**INTRODUCTION**

In this practitioner reflection I discuss an ongoing intergenerational performance collaboration among the New York Theatre Workshop, the Southwark Playhouse Elders Theatre Company, and London South Bank University, where I work as Head of Performance Arts. This transatlantic collaboration has thus far resulted in two devised performance projects in London in 2017 and 2019. Each company, comprising 12 undergraduate Drama students and 12 elders, worked intensively for a week under the artistic direction and guidance of the New York Theatre Workshop, to devise and perform a new intergenerational theatre work entitled, *Mind the Gap! (MTG!). A further MTG! is planned for 2021.*

Memory-focused theatre created by, and for, different generations is not a new phenomenon in the United Kingdom. Back in the 1980s Pam Schweitzer established the Age Exchange Theatre, which produced its first show, *Fifty Years Ago,* in 1983. This show was structured around interviews with sheltered housing occupants in London with the aim of “organizing performances based on the memories of older people, produced via specially structured reminiscence sessions or oral history programmes.” (Kosti, 2019 p.2). Since then, a myriad iterations of intergenerational theatre projects have arisen, many engaging with some form of ‘reminiscence drama’ (Schweitzer 2006) with its emphasis on the recovery of the memories of older people which are then transcoded into drama for re-enactment or performance by younger community or professional actors. In 2011, the creative director of London Bubble, Jonathan Petherbridge, explored the methods and impact of an intergenerational community theatre project which followed a ‘reminiscence’ format. Titled *Blackbird,* the project hadchildren from a London East End community interview elders who had been the same age as they had been during the targeted German bombing of the United Kingdom during the Second World War. The resulting testimonies were turned into a theatre performance by community actors. Petherbridge describes the effect the performance had on one elder who had contributed her story: “Brenda was visibly moved by the young lady who played Brenda as a girl. In Brenda’s words ‘‘hearing the age’’ of the young people’s voices allowed her to re-engage with her personal narratives and memories through the collective activity of the performances. Brenda declared that the collective performance ‘‘brought into focus where I am now.” (Petherbridge, 2011 p.305)

Intergenerational theatre projects can certainly illustrate the benefits making theatre from memories affords to participants, underpinned by a simple proposition that in bringing the different generations together the so-called ‘generation gap’ will be narrowed through enhanced mutual understanding delivering improved social cohesion. In the reminiscence drama model both young and old benefit from their engagement with the work and each other. However, the question of the equality of experience and the parity of outcomes for participants is less clear. Back in 2002 Gillian Granville, in a report for the Centre for Intergenerational Practice, identified a range of positive outcomes arising from working across ages and communities. However, in the same report she also identified the potential pitfalls, noting that not all projects working in this way can necessarily evidence the impact they might claim (2002 p.10). As Kaplan and Hanhardt observed in the Intergenerational Activities Sourcebook, “we can’t simply put different generations in a giant blender and hit the mix button. We need to prepare and take time to be thoughtful, intentional, and respectful” (2003 p.1) In 2016 Jennifer Little went on to critique the tendency of reminiscence theatre to create something of a ‘one-way street’ observing that, “intergenerational work appears to be focused on gathering stories from the elderly and having the teenagers create theatre through those life-events”. (Little p.58)

The problem that Little identifies lies essentially in the hierarchies implied within this ‘one-way street’ model in which the elders’ role is to provide the rich, raw material which is then shaped, and ultimately performed, by someone else. As I embarked on my first forays into the world of intergenerational theatre (very much a novice, it has to be said) I wondered whether it was not important to remove this unintentional imbalance to give everyone involved not just an equal stake - but exactly the same stake. Would it be possible to work collectively with different generations to create theatre not purely based on the memories and experiences of one of the generations involved, but that could somehow explore the experiences of all? Furthermore, in doing so would this reveal similarities, differences, or both between the lives of the participants, and if so, would the gaps be bridgeable by theatre alone? As a theatre practitioner, as well as a teacher, the challenge for me was to find a process which engaged the participants in a ‘professional’ rather than a community context. By this I mean working with experienced theatre professionals, using the same methods we might encounter in a professional theatre-making context. And finally, whilst acknowledging the potentially numerous social and therapeutic benefits to participants of such a project could we, at the same time, create a theatre performance that resonated with an audience as an artistic product in its own right, independent of the people who made it?

