

Article 1

Recalling Memories Through Reminiscence Theatre

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to study how a reminiscence theatre production develops dramaturgically, and to discuss what impact it has on the participants who take part in the project “The aged as a resource”. The theatre performance *Number Our Days* is visually and verbally presented and interpreted in this article. The reader also gets an opportunity to look at film extracts from the performance in electronic form. The theoretical framing is based on a performative mindset, Ryum’s dramaturgic model, Ranciere’s view on the emancipated spectator, Turner and Behrndt’s devising theatre universe, Saldana’s ethnodrama method and Ricoeur’s perspective of the capable and relational human being who builds their own narrative identity through communication..

Keywords: Reminiscence theatre, art-based research, artistic research, the aged, theatre production, applied theatre

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Prologue

All that is needed in order to understand our forefathers is to listen to their stories. For these stories run like hidden rivers² through all the other stories in their lives and our lives. In this way, the encounter with the stories is also an encounter with our own time and with us ourselves.

In a reminiscence theatre project, the storytellers stand as safe poles in the water we walk in. When the storytellers wash new stories ashore, we see the landscape build itself up.

At the waterside, we stand and watch the new landscape. But it is only when we all come up out of the water onto the beach and build bridges and canals between the stories, that together we build something new.

Young and old build a common memory world. It is this universe you are invited into. So – enter the beach. Together we will travel from sandcastle to sandcastle through the canals of the imagination.

Introduction

This article is concerned with how a memory world is built up through the art of applied theatre. My aim is to study how a reminiscence theatre production develops dramaturgically, and discuss what impact it has on the participants who take part in the project *The Aged as a Resource*.³ The theatre production started in a small reminiscence group where Norwegian pensioners met to share memories from their lives in order to contribute to an ethnodrama (Schweitzer, 2007; Saldaña, 2003). The ethnodrama developed as a manuscript devised from six focus group interviews conducted in this reminiscence group (Wibeck, 2010).

The theatre production based on the manuscript was performed by the mixed-age theatre group, Extraordinary Theatre, who wished to show the public and government institutions how today's aged can be viewed as a "wave of resources" and not as a destructive "tsunami". Extraordinary Theatre staged the play *Number Our Days* in a north Norwegian context and performed the production twice on 26th May, 2013, at the Harstad Culture House for a total of 200 audience members.⁴

² The metaphor "hidden rivers" is taken from Thea Obrecht's (2011) novel, *Tigerens kone (The Tiger's Wife)*.

³ For more information about the research, see the article: "Art, age & health: A research journey about developing reminiscence theatre in an age-exchange project", in this issue of *In-Formation*.

⁴ <http://www.harstadkulturhus.no/default.aspx?cmd=100&pkProgram=102>.

Ethnodrama development: Dramaturgical conglomerate and intertextuality

As an art-based researcher I have manoeuvred between everyday life and art in the development of the dramaturgic and producing aspects of the reminiscence theatre production *Number Our Days* (Dewey, 1934; Gadamer, 1986). The memories that were shared in the reminiscence group created hermeneutic association circles between the participants who took part in the focus group interviews.⁵ Altogether, 12 hours of interviews made up the foundation for the theatre script that the theatre group Extraordinary Theatre⁶ performed at Harstad Culture House in May 2013. In the writing process, I was faced with many dramaturgic choices that had to be made within the boundaries of the research project. The goal was that the script should reflect how a group of pensioners view the lives they have lived when they look back, and how they experience the youth's views of them today.



An old class picture - from the performance poster.

In this process I had to find a balance between science and art. As an art-based researcher you stand with one foot in the world of science and one foot in the world of art (Gjørøum & Rasmussen, 2012). As a scriptwriter, dramaturge and director one must look for the interesting scenic solutions and intuitively make use of the aesthetic eye, whilst as a researcher, one must more stringently adhere to the particular issue one wishes to elucidate (Gjørøum & Ramsdal, 2011). I categorized the interviews and processed them, noting interesting topics, frequently used terms and key quotes (Saldaña, 2003). The categories that appeared most frequently in the interviews were: “play”, “love and death”, “the role of grandparents”, “life philosophies”, “prejudices”, “exclusion”, “war stories” and “retirement”.

⁵ For more about “hermeneutic association circles” and clarification of the term, see the article: “Art, age & health: A research journey about developing reminiscence theatre in an age-exchange project”, in this issue of *In-Formation*.

⁶ Extraordinary Theatre is a project theatre group at Harstad University College with diversity as an aim. Actors with and without disabilities, work together equally across from four generations, from age 9-95.

In the background of the categorization process, I developed a script outline, which in turn permitted a “devising process”, i.e. the outline indicated thematic scenes with small fragments of text and musical transitions in a dramatic entirety, which formed the basis for improvisations in the theatre group. We know that “to devise means ‘to invent’” (Guss, 2004).⁷ In the devising process, the participants themselves fill in the outline with their spontaneous thoughts, memories and scenic ideas through repeated improvisation (Turner & Behrndt, 2008). The two pictures below show how we chose to dramatize the categories “war stories” and “love”:



*War stories - Liberation Day, 1945.*⁸

⁷ <http://www.dramaiskolen.no/dramaiskolen/media/Faith%20Guss%20spr%C3%A5kvask.pdf>

⁸ Photo taken by Inga Juul from the newspaper the Harstad Tidende.



