

***Echoes of our Anecdotes - Playing with Playback
at Frederic Place - Home for the Aged***

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a
Master's in Applied Drama degree by course work and
research report, Wits School of the Arts, University of
Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

2021

Abstract

In this qualitative study which took place over ten weeks at Frederic Place, Home for the Aged, the aim was to increase the sharing of personal stories amongst residents. Institutionalised elderly often lead sedentary lives with little or no activities that can build a sense of community. Playback Theatre, a form of Applied Theatre that relies on personal stories, was the core methodology in this practice as research project which aimed to combat residents' isolation. A small group of residents learned three Playback Theatre short forms and applied them in larger group sessions to play back fellow residents' stories when opportunities arose. The study endeavoured to ascertain if Playback Theatre could be the catalyst for more storytelling and thus building of community.

Playback Theatre is a non-scripted theatre that uses improvised, embodied responses to perform people's personal stories in a performance founded on structured ritual patterns which create a safe space for an audience to share. Witnessing one's own story brought to life is a unique form of validation which can encourage one and others to tell more, creating an immediate sense of community.

By the end of the research period, while some participants shared stories more than they had in pre-research work, this could not explicitly be attributed only to the use of Playback Theatre. Whether it was Playback Theatre or the process of regular meetings with each other, or the combination, there was more sharing than before. In addition there was the by-product of a select group of participants who learned some Playback Theatre.

An important ascertainment for the researcher came through an omission: not teaching participants the act of sending a story back to the teller diminished the sense of ritual and theatre that may have contributed even more to personal storytelling and community building.

Key Words

Applied Theatre, Playback Theatre, aging, institutionalised elderly

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Chapter One: Introduction

In this first chapter I describe what inspired me to implement this research project, including my personal journey of aging and my own experience of Playback Theatre. The latter is briefly introduced including a description of the specific Playback Theatre forms used in the research. The rationale for the work is given, highlighting the relevance of community activities for institutionalised elderly and the importance of story. The context of Frederic Place is detailed, as well as the design for the research process, including ethical protocols.

1.1 Background and Research Question

Echoes of our Anecdotes - Playing with Playback at Frederic Place - Home for the Aged emanated from four interests that began to grow in the year I turned fifty: a growing obsession with my own aging, concern about the elderly population, an ongoing interest in the sharing of stories, and, as an MA student, a discovery of Applied Theatre (Nicholson 2005; Prendergast and Saxton 2016, Taylor 2003), most particularly, Playback Theatre (Fox 1994; Salas 1993). Interest in the elderly stemmed from having an octogenarian parent, as well as many elderly associates in my place of worship. I started to observe and talk to those around me, fascinated by the different approaches and attitudes to life of older people.

I interviewed an active octogenarian of my church who shared her thoughts about the elderly: she felt strongly that senior citizens should be encouraged to do as much as possible, and that people need to get out of their homes to interact with others (Montgomery 2016, pers. comm., 17 May). Influenced by this discussion, in the context of my church community (and for the purposes of my MA coursework), I implemented a short Applied Theatre intervention, called *Swinging Sages* for the elderly members of the congregation. The purpose of this was:

to provide an opportunity for the elderly members of St. Luke Anglican Church, Bosmont, to get out of the seclusion of their homes, enjoy creative, embodied sessions of Bible Study and to get to know each other (Hall 2016, p.2).

The meetings centred on familiar Bible stories that people could remember together, discuss, analyse and re-enact. This included imagined parts of the stories, for example, Moses' mother preparing the baby to be placed in the bulrushes. In addition, themes from the stories, like acts of bravery, served as stimuli for discussion about personal experiences, sometimes followed by the implementation of theatre techniques such as creating frozen images or tableaux.

As a community service, I implemented a similar, parallel process at Frederic Place, Home for the Aged in a neighbouring suburb, Coronationville. This "haven for the destitute ... the aged ... and the frail" (Frederic Place 2018, brochure, p.1) then became the context of this research. Once I discovered Playback Theatre during a short course run by Drama for Life at the University of the Witwatersrand (20–24 March 2017), I began to envisage Playback Theatre short forms as potential tools for activities with the Frederic Place group. I also thought that Playback Theatre could possibly reveal information about the group members, their ability to share, and generate understanding about Frederic Place.