**Context**

Best known as the originator of the hit musical *Rent* in 1993, the Manhattan-based New York Theatre Workshop seeks to create theatre in which, according to the company, “our common humanity is affirmed.” NYTW is also the home of an innovative, intergenerational theatre project entitled *Mind the Gap!* (MTG!), which uses professional theatre techniques as a *“creative tool to enhance empathy and understanding between the generations….This intergenerational theatre workshop aims to foster meaningful dialogue among artists and audiences of diverse backgrounds and generations.”* (NYTW website). The notion of an intergenerational theatre project was not new to me, but *MTG!* certainly was beyond the scope of any of the creative partnerships I’d worked on before. However, I was strongly aware that five minutes from my own institution – London South Bank University, based in south London – was the well-known off-West End theatre, Southwark Playhouse, home to their Elders’ Theatre Company. And so, a plan gradually began to take shape. I cold-emailed the NYTW Director of Education, Alex Santiago-Jirau, and suggested a meeting while I was to be in New York. I fully expected to receive either a polite no, or possibly no reply at all. But the opposite was true – Alex, albeit with an unmistakeable note of surprise in his reply, agreed to meet me and within the month I was sat in the rather shabby upstairs offices at the NYTW, proposing that we create a new version of *MTG!* in London, in partnership with LSBU Drama students and the Southwark Playhouse Elders Theatre Company.

The original *MTG!* had developed primarily as a play-writing workshop based whereby participants would share personal and autobiographical experiences which were then written into scripts to be performed in rehearsed readings by professional actors. However, transferring the existing project model to the UK raised some challenges. Firstly, the drama students, while still young, were significantly older than most of the intergenerational youth participants in New York and were hungry to develop their training as actors and performers. Equally, the community elders were all actors with the Southwark Playhouse Elders Theatre Company and both expected, and wanted, to perform. In early discussions with Alex Santiago-Jirau in New York, it quickly became clear that here was an opportunity to explore a very different type of process whereby participants would still engage with personal stories and autobiography. But, instead of producing scripts for performance by someone else, participants would work with the directors to create and perform their own work of theatre using the methodologies and practices of the professional rehearsal room. We identified the fact that the London version would have to recognize the fact that all participants were performers, and the so the London MTG! became the first to offer the ‘Performance Workshops’ as opposed to the existing ‘Playwriting Workshops’. Alongside this new project commenced our communal journey of learning about what worked and, equally, what didn’t.

**The Project**

The project we developed at LSBU was new to everyone, including the NYTW directors who, embraced the opportunity to work with a more experienced company and brought their own ambitions for a theatrical aesthetic to the work. Although it takes the form of 10 weekly sessions in New York, owing to logistical reasons the first *MTG!* London ran as an intensive week-long residency. Alex Santiago-Jirau and co-director Andrew Garrett arrived on Sunday and began work the next morning. With only a week to create a theatrical performance, the pressure was on. The intensive nature of the work demanded a rapid generation of trust within the ensemble, which was largely achieved through a combination of games, trust work and physical exercises specifically adapted to include all ages and abilities. However, the compression of time also revealed tensions arising primarily from differences in expectation. In the New York model, participants have little or no previous theatre experience. In the London version, we worked with drama students – the majority of whom were actors in training, excited to experience NYTW methods - and the Elders Theatre Company, who met weekly to read and rehearse plays and who were excited to perform in front of an audience. For drama students, professionalism is built into their training; they all arrived early and highly prepared for each session. The elders however, came from a relaxed environment where the primary goal was enjoyment with no absolutist culture about observing the discipline of a professional rehearsal room. During the first series of workshops in 2017, this difference in approach led to issues with consistent attendance and time management. For the students this took some getting used to; for the directors, under real pressure of time it sometimes felt that the work was proceeding at a glacial pace.

These tensions were largely undeclared throughout the process and did not seem to affect the inter-personal relationships built within the company, but it did mean that elders frequently needed to perform with script in hand. Once this had been openly discussed it was accepted by all – and even, in some instances, integrated into the actual performance. With hindsight, these early issues seem to be an obvious by-product of bringing together two groups whose differences were not confined simply to age. We knew to anticipate these differences in approach by the time we began work on the second project in 2019. Prior to commencing that work I spent time with both groups separately, alerting them to the potential issues they may face, and this certainly prepared the ground better for collaboration. Indeed, these sorts of issues were not as noticeable in the second project – which may partly be down to better preparedness but also to the fact that some of the elders from the first MTG! were also in the second and able to pass on their considerable wisdom.