*Love - The Wedding.*⁹

The stories told by the informants were gradually dramatically interwoven with extracts from other sources such as poems, novels, song lyrics, obituaries and war archives in the script-writing process. The script thereby developed, sandwiched between fiction and reality with devised theatre as the dramaturgic paradigm (Turner & Behrndt, 2008; Amans, Kupperts, & Robertson, 2007). When writing the script, I chose to use sources other than the focus group interviews in order to give the actors creative impulses and a more stringent poetic stage language. This was meant to help give an aesthetic lift to the improvisations that were based on the informants' memories. I picked authors such as Thea Obrecht, Merete Lindstrøm, Karl Ove Knausgård and Anne Grete Preus in order to help the actors formulate concise and intimate stories that touched the audience. The professional texts I utilized in the script-writing dealt with the same themes that the informants were preoccupied with. The use of texts by Lindstrøm or Knausgård in this way represented a joint composition with the informants' own life stories, such as I wished to portray in the script. For example, I chose to re-work an excerpt from Karl Ove Knausgård's novel *My Battle 1*, where he artfully and concisely describes lived lifeworlds, with credible voices and poetic sentences that I thought could help to breathe life and inspiration into the improvisation. The monologue from scene 2, "Prejudices", is taken from Knausgård:

⁹ Photo taken by Inga Juul from the newspaper the Harstad Tidende.

To understand the world is to take a certain distance from it. That which is too small to be seen with the naked eye, we enlarge and that which is too big, we scale down. When we have thus brought things into the scope of our senses, we set it. We call the set, knowledge. Through the whole of our childhood and youth, we strive to maintain the right distance from things and phenomena. We read, we learn, we experience, we correct. Thus, we eventually come to the point where all the necessary distances are established, all the necessary systems are in place. It is then time begins to go faster (Knausgård, 2000, p.15).

I used this Knausgård text in the script because I planned to create a proximity to the tableaux depicting prejudices (Gadamer, 1989) we have against the elderly. The tableaux represented “the youth’s” views on “the elderly”, which the informants were very preoccupied with.



The nurse with a walking frame as a scenic element.

On the stage we see an elderly woman of 91 years old. She is dressed in red behind her walking frame and is looking at the tableaux as she passes them. She and we see one tableau where a teenager is kneeling in front of an elderly woman in a rocking chair, helping her to use an iPad. We also see an elderly man who is pointing out the northern lights whilst he supports an old lady out on a little walk. Our gaze then passes over the last tableau, which shows a grandfather reading to his grandchild. He is reading a story from a book of fairy tales; the child sits frozen whilst the grandfather looks at the audience and recites Knausgård’s text. The scene closes with a glimpse of the elderly lady in red, slowly walking over the stage with a smile on her face, looking at both “us” and “them”, whilst the last part of the Knausgård monologue flows over us:

No obstacles meet us anymore, everything is set, time flows through our lives, the days disappear at high speed, before we are aware of it, we are forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety [...] Meaning needs fullness, fullness needs time, time needs distance (Knausgård, 2009, p.5).

In the script-writing process I also chose to use snippets of text as the titles of the scenes or as small statements between diary commentaries and informants' memories from their childhoods and school days. I worked in the ethnodrama tradition and blended fiction and fact in order to highlight the main themes from the storytellers and bring up the “jucy stuff”, as Saldaña (2003) puts it. For example I chose to use a short quote from *The Tiger's Wife* by American author Thea Obrecht, both in the introduction and as the title for scene 3, “Hidden rivers”: “All that is needed to understand my grandfather lies in two stories from his life. These stories run like hidden rivers between all the other stories in his life” (Obrecht, 2012, p.35). I used this quote to illustrate that all people, including the aged, are more than what one sees with the naked eye. I wanted the performance to remind people that the elderly can have experienced the most incredible things, without it being visible. Indeed, in everyday life, we tend to only see “the old lady with the walking stick”, and stigmatize (Goffman, 1963) her without thinking that she was perhaps once a courageous nurse in Indonesia.

This kind of intentional intertextuality (Kristeva, 1982), which I consciously tried to create throughout the ethnodrama, is found in many artworks, in stage productions and in fictional literature – for example, the novel *Third Person Singular* by Vigdis Hjort (2008). Hjort uses the German author Sebald (2004) as a clear literary reference, without actually explicitly spelling this out in the text. New texts, in a broad sense, can thereby also relate to other texts and a kind of dialogue or intertextuality can arise between different works. When the dialogue is open, this can be understood as an interplay between philosophers, critics of society, authors or researchers.¹⁰ Therefore, I noted in the programme booklet which sources the script was built upon, with clear references to named informants, and fictional and academic literature. It can be seen that a compilation of media formed the backdrop for the selection of memories depicted. Memories connected to issues of aging, upbringing, education, work and life's cycle were compiled to create 13 scenes in the script outline, as the overview below shows:

Scene:	Title:	Drama:	Music/soundtrack:	Lighting:	Scenography:
	Entrance hall	A man sits at a table in the corridor, in a spotlight, and writes letters on a typewriter, the audience passes him on the way into the theatre.	The sound of waves and a boat in the corridor, soundtrack	Spot directed down on the man's head	Out in the corridor on the way into the theatre
1.	The journey	The audience finds their seats whilst Hedvig, Bror + their mother Margareth stand stylized and wave. Father Reidar comes in the door with a suitcase, waves goodbye and leaves.	Amilie	Spot	Slide: “America ship” is shown on the bridal gown scenography
2.	Prejudices	-Knausgård monologue. -Three mimed sequences with masks in separate spotlights, shown one after the other. Then a new monologue.	The sound of surf after still pictures and after the last text: the sound of heartbeat	Spot then blackout	Zimmerframe, old armchair, etc.
3.	Hidden rivers	-Live (as a child) stands in the middle of the stage; intro-monologue. -Improvisation with masks; departure as hidden rivers. -Closes with Guleng poem of a nurse.	Amilie	Warm light	Slide: “Classphotos”
4.	The letter	-Live (as a teenager) comes in with an “America suitcase” and reads the letter she finds.	The sound of waves and a boat; closes with a storm		Slide show: “Family happiness”
5.	The horizon	Soap bubbles and absurd acting to a monologue.	Amilie	Circus spot	Little chair and big chair

