

LEE LIMING

PROGRAMME IN

AGEING URBANISM

Dramatic Effects

Arts and Culture for the Elderly¹

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Studies indicate that drama helps participants feel less depressed, isolated and more confident and capable. The experience involves elements of social interaction, imagination and creation. Drama programmes for the elderly often tap into their past memories for inspiration, which results in positive validation and recognition of their lived experiences.

People receiving drama therapy need not have prior experience or skill in acting or theatre; older adults with dementia or memory loss can also participate. The range of techniques used includes interventions such as stories, playtexts, puppetry or improvisation. Outside of therapeutic settings, drama can be an enjoyable and engaging activity for older people. As Chang Mei Yee who created the Singapore Reminiscence Theatre Project puts it:

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

“The expression of memories can take many forms... Once external stimuli are introduced to the brain, the memory could be expressed via the body, almost as if it is a reflex action. When seniors are given the opportunity... the results are rich.”

TimeSlips™ – Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

The TimeSlips programme started in 1998, after founder Anne Basting saw the beneficial effects of the improvisation-based sessions she held for elderly with Alzheimer’s and dementia: the stories produced in the sessions led to the successful staging of a play that was shared with the larger community. Since then, the programme has been continuously refined, becoming an independent non-profit in 2013 to provide training and certification for caregivers.

TimeSlips has trained over 2000 facilitators in twelve countries, including the UK, Australia and Singapore. It is designed for people with cognitive disabilities such as dementia or memory loss, though anyone can participate. In each session, images are shown to participants who then interpret them to create a story. Facilitators ask open-ended questions as prompts. The goal is to enable people to engage in conversation and experiment with sounds, gestures, word fragments and

sentences to create meaning and have fun. It can be conducted one-on-one or in a group.

TimeSlips has observed that the method works best with people in the mid to late stages of memory loss as they tend to be the most open to language experimentation instead of focusing on factual memories. The programme is also accessible to people with low vision because of its emphasis on imagination – personal interpretations are encouraged over literal or factual descriptions. It is, however, sometimes challenging to work with participants with low vision as the facilitator needs to refrain from influencing and controlling the story direction.

TimeSlips works with Avanti Press and searches for Creative Commons licenses to obtain images for the programme. It has produced a *Creativity Journal*, designed as a keepsake, which contains simple instructions for families, friends and caregivers. For additional images, it recommends finding content in greeting cards, calendars, online image banks or magazine ads. Box 1 summarizes the characteristics of the TimeSlips programme that sets it apart from other improvisational storytelling methods.

Box 1: Techniques Used in TimeSlips

- **Create a ritual process or special event.**
This is so that people with memory loss

can learn it through their subconscious or implicit memory.

- **Accept and validate every answer**, including gestures, sounds and “nonsensical” answers.
- **Ask open-ended questions.**
- **Echo responses** to ensure you are getting them right.
- **Have fun!**
- **Connect with residents.**
- **Share the stories beyond your group.**
The TimeSlips website has a section for participants to share the stories they have created.

Source: TimeSlips, <http://www.timeslips.org>,
Accessed 20 September 2016.

Stagebridge – Oakland, California, USA

This non-profit theatre company was founded in 1978 “for and of” seniors, and is the oldest theatre company for older adults in the USA. Stagebridge offers Creative Aging programmes that provide opportunities for seniors and their communities to enrich their lives through the performing arts. Older adults can join performing arts camps in the summer where they can take classes, work with professional performers and meet other students. In the fall, the company organizes a variety of workshops, intensives and public

showcases. Box 2 summarizes some of these programmes.

The company consists of more than 150 members aged 50 to 92. Between 1980 and 2000, these older adults produced 30 original plays. It is also a useful platform for children and youth to experience positive interactions with older adults. An ongoing study on the impact of the Storybridge programme has found that children who participate have improved language skills and their teachers pick up new methods of pedagogy. In 2009, Stagebridge won the American Society on Aging Metlife Foundation MindAlert Award, which recognizes the company as an outstanding example of continuing education for adults.