Alex Santiago-Jirau has studied and worked with Augusto Boal and in his practice, employs many of the techniques encountered in that seminal work, *Theatre of the Oppressed* which envisages theatre as a radical call to action in delivering socio-political change underpinned by democratic and inclusive theatrical processes which aim to remove barriers between audiences and spectators. Inclusive, artistic processes in our project were certainly fundamental in enabling participants of such different ages to not only access their own ideas and stories truthfully and courageously, but also to let go of the fear of being judged, which many of the ensemble later said had been a major concern. The directors also used techniques imported directly from the NYTW rehearsal room such as Liz Lerman’s *Critical Response Process* (2003) and ‘moment work’. Moment work – derived from the Moises Kaufman Tectonic Theater Project in 1991 - is a ‘*method to create and analyze theatre from a structuralist (or tectonic) perspective. For that reason, there are no ‘scenes’ in this play, only ‘moments’.* (Kaufman, M p. xiv) The directors embedded this notion into the process in order to achieve a collectively understood working process which helped to create a bank of shared dramatic material ready to be shaped dramaturgically into a final structure. “*A moment can be created by an individual or by a group of artists. A moment can be however long or short it needs to be. A moment is a unit of theatrical time.”* The company first generated primary material through the moment technique, which was then critiqued and evaluated collectively using the Critical Response Process. This created a clear structure that supported both the youth and elder participants to enter openly into the creative process.

The Critical Response Process involved interviews and story gathering in groups of 3 using Lerman’s artist – responder – facilitator model whereby the facilitator takes primary responsibility for framing discussions and discovering the heart of the story being told thus removing ‘authorial’ responsibility for their own autobiographical ‘moment’ or experience from participants. This method of creating emotional distance for the performer has a beneficial effect in that it prevents the actors from holding on to their own material or trying to ‘own’ it whilst also encouraging the sharing of personal experience across the age divide. All the individual stories became part of a collective bank of resources the group could draw on and each had value in its own right. Lerman’s method of non-judgmental critique also created a safe place for actors from these different age groups to give and hear feedback The fact that NYTW uses this method in the professional rehearsal room promoted significant investment in the work for both students, the majority of whom identified as emerging theatre artists, and elders who were all keen amateur actors. Critical Response Process created a mutually supportive working environment in which personal histories and experiences could be revealed, whilst at the same time allowing facilitators to promote the theatrical and artistic integrity of the work. It created space for crafting for performance material in a multi-faceted way moving beyond autobiography and narrative reminiscence into dramatic storytelling and theatre.

All company members subsequently agreed that by performing the stories of others, rather than their own, they were able to commit to the emotional content of the work more fully, which allowed them to deepen their engagement with the material as actors. All *Mind the Gap!* performances end with a talkback session in which performers and audience have a chance to reflect on both the process and the work. On the last night of the 2019 show at Southwark Playhouse, a student commented, “*It’s really nice because you have the chance to tell someone’s story, other than your own. You feel like you have a responsibility to the other person’s story, to tell it well.”* The emotional distance afforded to performers in ‘telling the stories of others well’ resonated in unexpected ways in performance, sometimes creating a surprising disconnect between the audience’s expectation of the work and what is actually being performed on stage – the gap between these two producing a profound moment of disorientation in which unexpected truths were occasionally revealed.

During the very first *Mind the Gap!* I experienced this for the first time during one particular sequence. A very smartly dressed, male performer aged 75 stood up and to a silent auditorium, under a single spotlight, embarked on a powerfully delivered monologue detailing a moment of coming out as a gay teenager to disbelieving parents. As the monologue progressed, I experienced feelings of deep empathy for what this must have been like in a more heavily restricted time, which I vaguely assumed to be around the 1950s. I sympathized with the gravity and sincerity of the monologue and felt very connected to the performer with a sense of being invited to witness this important part of his own distant, yet still very present, past. As the monologue evolved however, the performer slipped into a much more contemporary language and gradually began to reveal the ‘speaker’ as female. The moment I realized that the story did in fact belong to one of the students was one of pure dislocation. I had engaged my energies and sympathies with one, rather simplistic narrative about someone from an older generation, only to find that it was in fact a completely different and in that moment of realization, my own stereotypical responses became vividly clear to me.

This distanced storytelling method resulted in some powerful dramatic moments. In one scene, an elder performed a students’ recollection of being a small child sat at her mother’s knee hearing a story. In the scene the performer played a child sat at the foot of an empty chair – inviting the audience to conjure with her in the immediate moment, the memory of the mother we supposed to be long lost. At the same time, the elder, performing as a child, was able to evoke reflections on the gap between her own present and past – the child she once was – even though this was not, in fact, her own story but that of a younger performer. The universality of the connection through the shared experience of being a child was what was held so beautifully in that one, highly nuanced sequence.