I hoped that Playback Theatre, learned and performed by a small group at the home, would draw stories out of the trained participants as well as the community members who might attend sessions, so they could get to know each other. Thus, through my research I sought to ask: *To what extent can the use of Playback Theatre short forms and short narrative forms help elicit anecdotes and stories in a group of elderly residents at Frederic Place - Home for the Aged, Coronationville, Johannesburg?* I wanted to find out whether the process of seeing and/or using Playback Theatre short forms could, to some degree, encourage or stimulate people in the group to speak up and share an anecdote or story about themselves. Would some people, who had not previously spoken in our sessions, begin to share anecdotes once they had been exposed to the Playback forms, either as witnesses or as performers?

1.2 A Brief Description of Playback Theatre and Forms Used

Playback Theatre is an improvisational, non-scripted theatre that is based on anecdotes and stories that are told by members of the audience. Without any planning or discussion, the team of trained performers play the stories they hear back to people who volunteer to speak. The facilitator of the performance, known as the conductor, asks the audience to share any personal experiences, from feelings about the day - short moments they experienced, to a long story; all these offerings are treated with the same respect, and afforded the same opportunity to be played back in either short, short narrative or long forms of Playback Theatre. While long stories are important in that they present a lot of information, and opportunity for mirroring the community, the playing back of short moments in a Playback Theatre performance is essential; it serves as a way to warm the audience up to the concept of Playback, and to the possibility of sharing long stories in a public setting (Hall 2017, Personal Reflective Journal, 20–24 March). In my research, due to time constraints, my limited Playback Theatre training, and the frailty of the participants, short moments or anecdotes were all that we aimed to share and play back, but any offering was regarded as story.

The Playback Theatre short forms used in this research are called Pairs and Fluid Sculptures and the short narrative form called V-Narrative¹. Pairs is when actors, “arranged in twos, enact oppositional feelings and situations” (Fox 1994, p. 38). There are usually two pairs where people stand one behind the other, and without discussing it, they each embody one of the two opposite feelings that have been described by the teller of an anecdote. Fluid Sculptures are described by Fox as “...quick, dance-like pieces” (1994, p. 37); each person in a tight group of three or four actors embodies an aspect of the teller’s moment, using their bodies and, if desired, their voice. One after the other they step forward and create their own moving shape or statue next to the other actors, to constitute one big, moving sculpture with

¹ My explanation of the Playback Theatre forms is based on my training from the Drama for Life Short Course *Introduction to Playback Theatre* where I was taught by Kathy Barolsky and Cherae Halley, March 2017. It is noted that these trainers use the name *V-Narrative*, while Playback practitioners elsewhere use the term *Narrative-V*.

different textures that represent interpretations of the teller's experience. Chesner says "[t]he final image or statement is ambiguous, a plurality of co-existent perspectives in dialogue with each other, and creating a whole" (2002, p.47). The short narrative form included in my group sessions was the V-Narrative which is a retelling of the story that takes place in a "V-shape". The person narrating the teller's story is at the apex of the 'V' facing the audience, and others form the rest of the shape behind her. While she tells the story, she does actions and gestures that are copied by the actors behind.

1.3 Rationale

1.3.1 Summary of the Rationale

The reason for my Applied Drama work at Frederic Place was based on what I had seen at the home – an institution where residents appeared to have sedentary, somewhat isolated lives. My observations were backed up by readings of practitioners Morgan (2000) and Crimmens (1998) that had described similar scenes in old age homes in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. I felt that residents would benefit from an organised, focused, facilitated weekly activity – something that would help counter the effects of institutional living. Playback Theatre and the specificity of the forms would focus our times together around personal stories.

