlie Robinson: 'Life. Everyone has something to contribute.'
> Julia Nixon: 'I think if you're involved in this kind of activity, ageing means less to you.'
> John Reynolds: 'Yes, but I know people are still being creative and publishers etc don't want to know.'
> Julia Nixon: 'Sorry, I didn't understand how age would stop you being creative, how would age stop you being creative?'
> John Reynolds: 'We don't look good on book covers and programmes!'
> Charlie Robinson: 'Okay, but anyone, regardless of age, can contribute to theatre; acting, creating, I'm sure everyone in this room has it in them. I don't think it ever leaves you.'
> John Carter: 'But I don't want to do it anymore.'
> Charlie Robinson: 'Look at David Jason; he's one of the best actors I've ever seen.'
> John Carter: 'It's not whether people are good or not, it's a psychological thing, about energy and all the rest of it. Just because David Jason is still doing it and picking up million pound cheques is neither here nor there!'
> Thomas Salt: 'There comes a time when you have to step aside.'
> Alice Hancock: 'I don't mind stepping aside, I just don't want to be told to step aside.'

William Bates: 'I wouldn't step aside for anyone, this is my time. Your best years are when you're doing something that you're passionate about.'

John Carter: 'I'll let others do it. Step aside from what I did but step forward into a new area: new passions.'

In the end then, there are, of course, no simple or straightforward answers to the questions about what ageing is or is not like, and what is or is not possible as one grows older. What the project and the new social documentary did do, however, was to celebrate the theatre's 50-year existence, begin to open up debates and discussions about ageing itself with diverse audiences and, through a methodology that mirrored the theatre practices developed by Peter Cheeseman, bring this kind of research-based theatre practice (or performative social science) 'full circle' (Basten, 2014).

Key findings

- It is important to challenge stereotypes that creativity declines/ceases in old age.
- There are connections between identity, belonging, wellbeing, self-esteem and self-confidence, and they can be enhanced through theatre and drama.
- Participation is important – through volunteering and involvement in creative activities – particularly at times of transition and bereavement.
- Theatre and drama have a role to play as a medium for the inclusion of older and younger people.
- There are positive health outcomes and a sense of wellbeing for both older and younger participants, as well as practical and policy implications for community cohesion.
- Policy agendas on 'arts, health and wellbeing' should be joined up with those addressing the needs of an 'ageing society'.

Epilogue

Although we have not been able to go into depth about all aspects of the project, the findings presented in this chapter, together with other outputs, demonstrate at least half a dozen key points. First, in keeping with existing research and scholarship, 'Ages and Stages' clearly shows the importance of continuing to challenge stereotypes that creativity declines or ceases in old age. Second, all three strands of our work

highlight close connections between identity, belonging, wellbeing, self-esteem and self-confidence, and how these can be enhanced through theatre and drama. Third, the project affirms yet again the benefits of participation and engagement, in this instance through volunteering and involvement in creative activities, particularly at times of transition and bereavement. Fourth, the intergenerational nature of the last strand of our project emphasises the role that theatre and drama can play as a medium for the inclusion of both older and younger people. Fifth, although 'Ages and Stages' was not designed specifically to explore health benefits, older and younger participants spontaneously associated their involvement with a range of positive health outcomes. Finally, the project points to the necessity of joining up policy agendas on 'arts, health and wellbeing' with those addressing the needs of 'an ageing society' if we are to move away from an entirely problem-oriented and deficit model of what ageing and old age can be like.

We have also been fortunate to secure further grants to enable us to set in motion a number of the practical, academic and policy-related recommendations arising from our initial three years. This has included extending our research into a critical review of the literature and into an exploration of the cultural value of theatre-making with older people (see Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016). In addition, we have been able to use and re-use our findings and research materials to underpin other translational activities. First, instead of having to disband the 'Ages and Stages' group at the end of the project, it has now been transformed into the Ages and Stages Theatre Company. The company continue to meet for regular workshops at the theatre, and have worked with us on subsequent projects to develop, devise and tour new and different kinds of performance pieces. Some have again involved members of the Youth Theatre (aged 13-19) and some have been in response to invitations from other theatres such as the Royal Exchange in Manchester and West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds. A key feature of the company is that it enables older people to participate in other aspects of theatre-making should they not wish to perform on stage: this has included facilitating discussions at performances, participating with members of the research team at conferences and other events, and co-facilitating workshops for practitioners and policy-makers. In the years since the initial project ended, membership has been renewed, refreshed and expanded; the company is now an independent community group hosted at the New Vic under Jill Rezzano's artistic direction, and has elected co-chairs, co-secretaries and co-treasurers.