The material moved beyond the purely personal however, and what I had not anticipated was that the youth and elder participants would actually come to find common ground, not only in lived experiences but also in a shared political sense and understanding. The second work in particular, contained many beautiful and engaging stories of love, loss, growth and change but also scenes of homelessness, drug abuse and most notably, in 2019, Brexit. For me, this was unexpected – both the companies had found common ground around issues that might have proved to be contentious. It may well be, of course, that the space we created was not quite as safe as we imagined, and I suspect that faced with the passion and drive of the students, it would have been a brave elder indeed who chose to go against the tide. Nevertheless, the post-show evaluations conducted in a filmed audience talkback and subsequently, in participant-only evaluation sessions, certainly seemed to reveal a shared connection around key political issues that neither group seemed to have anticipated. A student commented, *“It has completely changed the way I thought elders voted and their views of the world. Not all elders are Tories!”* An elder commented, *“This project has helped me realize my own passion for expressing views that are social and political.”*

**Conclusion**

An important part of the project – as with the New York MTG! – was the video-recorded post-show Q and A with the audience. Happening straight after a week of intense creativity, the Q and A afforded participants – many of whom had accessed difficult and emotional memories for the work – a much-needed moment of reflection and analysis. While the elders and young people both reported a deep sense of personal satisfaction with the project, their ‘take-away’ experiences seemed to differ slightly. Students reported a sense of better understanding the older generation as people in their own right rather than stereotypical ‘grandparent’ figures as well as some surprise at how engaged older people were with political issues: “*we could all get to know each other’s lives – for a lot of them it was the rock n’ roll era so we were connecting on different levels both socially and politically…this gave us a great opportunity to break the (generation) barrier and see there are so many more people out there we should listen to.”* (student, 2019 company) A student in the same company echoed this sentiment which came up frequently amongst youth participants, *“One thing I took away was how similar we all are and that age is really just a number. (The elders) are all really young at heart and it’s been lovely to connect because we don’t normally have the chance to make these connections unless it’s with our grandparents.” (*student, 2019 company*)* There was also some surprise amongst the students that the elders had been so politically engaged and open to discussing ideas such as gender and sexual identity as well as politics. This was not what some of them had expected, “*I wasn’t sure I could discuss things like coming out with the elders but then I realized that they’d all been young once – it’s not just us!”(*student, 2017 company*)*

For the elders there was a growth in understanding that young people were indeed accessible to them and a sense of surprise and pleasure at the ‘equality’ they had achieved during the project, suggesting that the elders had approached the project with more trepidation than the students.

In one instance, one elder acknowledged that young people could seem threatening to the older generation and that the project had shifted her perceptions of this: “*They are so talented and also so caring, that we have to suppress our worries that older people can have. We can be fearful of the young. And there is just no need to be. Being among these young people all this time has been so wonderful.”* (elder, 2017 company) Others also hinted at the expectation of an imbalance of power in the relationship with the students that had not actually manifested: *“It’s been an eye-opener for me. The students are genuinely caring about communities and older people.” (elder 2017 company)* And in an echo of this, *“It’s been a privilege for us – the chance to listen; the chance to talk; the chance to change your views and bend pre-conceived ideas. The young people have been so open, warm and friendly. Brilliant conversations…and great make-up tips!” (*elder, 2019 company*).*

The elders here, write with similar enthusiasm for the students but in their reflections are contained more of an awareness of the differences between the generations. One elder wrote, *“I stopped my judgements! I realized that we’re all as young as each other but that the elders don’t have as much self-confidence.”* The ‘gap’ being articulated by these elders is one of confidence and an ability to have impact in the world.

As the project has progressed, it has become clear that rather than seeking to reduce this perceived ‘gap’ between the generations, we can instead use our moments of difference and disconnect to learn and develop both as a company and in terms of the theatre we produce. In his work on developing collaborative theatre with young people, Noel Grieg (2008) describes a non-hierarchical, inclusive approach to collaborative youth arts projects called ‘twinning’ which he defines as, “*a specific process of creative work; the pairing of groups of artists from different cultures and communities, leading to new theatre that is rooted in collaborative enterprise.”* (2008 p.1) While this was not intended as a comment on intergenerational practice specifically, nevertheless the notion of engaging difference as a dynamic, generative tool resonated strongly with our own work uncovering the creative potential to be found in the gaps between different demographic groups. In this way, we may start to identify the ‘gap’ not as an implied challenge but more of an essential artistic resource.

Working with these companies of old and young performers has certainly challenged some of my own expectations and stereotypes: situations where an elder was more open, invested and creative than a student; where a student demonstrated real empathy and sensitivity to an elder and where both bounced around the room with more energy than I could muster. Through the application of core techniques drawn from Lerman, Kaufman and Boal the London version of *Mind the Gap!* aimed to build high levels of ‘co-intentionality’ (Little 2016 p.1) across the age divide. This allowed us to simultaneously enlist, and cut through, perceived differences between the participants to access a commonality in experience, forging political and social connections that neither elders nor students really expected to exist. After two full projects, and in anticipation of the next one, we are now approaching a more settled and sustainable understanding of our process. Going forward our theatre-making will be grounded in the sharing of both individual and group experiences, together with a process of content co-creation, which blurs and, hopefully, removes many of the boundaries between our theatre makers and performers, irrespective of age.