Since some of my early sessions at Frederic Place had encouraged participants to tell their own stories, introducing Playback Theatre seemed like an appropriate development of my Applied Theatre work in the home, particularly because of the genre's commitment to personal story (Fox 1986, Salas 1993, Barolsky 2008). Jo Salas, one of the founders of Playback Theatre makes a case for personal storytelling: "people *need* to tell their stories. It's a basic human imperative" (1993, p.111). Playback Theatre actors are regarded as doing "Acts of Service" (Fox 1986, pp. 6, 113) when they perform people's stories. A possible result of having residents learn how to enact other's anecdotes would be that they might feel affirmed in meeting others' needs. The listening, the sharing, the re-enactments as a

way of serving could all help to build a sense of community or group cohesion amongst the participants.

1.3.2 Combating Isolation, Building Community

While volunteering at Frederic Place, prior to my research, I observed that young and old visitors sometimes entertained the residents, chatting or providing personal care such as manicures and pedicures. But I also noticed that other than Catholic mass in the chapel, monthly Bingo, and occasional exercise sessions, little happened which could encourage residents to be active with each other, either physically, mentally or vocally. I had the sense that people were often sitting doing nothing, somewhat isolated from each other. People sitting side by side, against a wall, may provide some element of companionship for each other, but what appeared to be lacking was direct communication or contact. Paula Crimmens, a Drama Therapist who has done extensive work with institutionalised elderly in the United Kingdom speaks of the phenomenon: “The person in a rest home may be surrounded by people but feel very lonely because no one is bothering to make contact” (1998, p. 17). “If no one looks us in the eye we will begin to doubt our own existence”(ibid). What I often observed were seemingly bewildered or absent looks on some people’s faces. This may partly have been due to medication or health challenges, but it was also, I presumed, the effect of being in an institution and getting used to the new environment. Morgan, a Pastor for institutionalised elderly in America further confirms what I observed: “... transported to a nursing home often leaves them devastated and feeling they are of little worth to anyone” (1998, p. 62). “Stripped of their homes and their former identity, they feel trapped” (ibid, p. 31).

Through the sessions I proposed to run, I aimed to involve the participants in group activities that would help counter the lack of contact that Crimmens speaks of, and thus mitigate the feelings of entrapment and worthlessness that Morgan refers to. The previous work that I had done at the home brought about joy found in communal activity but also exposed what I interpreted to be shyness or a reluctance of the participants to share

information or stories about themselves. The use of embodied Applied Theatre work in the form of Playback Theatre, I hoped, would encourage even more story sharing to assist them to know each other and increase a sense of community among them.

Crimmens lists a number of reasons why group work with the elderly is important, the first two reasons being, “contact and relationship building and providing an experience of community for people who may be feeling very isolated” (1998, p.15). This resonated with my observations, and the needs that I saw in front of me. I felt that building community was important, as it could help alleviate isolation, and increase contact between people.

Frederic Place, as much as efforts are made to create a home, is an institution, which could fit into Durkheim and Turner’s concept of a social structure, which, “while necessary to facilitate the physical survival of a society, is in its intrinsic nature alienating” (Olaveson 2001, p. 107). Group sessions could possibly help ameliorate the sense of alienation created by institutionalised living. “The experience of collective effervescence/communitas is a fundamental human need which acts to counterbalance this alienation” (ibid).

Prentki, (2009) speaks of the world as a place “where being human has been reduced to a set of transactional economic relations” (p. 252); in Applied Drama processes which practitioners bring to communities, he believes “[p]articipants are invited to recreate themselves in ways which the daily business of economic existence constantly thwarts” (ibid). At Frederic Place residents are governed by the “daily business” of the home in terms of their routine, medication, meals, entertainment and pocket money. There is a need to go beyond these constraints that residents may experience in the institution, to experience activities that allow them to feel at home within themselves. But, as Prentki warns, some of the borders experienced by participants may be of their own making, for example, psychological, emotional or racial borders; “where they have erected razor wire around their ‘comfort zones’ to keep out threats to a stable, if fossilized, identity and to discourage adventurous attempts to stray onto the territory of another” (p.

251). In using Playback Theatre it was hoped that the work would allow for some of these possible barriers to begin to collapse in the wake of shared fun, storytelling and witnessing.