Second, we have been able to test out whether the kinds of creative research and drama-based techniques employed during the last strand of the project might have wider applicability. In 2013, we developed a pilot six-session interprofessional training course for which we had nearly 60 applications for the 12 available places. In the end, we accepted 18 participants onto the course drawn from arts organisations, the voluntary sector, local government, health and social services, and housing. Freelancers and volunteers were included as well as paid professionals from organisations. The group ranged in age from 20 to 72 and came from as far afield as Manchester, Wolverhampton and Herefordshire. Although a number of participants were experienced in working with young people, older people or drama, they were all inexperienced in using intergenerational drama within their practice. Themes and issues covered on the course included ageing, drama and creativity; stereotyping; intergenerational relationships; and intergenerational drama in practice. Three sessions involved invited speakers and members of the Ages and Stages Theatre Company, and participants attended a performance by the company, entitled 'Happy Returns', at one of a number of regional venues. The evaluation shows improved age awareness, increased confidence in facilitating activities, adaptations to participants' own practice using the tools and techniques learned on the course, and indications of learning being cascaded to other colleagues (Reynolds, 2013).

Third, in terms of wider policy and practice-related recommendations, we were also able to initiate discussions with local policy-makers and representatives from a range of organisations (for example, community arts organisations; over-50s groups; both local universities; cultural venues; and the health and social care sectors) about the potential for holding a Creative Age Festival in Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire. Following an initial scoping meeting in 2013 attended by 20 participants, a working group of arts and older people's organisations came together to put on the first pilot 'Live Age Festival' in 2014. Timed to coincide with UK Older People's Day on 1 October, the Festival celebrates the artistic and creative talents of older people who are also involved at every level including planning, leading activities, participating, performing, and evaluating the events. Subsequent Festivals have expanded in scope and content and now take place in a variety of cultural and community venues across North Staffordshire. An important element of the Festival is the Live Age Symposium that features inspirational speakers and offers exciting opportunities for researchers, practitioners, the general public and anyone interested in late life creativity to share knowledge and

experiences. Evaluation reports for each Festival – together with films, photographs and details of all the activities to date – can be found on the Festival's website (www.liveagefestival.co.uk).

Beyond these practical and policy-related outcomes of our work, we conclude by suggesting that the value of an interdisciplinary project of this nature lies also in the avenues it opens up for further ageing research. As the project progressed, and especially during the final strand when we were devising our own documentary production from the research materials gathered earlier, we were increasingly reminded of the potential of theatre as a provocation: not only as a creative medium for representing and performing the past and present, but also as a forum for raising questions and imagining the future. Echoing Lipscomb's (2012, p 131) contention that 'this branch of the arts remains woefully under-researched and under-theorised', there is much more that could be done to examine the place of theatre in the lives of older people including analyses of plays, scripts and characters; evaluations of the benefits of engagement in senior and intergenerational theatre groups; comparative studies of theatre and other art forms; the use of theatre to tackle and raise awareness of pressing issues such as age discrimination in policy and practice; and critical examinations of the disjuncture between arts and ageing policies (Bernard and Munro, 2015).

The 'Ages and Stages' project attempted to take up the challenge of articulating what the engagement of older people in theatre-making adds to their lives beyond a focus on the therapeutic and health aspects. In so doing, we hoped to capture the 'transformative' power of theatre (Basting, 1998) by confronting stereotypes that creativity declines or ceases in old age, by celebrating the ground-breaking role the New Vic Theatre has played in the local community, and by exploring ways in which theatre could capture the creative potential of older people and promote intergenerational exchange in the future. The extent to which the objectives we set ourselves were achieved is probably not for us to judge; what we do know is that we were privileged to have been part of a project which challenged all of us (researchers, performers and participants) to see behind and beyond conventional views of what ageing and old age might be like.

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