Box 2: Stagebridge programmes

- **Performing Arts Training Institute:** professionally-taught classes for adults looking to develop performing arts skills. Over 20 classes are offered each week. The *Summer Performing Arts Camp* is for adult campers aged 50+ where they participate in a variety of hands-on training including acting, improv, storytelling, musical theatre, dance and playwriting. More than 130 students participate each year to work towards either a “diploma” or teaching certification. Classes are kept affordable

with support from the National Endowment for the Arts and two local foundations.

- **Storybridge Speaking and Listening Program:** intergenerational storytelling programme in Bay Area public schools, which pairs senior storytellers with elementary school teachers and students to help increase literacy and confidence.
- **Nurses Training ‘See Me’ Program:** aimed at helping nurses and nursing students to better understand older patients’ ageing experience and create positive attitudes towards ageing through theatre, song and sensitivity improvisation work.
- **Seniors Reaching Out:** events with high-quality entertainment and hands-on classes offered at community venues that serve both active and frail elders such as seniors residences, adult day centres, hospitals, libraries and conferences. It is a representative of TimeSlips™.
- **Performance-based staff training** to healthcare workers and senior service providers.
- **Public storytelling performances and original theatrical works** that showcase the rich and varied experiences of older adults to a multigenerational audience. They have created over 35 new works and reached more than 350,000 people in senior centres, hospitals, schools and

theatres.

Source: Stagebridge, <http://stagebridge.org/>,
Accessed 20 September 2016.

Theatre for Seniors – Singapore

Launched in April 2008, Theatre for Seniors is an outreach programme for older adults (age 50+) by non-profit theatre company, The Necessary Stage. The programme is supported by partners like the National Arts Council and Council for Third Age. It provides a platform for older adults to showcase their talents while sharing their personal stories.

Professional theatre practitioners train senior citizens in essential theatre skills and knowledge including acting, playwriting and directing. Eight seniors were also trained as facilitators to conduct a basic acting workshop. They have since propagated their knowledge to more than 200 peers in collaboration with community organizations.

The group has performed in various events at community centres and libraries, and public showcases in venues like the Esplanade Theatre Studio. The *Encore* series regularly feature short plays created by programme graduates, and has seen four editions so far. Graduates have been recognized with

nominations in the Best Ensemble category at *The Straits Times* LIFE! Theatre Awards.

Ageless Theatre – Singapore

Ageless Theatre is a non-profit theatre interest group founded in May 2011 by Peggy Ewe, a graduate of the 3-year theatre programme by The Necessary Stage. It is based in the Marine Parade Community Club. They aim to: 1) promote and develop members' interest in theatre skills and acting; 2) promote active aging; 3) reach out to the community on topical issues; and 4) encourage participation in social, cultural and recreational activities.

The company currently comprises 22 actors in their late 40s to late 70s. Members have performed in major theatre productions, short films, TV serials and community events. The company meets at the Community Club for a workshop every Tuesday. The chairman of Ageless Theatre, Debbie Lee Lodge, says that acting or dancing helps to keep the older person physically and mentally alert and gain a sense of fulfilment.

Reminiscence Theatre Project – Singapore

This community theatre programme was led by Chang Mei Yee, a senior lecturer in

applied drama and psychology at Singapore Polytechnic, together with her student volunteers and involving senior participants from Jurong Spring Community Club. It ran from 2010 to 2012, lasting between six and nine months each. The programme produced 2 plays, providing a forum for older people to share past experiences and delve into their memories through theatre.

Working together enabled both students (young people) and older people to learn about the production process of applied drama as they reminisced, created and rehearsed a play based on the seniors' memories. By sharing their memories, the senior participants felt validated while offering students a bridge into life during the 1950s and 1960s.

The first production was called *Our Show*, and was inspired by the older participants' memories of their childhood. The second play was *Letters to Aunty Worry*, where they reimagined scenes based on their past memories of love, courtship and marriage. The sessions culminated in a performance in Mandarin at the Community Club. Most of the senior participants, aged 53 to 73, had enjoyed Chang's first run of the Project and were eager to take part again.

The group (students and seniors) met for two hours weekly, though rehearsal sessions would

take more time. Idea collection formed the first phase of the project and lasted about 3 to 4 weeks. The consolidation and development of ideas in phase two was a prelude to the writing of the script. The final phase consisted of rehearsals and the actual performance. A community leader at the Club contributed valuable support by giving the group rehearsal space, a performance venue and helping to coordinate the performance event. Box 3 shares a typical rehearsal session as the group developed *Aunty Worry*.