1.3.3 Use of Embodied Work and Playfulness

In *Dance for the Older Adult*, Beal and Berryman-Miller (1988) speak of the need to encourage physical activity for the elderly. It is clear from both literature and my experience with my participants that even a little activity can be a positive experience for the elderly, as it is for all ages. When they danced or moved, I observed participants become more alive within themselves; as heart rates increased, people's smiles widened and they breathed more deeply as inevitably there was laughter, even if momentarily. In continuing sessions at Frederic Place, I intended to sustain an approach that would encourage embodied work for all present - even if it were brief actions while singing. Previously I found that the participants had enjoyed copying my miming as I recapped a story, for example, climbing a tree, pouring water, pulling a ship to shore.

I also wanted to ensure that playfulness would be an important aspect of the approach to allow for a relaxed atmosphere which could help with people's willingness to share. John Wright (2006) speaks of Lecoq's observations about play: "He concluded that mimetic play is at the core of our understanding of the world" (p. 30). In the early sessions the group were enlivened by playfulness in the form of ball throwing across the circle, or sword fighting with rolled up paper which was sometimes used as an energising tool. Phil Jones (1996) explains that play helps participants "begin to be aware of others, and to use objects in interactions with others rather than staying in solitary activity" (p. 117). Applied Theatre includes a lot of play in its activities and O'Toole (1992) mentions its benefit of "minimising the consequences of one's actions" (Bruner cited by O'Toole, p. 97). I sensed that if my participants were taken up in the moment – in the play, they would be less worried about the consequences, such as 'I look like a fool'.

1.3.4 Invitation to “Acts of Service”

The entire premise of Playback Theatre is based on Jonathon Fox’s idea of serving others by listening to them: “There are many people ... who are not always listened to... our mission has been to provide a space for anyone and everyone to be heard” (Fox 1986, p. 6). In my own experience of Playback Theatre training (Hall 2017, Personal Reflective Journal, 20-24 March) I had seen how our stories as trainees could be represented and enjoyed with each other. When I had the opportunity to watch parts of my life reflected back to me by fellow trainees, it was a positive, validating experience. Being able to do the same for others in the training course gave me a sense of accomplishment, and a feeling that I had done something useful as well as kind. I wanted to offer members of my group at Frederic Place a similar opportunity of being able to help others. I hoped that they would feel important, and that they would, by serving others, be able to take the focus away from themselves. Moving your attention outside of the self allows for interaction with others (Crimmens 1998, p. 13).

1.4 The Context for the Research

Frederic Place is an old age home situated in Coronationville, a historically Coloured area in Johannesburg. It is a three-storey home in a converted Catholic Church and Nunnery. There are dormitories and bathrooms on all floors, two TV-lounge areas on the ground floor – one for the frail care (approximately 22 people) and one for the more able-bodied residents, and a dining hall for the latter. A separate block on the property contains the administration offices, a small Catholic Chapel and a large meeting room where I implemented many sessions both preceding and during my research period. The second space I used was a small upstairs room in the residence which functioned as a foyer or waiting room situated near the nurses’ station.

According to a short publicity document by the home, Frederic Place was started by the Society of St Vincent De Paul in 1978, “to meet the needs of the Elderly and Destitute people in the vicinity” (Frederic Place 2018, brochure p.1). It now serves the needs of “85 Aged and Destitute residents

aged 60 years and over from all population groups and religions” (ibid). People in my research group came to the home from nearby, as well as Soweto and other areas to the east and south of Johannesburg. The institution’s publicity emphasises that it assists elderly who are destitute and cannot pay for board and lodging in an old age institution. Appeals for help of all kinds are made, for example curtain rails are asked for, as “60% of our dormitories do not have curtains” (Frederic Place 2018, brochure p.3). This need was corroborated by one of my participants who spoke more than once of his desire to have curtains in his dormitory. Adult nappies are also called for, which is echoed in a newspaper article (Mokati 2016) which highlighted that Frederic Place needs over R25 000 a month for the nappies.

There are seventy staff members, including five volunteers, and thirty certificated Care-Givers. I had the impression that there is a sense of safety at the home, and that staff members offer adequate care to the residents, but writing this report in the context of the South African tragedy of the death of 141 mentally ill patients being deinstitutionalised from Life Esidimeni (Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2018), I did not feel totally certain of any conclusions made merely on observations. Nonetheless, in my decision to work at Frederic Place, I chose to do so with the limited knowledge I had garnered from observations, conversations with senior staff and my contact and communication with the residents.