¹⁰ I.e. not plagiarism or theft of others' ideas, as Vigdis Hjort has been accused of. (<http://home.hio.no/~helgerid/litteraturogmedieleksikon/intertekstualitet.pdf>)

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6.	The sound of peace	First, a tenuous child's voice begins to sing. A child comes in with a radio. Then a combination of enactments and choreography to the sound of peace, prison, then 7th May celebrations and freezing.	"The longest night", song and theatre orchestra, and then "I love 17th May"	Three rooms created with lighting	Flags for everyone, also for the audience
7.	Falling in love	Procession to wedding celebration, then long table; afterwards, the memory of a cake delivery to a fishing boat, acting with masks.	Bridal waltz	Party lights	Long table and gunwales
8.	Besieged by enemies	The story of fleeing from Bergen 9th April, 1940, told by Solveig sitting in the old chair is interplayed with diary readings and a song with two soloists and the orchestra.	"Besieged by enemies", song and theatre orchestra	Spot, then backlight the sound of a child crying when scene is over	Slide show: "Displaced families anno 2013" and an old chair
9.	No regrets	Intro-monologue by Rit, the children borrow stones from Rit, then circle game with the children, passing a stone around the circle to a Gahndipoem .	Only a drum beating to the game	Dappled light on the floor, spring atmosphere	A stone
10.	Standing on the outside	A retired teacher tells a story whilst her "class" improvise classroom life with masks.	"Portrait in January", song and theatre orchestra	Interior cold light	
11.	The obituary	A boy and an elderly man cycle in; "Nordlys 1 krone!", obituary is then read aloud by the elderly newspaper boy for the junior one.	After the monologue: "A grandfather in life", song and theatre orchestra, small boy and grandfather	Warm daylight	Big black bicycle and newspapers that are thrown out into the audience. Slide show: "Grandparents"
12.	The game and death	Children play on ice. Lots of laughter. They hop from ice floe to ice floe and dramatize childhood memories of ice floes, which suddenly goes wrong. Monologue about death.	From laughter over into the sound of a heartbeat After monologue: Amilie melody	Creepy light, ice floes of light on the floor	
13.	Epilogue	Epilogue from the orchestra: "For the heart, life is simple, it beats as long as it can. Then it stops." Live: "Please, can't you tell the story about grandma, just one more time!"	Amilie melody	Spot	

Dramaturgic glue

From a dramaturgic point of view, the production emerges as *epic* and *non-Aristotelian*; it consists of tableaux, life stories, songs, dialogues and monologues (Evans, 2006; Platz-Waury, 1992). But the theatrical universe of the performance is characterized by an *interaction* between "performative" and "narrative" representations (Platz-Waury, 1992; Gladsø, Gjervan, Hovik, & Skagen, 2005). The audience is led into strong dramatic events in the fictive world, which are suddenly interrupted by short speeches and longer stories. The performance therefore moves in the space between the performative and the narrative, since the actor at times assumes a panoramic position. And in this way, one can argue that the actor has the opportunity to see "from above, i.e. from a superior perspective that withdraws from the activity" (Platz-Waury, 1992, p.170).

The scenes are woven together with musical transitions where the theatre orchestra, also in costume, takes over the main role.¹¹ The auditive element of the performance consists of voices that relate stories, in combination with musical arrangements and sound effects of a heartbeat, surf and children crying. The music is specially arranged into a comprehensive soundtrack that creates dramatic and emotional atmospheres in the scenes. Music from the film *The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain* by Jean-Pierre Jeunet is the supporting musical element, whilst Odd Nordstoga's *A Grandfather in Life*, Øystein Dolmen's *The Longest Night* and Nordahl Grieg's *Besieged by Enemies* function as time markers and emotional relief from the tension the actors lead the audience into.

¹¹ The orchestra consisted of professional musicians on trumpet, accordion, double-bass and drums, including members of the North Norwegian music corps of the armed forces; Musical director Ole Thomas Gjærum. Other musicians: Geir Nordeng, Jon Sjøen and Skjalg Bjørstad.

The performance is built upon Ulla Ryum's dramaturgic model, which is based upon the narrative principle: "[...] which emanates from a central scene, where a question is formulated which appears with a high degree of imperitive" (Szatkowski, 1989, p.20). The production further revolves around the main theme that the central scene introduces. The central scene in *Number Our Days* is scene 2, "Prejudices". Here, the thesis *the aged as a resource* is released into the aisles for the first time, through tableaus that non-verbally challenge the audience to consider, associate and reflect. Thereby, it is "in the central scene that the 'key' to the work is hidden. The other scenes in the work can thereby relate to this exemplary scene" (Szatkowski, 1989, p. 20). The monologue of the central scene, which hovers over the tableaus, is delivered by an elderly actor who is also a political leader in the council for the elderly in the town the performances took place in. It is consequently possible for the audience to note the political subtext in the director's choice of actor. The elderly politician also delivers the monologue at the end of the performance, something that contributes to a circular composition and the continual return to the theme "the aged". But the central scene is also insinuated in all of the other scenes in an indirect manner. There is no clear red thread running through the performance in the form of just one story; the production exists as a *montage* where fragments of memories are unfolded. The montage of the various scenes is connected to the hermeneutic association circles that I, as dramaturge and director, wish to set in motion for the audience. Consequently: "Such a montage functions by virtue of the associations that arise across the [...] montage" (Szatkowski, 1989, p.21). The scenes then, appear to the audience to be coincidentally pieced together, but they nevertheless form an intentional dramaturgic pattern connected to the staging concept. The aim in using this dramaturgic model is to give the audience a feeling that they themselves almost take part in the creation of their own performance. The audience are a part of their own experience in an active manner when they view a work that operates within the 'performative paradigm'. This means "that the performance 'is' not on the stage anymore" (Böhnisch, 2010, p.83). But the performance is created between the actors and the viewers through a shared bodily, audible and visual presence in the room.