To aid the seniors during the actual performance, student facilitators worked with the seniors to pre-record scenes, turning these into radio recordings and soundtrack of the play. Scripts were altered to ease the rehearsal process. During the performance, students formed the backstage team to support the senior performers with stage management and technical skills. Seniors left the programme with acting skills and newfound confidence. This is a departure from the usual Reminiscence Theatre approach where professional actors perform after developing the play with senior participants.

Box 3: Typical rehearsal process with Reminiscence Theatre Project

- **Start the session with warm-up games.** Student volunteers assist by demonstrating the games and

partnering with seniors.

- **Generate ideas with seniors** to create the main content of the play. Encourage seniors to talk about their memories and what life was like in their youth. This includes viewing old photographs – to stimulate memories and ideas – and group and class discussions.
- **Use devising processes to develop** the form and structure of the play, including character development. For example, Chang asked seniors to think about the different ways of saying ‘love’ in the 1960s in three stages of courtship.

Source: Developing the Structure of *Aunty Worry*, http://iop.rdc.nie.edu.sg/drama/mei-yee/aunty_worry.php, Accessed 21 September 2016.

The Glowers Drama Group – Singapore

The Glowers was established in 2003 to engage seniors, especially retirees, through drama. In January 2008, they became the voluntary drama wing of the Centre For Seniors, a non-profit voluntary welfare organization, which promotes the total wellbeing of older adults in Singapore. The group has been led by veteran actress, Catherine Sng, since 2008. Kampong Glam Community Club provides them with a

rehearsal space at no charge, freeing up funds for productions and props.

By 2012, the company had 35 members aged 58 to 84. They would do about 25 shows annually, and members are given DVD recordings of their performances as keepsakes. Activities are conducted in either English, Mandarin or Chinese dialects.

Saitama Gold Theater – Japan

The troupe was launched in 2006 as a performing group for senior citizens under the umbrella of Saitama Arts Theater. Artistic director, Yukio Ninagawa wanted to develop a new form of theatre based on the personal histories of older people, and created the Gold Theater programme to nurture professional mature actors.

Performers are aged 55 and above; the average age in 2015 was 76. All members gather for four hours a day, five days a week to receive basic training and acting classes conducted by Ninagawa and his staff. During these classes, they cover a range of texts, from important Japanese works to classic dramas by Chekov. Leading contemporary Japanese playwrights create new works specifically for the troupe. They have performed not only across Japan, but also in Paris and Hong Kong.

Source:

Dramatherapy, <http://badth.org.uk/dtherapy>, Access 21 September 2016; TimeSlips, <http://www.timeslips.org>, Accessed 20 September 2016; Stagebridge, <http://stagebridge.org/>, Accessed 20 September 2016; Stagebridge Senior Theatre Company, <http://livable.org/livability-resources/best-practices/415>, Accessed 23 September 2016; Theatre for Seniors, <http://www.necessary.org/index.php/outreach/theatre-for-seniors>, Accessed 20 September 2016; Reminiscence Theatre Project, <http://iop.rdc.nie.edu.sg/drama/mei-yee/index.php>, Accessed 20 September 2016; *2015–2016 | Reminiscence Theatre Project: 定位*, https://seelio.com/w/26f1/2015-_-2016-remembrance-theatre-project, Accessed 21 September 2016; *Theatre A-B-C, DRAFT: Volume 2 Issue 2 – Memory x Space*, p48-63, http://www.dramabox.org/eng/publications_ezine.html, Accessed 21 September 2016; Ageless Theatre, <http://agelesstheatre.weebly.com/>, Accessed 21 September 2016; *Age is no barrier for this group*, <http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/age-no-barrier-group?nopaging=1>, Accessed 23 September 2016; *Growing up*, <http://www.agelessonline.net/2132/growing-up/>, Accessed 21 September 2016; Saitama Arts Theater, <http://www.saf.or.jp/en/>, Accessed 21 September 2016; *Artist Interview: Yukio Ninagawa*, http://www.performingarts.jp/E/art_interview/0910/1.html, Accessed 21 September 2016.