1.5 Research Design

1.5.1 Overview of the Plan

I planned to use twelve sessions (approximately forty-five minutes in length) which would include training sessions where Playback Theatre would be taught to a few participants selected from my pre-research group. This group would then perform within a larger group that would include themselves and others from Frederic Place. The twelve planned sessions would be divided equally between the training, and times of sharing with others. The large group would be a combination of the small core group,

others who had been a part of my previous work, and any newcomers from the home who wanted to join.

In addition to being a researcher and trainer-facilitator, I would wear two hats within the Playback Theatre process; firstly I would take on the role of the conductor – the person who holds and guides a Playback Theatre performance as I would be encouraging and facilitating the telling of stories and enabling participants to play these back to their colleagues. Secondly I would be a performer because in the absence of enough willing or able volunteers, I would step up to perform with participants.

1.5.2 Ethics

I received verbal and written consent from the Matron to shift my visits to Frederic Place from Applied Drama and Storytelling, to Storytelling and Playback Theatre Research sessions. The participants in both the training group and the large group received *Participants' Information Sheets* and they signed *Consent Forms*. Copies of these can be found in Appendix A. Permission given by participants included the right to capture data by recording sessions, and taking photos. The forms indicated that pseudonyms would be used and thus names used in this report do not reflect the real names of the participants.

It was agreed that the Social Worker at Frederic Place, as well as the Matron would be on standby during the course of the project to offer help or counselling to the participants, should the need arise. I planned to have a caregiver present when I ran the sessions, and was assured by Matron I could have somebody consistently throughout the research period. I hoped that any staff present would also tell their own anecdotes or stories, which would be an excellent way of modelling story-sharing to the participants. I wanted to ensure that people would tell their own stories, and avoid the telling of someone else's story, as Playback Theatre is based on the premise of personal story.

One of my concerns was that the process should not be onerous for the participants; part of the ethical agreement was that they could come to

sessions, as they pleased, or as they were able. No one would ever be forced to attend, or to be active in sessions if they did not want to be. They could also choose to exit the process at any point.

1.5.3 Data Collection

The data produced in the sessions was captured, with permission from the participants, (given in the consent forms), in the form of photos and voice recordings. My journal about the sessions also formed part of the data, as well as a focus group discussion with the group who learned the forms. I planned to ask them whether they felt the sessions with the Playback Theatre made a difference to the sharing in the group or to the desire to share stories.

1.6 The Value of this Research

This research hopes to throw light on the value and efficacy of Playback Theatre short forms and short narrative forms with the elderly. It could offer an important contribution to the body of research on Playback Theatre in South Africa, as thus far such research has not covered the elderly, but rather Playback with young people (Jordaan 2013) and people living with HIV (Barolsky 2008) and an unpublished study on how Playback Theatre can stimulate dialogue about the origins of people in Hammanskraal (Radebe 2020). The report should also assist with an understanding of what activities are possible with the elderly and/or disabled in the midst of assisted, institutional living in a South African context, and particularly a context with multiple cultures, such as that of Frederic Place.

1.7 A Breakdown of the Chapters

The following chapter, Chapter Two, firstly examines the issues surrounding the process of aging and the elderly in institutions. Secondly, the theory behind Applied Theatre and Playback Theatre is highlighted as the main framework within which the research is placed. Chapter Three discusses the methodology of the research, explaining the approach as “Applied Theatre practice as research” (Mackey 2016). This is followed by a description of what happened in the research period, in both the training of

participants who learned the Playback Theatre forms, and in the large group sessions where stories could arise and be played back by these trainees.

Chapter Four analyses points that arose in the research, including challenges in the training, adjustments that needed to be made in performance of the Playback Theatre forms, and omissions in the training that may have possibly diminished a sense of theatre and possibilities for storytelling. Further, themes that arose during the sessions are discussed as well as reasons why people may appear to resist telling personal stories. Chapter Five concludes the report by answering the research question, naming limitations, giving recommendations for similar work in the future and sharing personal reflections on the process.