The Norwegian-German theatre researcher Siemke Böhnisch points out that a dialogue between all who are present is implied, but there is also a focus: "[O]n the changeable in the opinions the audience ascribe to [...] The work's open offer to produce opinions is made concrete in the reception process of the audience" (Böhnisch, 2010, p.84). This performative mindset can be seen as one of three possible mindsets in post-modern theatre. The model below shows the three theatrical accounts (Böhnisch, 2010, p.87):

From	Work aesthetic mindset	Reception aesthetic mindset	Performative mindset
Where is the performance?	On the stage	In the consciousness of the audience	Between the participants and the audience
Audience:	Passive recipients (individually)	Active recipients, (co-)creators of the performance's meaning (individually)	Audible and visible participants, reciprocal influencing of the audience and the participants (collective)
Scenic proceedings are perceived as:	Invariant	Invariant with variable meaning	Variable, contained in the event
Understanding of the work:	Closed and final (static)	Open and incomplete (dynamic)	Problematising of the concept of the work

My aim in the performance was, within the universe of applied theatre, to influence the dialogue between all the attendant participants. Therefore, I view the staging of *Number Our Days* as an *event* where both the performance and the processing part afterwards (a “reminiscence café”) are a *collective* act. The performance can vary between different audiences, and therefore it is the *mutual exchange* between the actors and the viewers that makes everyone into an active participant. Many of the scenes challenge the audience to actively participate in the performance through the fact that they are given lines (“God bless our land”, in scene 6), props to use (newspapers from 1930, in scene 11) or are invited to dance (“Portrait in January”, scene 8). I have been very conscious of influencing the *production of opinions* in the audience, on the topic of their views on their own and others’ aging process. In the staging concept, I have therefore worked in order to ensure that everyone in the theatre has the opportunity to experience moments of subjective recognition during the performance and thereby be able to reflect on their own lives.



The original picture, “Class photo nr. II” of visual artist Øivind Brune.

When the performance is summed up before the epilogue, the focus is turned to death as an unavoidable part of life. But this is done by lifting the gaze and trying to set the audience free from the sad or sinister associations of death, and instead give them the chance to laugh a bit about Western society's attempt to distance itself from the natural event of death, for all people are born and all will die. Therefore, the "population", who is all of us, is represented in a manipulated class photo on the scenographic dresses on the stage, whilst the following monologue is read:

In the same moment life leaves the body, the body belongs to death. There are few things that awaken a bigger discomfort in us than to see a person entrapped in it, if one shall judge in relation to the efforts we make to hold dead bodies out of sight. In the larger hospitals, they are not only hidden away in their own, inaccessible rooms; also the ways to these rooms are hidden with their own lifts and own basement corridors and even if one should randomly stray into one of these corridors, the dead bodies which are wheeled by are always covered up. When they are transported from the hospital, this is done from a separate exit, in cars with tinted glass; at the church, there is a special, windowless room for them; during the funeral ceremony, they lie in closed coffins, right up until they are sunken into the earth or burnt in the incinerator. The dead bodies might as well, for example, be wheeled uncovered through hospital corridors and be transported in a normal taxi without this representing a risk for anybody. The elderly man who dies during a film can well remain sitting in his seat until the end of the film; so long as the dead do not lie in the way, there is reason to rush, they cannot die once more, can they?¹²

The audience hears this monologue through the speakers after the children have played on the ice floes – a game the elderly recall with both illicit pleasure and paralyzing fear. The young actors jump and laugh, right up until fear of the cold water takes over from the horror-filled laughter. One of the children falls, and remains lying motionless:



¹² Text inspired by Knausgård (2009).

Silence grips the room: Will she die? The young girl is dragged out by her friends, lifeless. The question hangs unspoken in the air, still unanswered, whilst the monologue is still being read to the audience.¹³

Acting life lived

In conversations in the theatre group, the participants reported that real-life stories were inspiring material to work with. They pointed out that when the author of the story was present during the exploration of the narrative, it created a tension, a passion and a presence that one could transform into energy in the play. After the midway evaluation, many positive comments were delivered on this point: “The story becomes common knowledge and the responsibility to play ‘life history’ properly or correctly becomes less crucial”, wrote one participant. This participant further claimed that, “By sharing joy and experiences, joy doubles in size. By sharing the difficult, pain is halved”. One of the participants reflected that: “When we talk about incidents, I think back to what my family has told me about; about the war, rounds with the sheep on the mountains, or berry picking expeditions.”¹⁴ Here we see how association circles are at play and how the actors are included in a hermeneutic encounter. Another commented: “I think this is very eerie. To interpret another person’s life story can present challenges [but] I feel privileged that the author/authoress is here and can guide us.”¹⁵ It seems that the participants feel that they almost immediately validate the acting and the interpretation and that this brings them further *from* the story and *into* the fictive world, but with a more believable play. Hermeneutically, this can be analysed as a back and forth movement between the actors and the storyteller via the play (Gadamer, 1986). The play almost plays the players in and out of the original story, seen through Gadamer’s terminology (Rasmussen & Gürgens, 2006).

The drama researcher Marit Ulvund is concerned with exactly this significance of dramatizing life stories. But she does not work with reminiscence theatre or with age-exchange theatre, she facilitates storyteller-chair workshops for children. All the same, her method is just as applicable in reminiscence theatre. Ulvund works in the arena of the classroom and with “echo theatre” as the method. This is a storyteller and improvisation method that Ulvund created, where the participants can develop performative and narrative competences. Ulvund states that:

We have a bodily need to communicate and to link experiences with performing narratives. To act lived experience is based on work with the physical body and with the nonverbal and all aspects of the voice in addition to the words (Ulvund, 2012, p.277).