Conclusion

This chapter described the background and context of the research, as well as providing the rationale for the work and outlining the implementation plan. The main reasons for using Playback Theatre at Frederic Place were given, namely: the importance of personal story, the need to combat the sense of isolation in the institution and build community, the concept of serving others by listening, and the use of embodied, playful activities to stimulate sharing amongst residents at the home.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Drawing from literature in the fields of theatre and social work, this chapter details the concept of aging and the experience of the elderly in institutions and then discusses the theoretical framework within which the project was conducted.

The *Playing with Playback* research project at Frederic Place and this ensuing research report were based on three main areas of knowledge, namely information on the elderly, Applied Theatre and Playback Theatre. The latter technically falls under the Applied Theatre umbrella but has its own unique body of literature and practice which informed my approach.

2.1 The Elderly

2.1.1 Aging – Navigating a Personal Journey

Aging is a universal experience – everybody is aging, all the time. And yet it is also a very personal journey experienced differently by each individual. It can be a difficult process; as Katz (2011) says: “older people can experience the embodiment of aging as a fractured process of resisting, accepting, denying and recreating aging” (p. 190). Part of the difficulty is dealing with stereotypes of the elderly, and resisting negative labels. As part of a Performance as Research investigation in the preliminary stages of this research, I asked MA colleagues to call out words or phrases which they associated with old age; I then embodied these in an improvised response. Of twenty-five offerings, only two had positive connotations: “wisdom” and “tells stories” (Hall 2016, Personal Reflective Journal, 23 August). With the exception of one neutral description, “drinks tea”, all the others were negative:

senile, slow, frail, incapable, forgetful, deaf, childish, shouting unnecessarily, forgotten, lonely, angry, full of regrets, sickly, smelly, talkative, boring, stuck, moody, displaced, bossy, always thinks they are right, uncensored (ibid).

In addition to the list above, ‘useless’ and ‘inefficient’ could be added – two descriptions which, according to Hareven (1995), speaking of the American context, arose at the beginning of the twentieth century, when people were expected to leave the work force at 65 (p. 131). All these negative

associations with the elderly pervade Western society and are juxtaposed with media images of youthful, successful people who will seemingly enjoy life forever. The older person seldom sees honest representations of their age group; “realistic images of aging bodies are few and far between, hidden from view as a kind of geriatric pornography that might disturb postmodern cultural fantasies about timeless living” (Katz 2011, p. 189).

The tension of the above paradox is further complicated by an ambiguity experienced by all who are aging, that of *feeling* much younger than one *looks*; there is a “disjuncture between the inner self and the image of the body” (Turner 1995, p. 250). Some people respond to the shock of their aging image in the mirror with strategies to hide the truth from themselves and society, for example, hair dye, cosmetic surgery, carefully selected clothing (Burack-Weiss 2016). Morell (2003) advises that instead of believing the myth that they can control their bodies, the aging population should reclaim their bodies which society has rejected (p.80).

Embedded in the above paradoxical processes of aging there is the massive challenge of accepting loss, from the loss of a job at retirement - with the accompanying loss of income, status, and purpose driven routine, to the physical deterioration of the body (slow changes, if one is lucky, and more dramatic changes if one contracts chronic diseases), to the loss of spouses and friends as they die. How one navigates these losses has an influence on each individual’s journey in the sea of change. The benefits of physical and mental health, as well as strong socioeconomic standing can make the experience easier for some than for others, but for all, as in any life stage, there is a personal navigation process.

I could not know what my research participants’ experience of growing older had been before, or even during their sojourn at Frederic Place. I became aware that those possibly affected by dementia may not have made any conscious choices about how to deal with their aging or institutionalisation; dementia affects cognitive functions including, judgement, orientation, memory and comprehension (World Health Organisation n.d.) which can make the journey almost impossible to plot.