The aim in the echo theatre method is to dramatize a story whilst the author watches and can therefore validate the result. The method has five steps, which are connected by continuous reflection in the

¹³ Photo taken by HT’s Inga Juul.

¹⁴ Quote from midway evaluation, 18.04.13.

¹⁵ Quote from midway evaluation, 18.04.13.

group; 1. “recalled experience”, 2. “narrative”, 3. “drama”, 4. “performance” and 5. “evaluation” (Ulvund, 2012, p. 175). Ulvund writes in her doctoral thesis that “To act in each other’s stories creates solidarity. You have acted in a story from my life, there is now a new closeness” (Ulvund, 2012, p.243). Ulvund quotes here one of her informants who is a teacher in her study of echo theatre, when the teacher emphasizes the significance of sharing life experiences through the medium of theatre.

I tried out echo theatre as a method in the reminiscence group in the dramatization of the call of an elderly nurse, Riet M. C. Andreassens, to take up nursing. I want to confirm the statement of Ulvund’s informants, when they note a new closeness, since it was precisely this the participants in the theatre group Extraordinary Theater also noted after the echo theatre session we had on 06.03.2013. The photos below were taken during this session when we used improvisation to act out Riet’s departure from The Netherlands, via Indonesia and Switzerland, before she settled in Norway as a fully-qualified nurse. Riet was involved in the process, and can be seen on the sidelines, where she contributed to the adjustment of the dramatization so that it was credible for the audience and representative of her life world.



Echo theatre method to nursing vocation

According to reminiscence research, the sharing of one's life stories with others contributes towards the consolidation of one's identity and safeguards the elderly's self-esteem in life (Krüger, 2007). This implies that: "memories are actively processed and include a reassessment of the life one has lived [...] To arrive at ego integrity, i.e. an acceptance of one's life as it was" (Smedbye & Krüger, 2007, p.223). We also experienced this in the reminiscence theatre group. But one can ask oneself if the memory work in a mixed-age group spanning 5 generations (9–91 year olds) will not contribute more than simply safeguarding the identity and self-esteem of the elderly. One of the child actors explicitly stated in a conversation after a rehearsal that she enjoyed taking part in the theatre group so much because the elderly "know so much, have so much information and they have, after all, already done everything we will do in our lives. That is good to know". This statement popped up in the course of the process, in different variations, from many of the young actors in the theatre group.



Playful interaction with a senior participant watching.

My experience in running a mixed-age reminiscence theatre group taught me that the safeguarding and confirming of identity and self-esteem are not only connected to the elderly participants, but just as much to the younger ones. In addition, they all highlight a sense of *belonging*, something research into applied theatre has shown in many studies (e.g. Gürgens, 2004; Sauter, 2004). We see that the theatre process has an important impact on all participants who take part in the project, no matter their age.

The informants' stories can be interpreted as *narratives* in light of the thinking of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1994). Ricoeur describes in *Oneself as Another* how people create identity and meaning in life through the spoken narratives they contribute when meeting with others. A person's "narrative identity" is thus the manner in which he/she constructs his/her history, according to Ricoeur. As I see it, this theoretical position finds its practical sounding board in cultural reminiscence work. As a theatre researcher, I have not been concerned with capturing the lives of nine people as a type of fixed picture. I have rather wished through the theatre media to ask what these nine lives represent regarding life experience, which can in turn tell the audience something about the aged as a resource and what it means to be human as one looks back on one's life. The thought behind the focus group interviews was to contribute to the evocation of memories in the group that could form the basis for the sculpting of so-called real-life experiences on the stage that could be presented to the spectators (Turner & Behrndt, 2008, p.170–171). As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière points out in *The Emancipated Spectator*, being a spectator is:

[N]ot some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed (Rancière, 2009, p.17).

Rancière elaborates that we must acknowledge a spectator who is able to "compose her own poem with the elements of the poem before her" (2009, p. 17), in this sense the reminiscence theatre's narrative can be linked to every single audience member's life experience. This can give the spectators an aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1934), in the understanding of theatre as a "collective event" within the frame of the "performative paradigm" (Denzin, 1997).

Masked play as a dramaturgic tool

In some of the scenes, Basel masks (also called "Larval masks") are used.¹⁶ These are full-face masks, relatively simple in form, but with exaggerated proportions. They are expressive and mournful, but with an open and suggestive manner. Basel masks stem from an old carnival tradition in Basel, Switzerland, but have been used in theatre education by Jacques Lecoq, in physical actor training (Lecoq, Carras, & Lillias, 2002). Basel masks are used in the performance *Number Our Days* as they are open and invite wonder in the audience and experimentation in the actors (Wilsher, 2006). The masks bring the actors out of the traditional realist style of acting, which amateurs often tend to use, and into a more playful and fanciful world where one can experiment with various physical improvisations that bring the informants' stories to life. Full-face masks are aesthetic objects that form a collaboration with the actors body.

¹⁶ <http://www.themaskery.com/basel.html>.



These Basel masks were used; photos taken during the rehearsal period.

The masks accordingly help amateurs to enter into theatrical expression by blocking the option of using verbal utterances and facial expressions, which they are used to using as the primary method of communication in everyday life (Nilsen, 1991). The face remains hidden under the mask and the body therefore emerges more strongly in creative communication as the story unfolds for the audience. The actors animate the mask with their bodies:

Beneath the neutral mask the actor's face disappears and his body becomes far more noticeable. Talking to someone, you often look that person in the face. With an actor wearing the neutral mask, you look at the whole body. The look is the mask, so the face becomes the whole body. (Lecoq, Carras, & Lillias, 2002, p. 39)

The aim in using various masks in five of the scenes was to create a theatrical awareness of the body in the amateur actors, in order to release an enthusiasm and fearlessness in them (Krosshus, 2008).¹⁷ In two of the five masked scenes in the production, it was necessary to use dialogue and have the opportunity to blow soap bubbles. Thereby, we discovered that we needed to also use half-masks, and chose masks from the commedia dell'arte tradition. These Italian renaissance masks have strong, exaggerated characters that give ample space for human emotions and playfulness. In scene 7, "Falling in love", and scene 5, "The horizon", half-masks were therefore utilized, since the audience thereby becomes:

[A]ware of both actor and character – the process of transformation is continually taking place in front of them, and it teeters on the edge of success and failure. This visual dichotomy lends the mask a sense of anarchy and chaos. (Wilscher, 2007, p. 146)

¹⁷ The masks were used in five scenes.

The actors themselves related that they felt that the masks protected them and gave them a sense of security in their acting. The masked acting also gave a fanciful touch and a playful life to the reminiscence performance.

The significance of participation

The primary goal for the project was to induce memories that could result in a public theatre production by children, youth, adults and pensioners, which would explore the expression, “The aged as a resource”. So during the focus group interviews and the process of creating the theatre production, the consolidation of identity and self-image was only a secondary goal I had for the participants. It was therefore interesting to see how both the young and elderly participants actually went through relatively clear identity consolidating processes through their participation in the theatre group. In the midway evaluation, I asked the participants what it meant for them to take part in reminiscence theatre. The responses were exclusively positive, but all the same, thought provoking: “It means so much! As an elderly person, one goes around a lot with one’s restrictive habits. Not much new happens. To be together here is invigorating.”¹⁸ “[...] [T]o have the opportunity to communicate that the aged are also important in our society and to take part in the acting out of others’ experiences.”¹⁹ “In the beginning, I was sceptical, but gradually I saw the value of coaxing forth some of the stories that lie hidden inside one.”²⁰ “[...] [I]t gives me much to think about.”²¹ “[...] The significance of participating grows more and more. [...] [G]ive a thought to the past, but also go forwards.”²²

In the interpretation of the midway evaluations, it was clear that the participants were in the middle of a process that touched them both emotionally and cognitively. The questionnaires showed how theatrical experiences were clearly connected to the experience of a more secure identity and self-esteem in everyday life. Research shows that this is also valid for other target groups in applied theatre, for example, youth with disabilities, actors with hearing impairments or youth who have dropped out (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009; Gürgens, 2004; Gjørnum & Ramsdal, 2011). “You know, the fact that someone needs you, is a good feeling”, said one of the actors who is over 80 years old to me in the lift one morning before the rehearsals began. Halfway through the project, I also asked the participants if they had changed their opinions about whether the elderly can be a resource in society. Both the elderly and the young acknowledged that through the theatre process they discovered new things, both about themselves and others. In this way, one can say that through the artistic process, an

¹⁸ Quote from questionnaire, informant 4, 18.04.13.

¹⁹ Quote from questionnaire, informant 5, 18.04.13.

²⁰ Quote from questionnaire, informant 7, 18.04.13.

²¹ Quote from questionnaire, informant 8, 18.04.13.

²² Quote from questionnaire, informant 9, 18.04.13.

increased consciousness emerged around the statement “The aged as a resource”. In the questionnaires, the participants described their renewed understanding in this way: “[T]he aged are indeed full of wisdom and knowledge [...] they show courage in participating!”²³ “The aged are an important resource in many areas: our history, politics, life experience [...] long professional backgrounds.”²⁴ By entering consciously with a clear, positive researcher’s eye on the phenomenon “the position of the elderly in society”, it is still possible to use art-based research to explore different sides of the phenomenon. For through the participants’ immersion in life stories and the discussions about improvisational solutions, they are transported further from their pre-understanding towards a renewed knowledge (Gadamer, 1989). This hermeneutic process is also a characteristic of “devised theatre” as a working structure:

A devising process might therefore require, on the one hand, a search for structure, while on the other hand, the facilitation of possibilities. The need to keep the process open can make it seem chaotic because one idea might lead to an exploration of parallel stories or ideas which in turn lead to other ideas and before long the process is going down different, perhaps disparate, avenues and paths (Turner & Behrndt, 2008, p.171).

The taking up of ideas gradually as the process proceeds is an essential element of my work when I use “devised theatre”. But it seems that through this method of working in a devising process, the participants also grasp their own pre-understanding, and are able to re-work their thoughts about themselves and others. One of the actors wrote in the midway evaluation that:

I am so busy as a pensioner that I don’t understand how I had time to work earlier. Our Heavenly Father doesn’t retire anyone!²⁵

The participants’ contributions were woven into the performance where they fit in, either as props or as small meta-comments. Performance art lecturer Cathy Turner and the dramaturge Synne Behrndt from the UK describe this method of working dramaturgically and point out the inherent challenges to “define and shape the material from the living process and from the dialogue between people involved” (Turner & Behrndt, 2008, p. 170). They claim that devising processes: “[T]end to reflect the particular places, spaces and people involved and the immediate contexts of the work tend to be woven into the performance” (Turner & Behrndt, 2008, p. 170). My job then, as a director and an art-based researcher in the devised theatre process was to bind together the selection of memories from the focus group, which formed the outline of the script, together with meta-comments on the content itself in the scenes we were working with, and the more personal associations that arose connected to the life experiences of the participants in the group. From my point of view it was important that all the participants were able to continuously develop a clearer relationship of ownership towards the production. The experience of being listened to, but also the opportunity to share thoughts through

²³ Quote from questionnaire, informant 9, 18.04.13.

²⁴ Quote from questionnaire, informant 10, 18.04.13.

²⁵ Quote from questionnaire, informant 1, 18.04.13.

improvisation on stage, had a clear influence on the participants, something I saw repeatedly. But during the work on scene 7, “Falling in love”, it became particularly striking:

The 70-year-old actor interrupts. He misses the searching eyes of the young woman on the stage, the love has gone, he says, as original owner of the story behind the acting. “And it was indeed the gaze, the searching hands, which were themselves the experience of falling in love”, he reminisces for us. “This has to be included!”, he says, with a clear voice. The other actors agree, understanding his objection, they rise and experiment again. A new improvisation is begun (Field diary, 11.04.2013.).