2.1.2 Advice on the Navigation Process

Literature on how to navigate the aging life course abounds in both print and on the World Wide Web, and different approaches are offered. Helen Luke (2010), a Jungian psychologist advocates a relinquishing of one's former self in old age and a meeting with the divine. Being active in old age is also highly recommended for keeping up a positive attitude even though the body is slowly decaying. Geraldine Jeffri (2011) demonstrates that many artists in their old age have not given up their art. Morell (2003) conducted a study with four long-living American women in their ninth decade who all maintained their interests and activities from earlier in life. My own elder role models such as my mother and her sisters are the same. In many instances in South Africa, senior citizens have no choice but to remain active as they are caregivers of grandchildren (Frisoli, 2016). Whether by choice or not, it would appear that, if one can, being active in old age assists in making the experience of old age more manageable. The Association for the Aged (TAFTA) encourages people to "Embrace 'active ageing'– stay as healthy as possible and remain actively involved with life ... physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually" (TAFTA n.d.).

Burack-Weiss (2016) speaks of women writers whom she felt survived old age because they held onto their craft. She observed that the authors succeeded in merging their experiences of old age with both their present and their past – they "assimilated into their emerging identities – the ongoing story of who they are now" (p xvii). Similarly, Katz (2011) reminds us that in a world where biological aging is overemphasised, a focus on biography is necessary: "Biographical aging also provides the inner resources for decision making and imaginative understanding about the dilemmas of maturity and longevity" (p.188). Playback Theatre's emphasis on personal biography – whether it is the story from this morning, or from a long time ago, can be a useful tool in the process of biographical aging.

2.1.3 The Elderly in Institutions

As people grow older, they would ideally like to age 'in place', for instance at home and, if possible, with family; this is often not feasible because as

elders become more frail, due either to natural aging or illness, they need full-time support that families may not be able to offer. In addition to the *inability* to help, there may be *unavailability* of family members, as so many of Southern Africa's elderly have lost their children to HIV/AIDS (Ncube 2017 citing Dhemba 2013), (Frisoli 2016). Dhemba and Dhemba (2015) in a study about Lesotho and Zimbabwe, speak of an "outdated assumption that families are obliged to look after their own older members" (n.p.) and indicate that the state should be doing more to help the elderly. As the population of elderly people grows rapidly governments are expected to offer as much help as possible. South Africa government care is insufficient: "there are an estimated 1 150 residential facilities for older persons, and only eight are state-managed and fully subsidised by the government" (Mahomed 2017). The Association for the Aged (TAFTA) is a Durban based NPO which, like Frederic Place and many charities, works in partnership with the government to provide critical services which the government is unable to do alone (TAFTA n.d.).

2.1.4 At Home in a Home

One of the many difficulties of living as a frail, elderly person under the care of others in an institution is the challenge of feeling at home in a completely alien setting. Johnson and Bibbo (2014) interviewed eight residents who had moved to nursing homes in the United States about how they "constructed the meaning of home" (p. 56); they were interviewed shortly after arrival and then two months later. The respondents who had not had a part in the decision to be relocated seemed to struggle most in defining their new abode as home. By the second interview the feeling of safety and the availability of care had begun to contribute to the respondents feeling more relaxed, as well as the fact that they had begun to meet people. On the whole the lack of space for possessions and the feeling one is being controlled by a schedule (lack of autonomy) negated feelings of being at home. Helen Nicholson (2016) also speaks of the importance of possessions for the person moving to an institution. Her Applied Theatre work with an elderly woman on choosing special objects for her new home highlighted that those artifacts could also serve the very significant task of

informing care-givers about her and her previous life outside of the institution (p. 258).

Johnson and Bibbo's study also found that people assigned the nursing home as "a place to die" (p. 62). Thoughts of a final resting place engender visions of a place beyond earth. Theatre director Peter Brook, at the age of 91 commented that he kept thinking of the line from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* that "there is a world elsewhere" (Cavendish 2016). The dimension of a heavenly home featured strongly in my participants – judging by the frequency with which we sang "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming forth to carry me home". The need to look elsewhere, beyond the walls of the institution, and maybe beyond suffering, echoed in the words of our singing.