The actors in the theatre group claimed that both acting in *other peoples’* stories on stage, and watching others acting out *your own history*, was a powerful experience.

On 17th April, we had just finished work for the day, combining the childhood story of the retired office worker Solveig Marie Losnegaard Nilsens, when they had to flee from Bergen on 9th April, 1940, with Nordal Grieg’s song, “Kringsatt av fiender”, sung by the young participants. Solveig herself acted out her story, staged as the rediscovery of an old diary in the loft, as the photos below show:



Scene 9: “Besieged by enemies”.²⁶

Over a cup of coffee after the diary improvisation, the discussion took a new turn. We spoke about what participation in this reminiscence theatre group was doing to us. We left the topic of the art of the

²⁶ Photo nr. 2 taken by HT’s Inga Juul.

theatre, at least, seemingly. “It is about being seen. We need each other, all together”, said Solveig. The retired nurse, Riet Maria Cornelia Andreassen, continued, “I never use the word ‘limitations’, I say ‘challenges’”. The youth around the table listened. The elderly reflected on the work we were in the process of and on the process of getting oneself out of the house and being creative together with others. ”It is indeed true”, continued Solveig, “everything one doesn’t use becomes blunted – it doesn’t take many days inside before the walls trap you”. The other actors looked at her and nodded, confirming her statement. Then the retired skipper, Jan Karoliussen, told us that one of the child actors had said to him, “You, you are a good grandfather!’ right after they had sung Odd Nordstoga’s whilst rehearsing scene 11, “The obituary”, as depicted in the photo below:



A grandfather in life and an enthusiastic grandchild.

He looked at us, and I pointed out that the boy was right. For Jan greeted all the children with a handshake when they came to the rehearsal weekend; he took the children seriously and he took on the grandfather role with a spirit, laughter and honesty that made a strong impression on the children. “They felt that you were a grandfather in the room – also for them, not just for the audience”, I told Jan. He smiled. Theatre experiences and our everyday life melted together that day, for all of the participants around the table.

Three deeper emersions into the script

See attached video, which shows clips from the theatre performance.

We will now dive deeper into three of the scenes: Scene 1, “The journey”, scene 4, “The letter” and scene 6, “The sound of peace”. Scene 1 is based on Ørjan Johansen’s childhood stories, which he shared in the reminiscence group by bringing with him his father’s old letters from the period were he travelled in service overseas during the 1950–60s. Ørjan also brought with him a big collection of black and white photos and a collection of props in order to describe his childhood and family memories.



The informant as a child with his sister, mother and father finally together.

A selection of the letters from Ørjan’s father to his wife and children were presented in the reminiscence group, but in the dramaturgic work of converting the stories into a play script, I made some thematic cuts in the letters, combining several letters to make the two letters that are used in the performance. In the fictive universe on stage these re-written letters were placed in the hands of the teenager, Live. Live plays the fictive grandchild of the original writer, who has been given the role name Reidar. Reidar wrote a large collection of letters to his wife Margareth and to his children, Bror and Hedvig, whilst he was on his long journeys with a shipping company. In the performance the character Bror plays out Ørjan’s childhood memories. The audience first meets Reidar in the corridor on the way into the theatre.

Scene 1 “The journey”

The actor who plays Reidar sits into the corridor between the foyer and the theatre. He writes using an old typewriter and sits with an original engineer’s cap, melancholically writing a letter to his longed-for family. When the audience has passed Reidar on the way in and found their seats, they look out over the stage. There, they can get a glimpse of a frozen tableau of a mother and two children. The three wave at a figure who has not yet come into view. Then the light shifts and photos of boats in international shipping roll slowly over the white bridal gowns which make up the scenography behind the orchestra. The tableau begins to come to life as the music changes character. The children wave enthusiastically when their father comes into view with an “America suitcase” in his hand. The farewell scene is abruptly gone, and in the darkness on the stage we hear the sound of a heartbeat.²⁷



*Farewell between father and son.*²⁸

²⁷ Producer’s description of the contents of scene 1, excerpt from the script of *Number Our Days*.

²⁸ Photo taken by HT’s Inga Juul.

Scene 4: "The letter"

Here, the audience meets Live, Reidar's grandchild, when she comes excitedly running down from the loft with grandfather Reidar's America suitcase in her hand. She reverently opens the dusty suitcase and in it lies the collection of letters together with the bridal gown of her grandmother, Margreth. Live carefully tries on the bridal gown, sits down next to an old chair and reads the letter, as the photo below shows:



Live sits in grandmother's bridal gown whilst stories wash in over the stage.

Dear Hedvig and Bror

I just want to write a few words to you so that you know how I am. We have now travelled with the ship for nine days and have arrived in a country that is called Canada and which lies far away. Today, it is 23rd December, and we will begin the journey back home this evening. We will have Christmas Eve at sea and this will go fine. I have got the Christmas presents from you and I have now bought something you will get from me when I come home. The crane for Bror is nearly finished and I can promise you it will be fine. You must say hello to all the boys and girls up there from me and wish them a Happy New Year. It won't be too long now until I come home and then we will have a lot of fun together. Maybe I will buy a car so that we can drive on outings – everyone would like that. Have a very good time and give my love to Mamma. I wish everyone a Happy New Year, Pappa.²⁹

Live opens a new letter, now sitting in the chair, and the voice of the grandfather is heard over the speakers while the next letter is read, as depicted in the photo below:

²⁹ From the script *Number Our Days*, scene 4.



The grandfather becomes alive for the audience through the voice Live listens to.

Live stands up after having heard her grandfather read a letter. She packs the letters back into the suitcase and calls, “Mamma, Mamma, you must see what I found in the loft, two letters from Granddad, and Grandma’s wedding dress, you have to come and look!” Live dashes off the stage with eagerness in her eyes.

Scene 6: “The sound of peace”

A young girl of 10 years old stands alone on the stage, barefooted, clothed in a white dress and pantaloons. She sings with a clear young voice the song *The Longest Night*:³⁰

Listen, now the message is sent, Oh, let us excitedly wander. Into the longest night, with a light lit in one’s heart. Thousands of little eyes glitter and glow now. Giving out their light now, so that all who want can receive. A simple note is played, then the stillness of darkness descends, where the hope of desires play, deep in the soul of the earth, a voice prays, a prayer of peace.³¹

After this graceful melody, four children come running onto the stage carrying between them an old radio from the 1940s. They lie down in expectation on the floor, search for channels and listen. The children tune in the radio, then suddenly an old radio voice is heard over the speakers:

COURT MARTIAL, Victoria Terrasse 9. February 1945 – seven men stand chained together at the Police Commissioner’s office. SS soldiers press a sub-machine gun into their backs. They belong to the “Pelle-group”, an independent group who were behind the biggest and most important sabotage action in Oslo: The explosion in Akers and Nyland’s Mechanical Workshop, on the night of 24th November 1944. All are condemned to death by the court martial together with 43 other young men. On the

³⁰ http://www.nrk.no/video/barne_tv_musikkvideo_den_lengste_natta/149AEF70E55321DD/.

³¹ Excerpt from the script, scene 6.

morning of 8th February they wake up to commando cries and the tramping of boots down in the square. One by one, the cells are emptied, they hear the shots outside, one by one, they are shot. Forty-three shots are heard. Then it is silent. No more soldiers come.³²

The children walk out with sadness in their eyes:



The orchestra plays a short instrumental version of *The Longest Night*, before the voice on the radio continues: sssss

MØLLERGATEN 19. 7th. May – The Pelle Group have been transferred from Akershus to Møllergata. But what happens, the prisoners suddenly hear a Swedish voice. The door is suddenly flung open and the Chief of Police Dr. Harry Söderman, from Stockholm, stands before them with the commission to bring the political prisoners to safety. In the corridors are filled with euphoric, free Norwegians. In the cells, three ragged, dirty, bruised, emaciated young men and a stench of vomit.³³

The scene closes with the emancipation of the prisoners on 7th May, 1945, a day on which, according to the informants, there was: “A cautiously budding celebration of capitulation and of Norway’s regained freedom”. The audience see that a masked, black-clothed prisoner flees through streets that are filled with flags and playfulness. Finally, he finds his wife, who watches the procession with a mournful mask on her face and a black band on her arm. She believes that her husband has been shot during the court martial at Akershus Fortress on 8th February – how mistaken she was!³⁴

³² Excerpt from the script.

³³ Excerpt from the script.

³⁴ This story is from my own paternal grandfather. It is a powerful family story that has influenced my interest in history and autobiographical theatre.



The embrace in the middle of the crowd; photo from the rehearsals.

The embrace ends in a frozen image of the two mask-clad figures in front of the celebrating street scene. A new voice is heard on the radio over the speakers before the stage goes dark.

The preceding three scenes represent only an extract of the performance, selected in order to give the reader a picture of the memories I chose to capture and the choices I made to develop the theatre production dramaturgically. In *Number Our Days*, a selection of oral stories, personal letters, historical black and white photos, combined with excerpts from archives, novels, poems and newspapers are acted out. The production's epic universe unfolds in 13 scenes lasting a total of 50 minutes with live theatre music.

Summary

In this article my aim was to study how a reminiscence theatre production develops dramaturgically, and to discuss what impact it has on the participants who take part in the project *The aged as a resource*. The study shows that a reminiscence theatre project develops dramaturgically as a form of political applied theatre, where the life stories of the elderly contributes to a dramaturgic journey during which one must undertake many dramaturgic choices. The study of the theatre production *Number Our Days* shows that reminiscence theatre can be created within a performative paradigm, where the performance stands as an event and a collective act. We have seen that Ulla Ryum's dramaturgic model functions as a useful tool in the production of ethnodrama and that the echo theatre method creates a new closeness in reminiscence theatre work between the owner of the story and the other actors. In this article we have seen that reminiscence theatre can create a seedbed both for aesthetic development and consolidation of identity in participants of all ages. It is also clear that

devised theatre processes give the participants in ethnotheatre opportunities to develop an independent ownership of the material. We have now seen that an age-exchange project creates an arena for aesthetic experiences and personal reflections for the participants. And during this research study and theatre production I realised that “all life is special, also the ordinary”.³⁵



The theatre orchestra.

Epilogue

I have explored how one can stage lived life which was formed in the intangible, spontaneous existence that is – our own everyday life. ‘Number Our Days’ is a poetic answer to what life means when one both stands in the end of it and when one looks back upon the days one has lived. Culturally-based reminiscence work is about this life, which both comes and goes. For me it is also a study of aging among my own people. One day I will be an old little lady – and I need to know...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aZY1IZc2MU>

³⁵ Interview with an actress in reminiscence theatre from Tromsø, Nina Rosenlund, November 2012.

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Online Resources

<http://www.dagbladet.no/film/film/?id=116924>

<http://www.harstadkulturhus.no/default.aspx?cmd=100&pkProgram=102>

<http://home.hio.no/~helgerid/litteraturogmedieleksikon/intertekstualitet.pdf>

Gürgens Gjærum: Recalling Memories through Reminiscence Theatre

http://www.nrk.no/video/barne_tv_musikkvideo_den_lengste_natta/149AEF70E55321DD/

<http://www.themaskery.com/basel.html>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aZY1IZc2MU>