2.1.5 *Negotiating a New Identity*

Adjusting to new living circumstances and people in the old age institution includes negotiating a new identity for oneself. Johnson and Bibbo (2014) quote Rowles (1983): "Separation from the physical home and its possessions can disconnect individuals from their self-identity and lived previous experience" (in Johnson and Bibbo, p. 57). Nicholson (2016) says new residents can experience a "profound shift of identity because their domestic spaces no longer reflect their life histories" (p. 257). Personal identity is challenged from the outset when applying to some institutions; Hockey and James (1995) quote Hazan (1980) about factors considered relevant when entering residential care. These factors essentially "obliterate their life history and social identity" (p. 144). This was seen in the entry assessment for institutions which asked questions about what the elder is able to do: "mobility, dressing, feeding, continence, sleep", and how they appear mentally: "orientation, communication, co-operation, restlessness and mood" (ibid). The identity of "patient" is probably the most common when institutions deal with residents. But refreshingly, Rooney (2014) describes housing options for American elderly where a shift from nursing homes to assisted living facilities has enabled elderly to be treated as residents in a community and not as patients: "Having social capital in a

community can create positive feelings for individuals. Those positive feelings are often connected with a decrease in health risks” (Eilers, Lucey, & Stein, 2007 in Rooney, p. xx).

Activities that create positive feelings for the elderly, like for any age group, are important, and sometimes they come in the form of Applied Theatre. What follows is an explanation of Applied Theatre, and then examples of how it has been used with the elderly.

2.2 Applied Theatre

Applied Theatre is an overarching name for many different kinds of interventions that “employ theatre processes in the service of self-development, wellbeing and social change” (Prentki & Preston 2009, p.14). Examples of Applied Theatre are: Popular Theatre, Protest Theatre, Theatre for Development, Theatre of the Oppressed, Prison Theatre, Theatre in Education, Process Drama and Playback Theatre (Prendergast and Saxton 2016, pp. 3-7). The emergence of these forms was one response to a changing world in the second half of the twentieth century; movements such as globalism, feminism and individualism prompted active citizens to demand their rights (Prendergast & Saxton 2016, p. 11) and Applied Theatre was a vehicle to do so. Progressive theatre artists not only wanted to comment on society, as some theatre had done for centuries, but ignite conversations and action amongst people to speak truth to power; and so more theatre was done *with* people, not *for* them. Applied Theatre practitioners were also inspired by Paulo Freire (1970) an educator who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which proposed that students be involved in their learning, and not just fed information (Prendergast & Saxton 2016, p. 10). Rather than education as indoctrination, Freire encouraged active, engaged students; rather than theatre as mere entertainment, Applied Theatre engendered active, engaged audiences. The purpose of both was to empower the marginalised in society which requires good facilitators.

Applied Theatre practitioners are artists, but perhaps more importantly, in order to work effectively and empathically in communities, they need to be

sensitive, skilled facilitators with a sound understanding of social contexts. Projects can take place in a large variety of places such as schools, prisons, women's shelters and old age homes, and often the participants will be completely new to the terrain of theatre and an embodied way of working. Beginning the work from what participants know warms them up to the work, for instance using their own songs, stories, dances and games. Facilitators' activities can include improvisations, role plays, use of frozen images (tableaux), simulations, games that involve whole body movement, games to practise concentration, and reflective work including journaling and exercises like mind and body mapping. After such activities participants are encouraged to reflect on and talk about what they have experienced, and to explore the meaning in their lives and community, and what action could possibly be taken. The processes can lead to building a play, or, as in forms of theatre like Playback Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed, performed moments are set up by interaction with the audience, happen, and then are gone. Once they have ended, again, there can be moments of reflection and discussion.

Unlike mainstream theatre, Applied Theatre does not necessarily need a formal stage or a distinct audience. The facilitators and participants in the processes could be the only ones present for the activities, and in some cases, participants can switch between being part of the theatre processes and being audience (Prentki & Preston 2009, p.10). The main purpose is that participants in Applied Theatre work are enabled to see themselves (Prentki 2009, p. 252) and speak for themselves (Preston 2009, p. 67).

Enabling others to recognise themselves and to speak up is one part of what Nicholson (2016) calls Applied Theatre's "commitment to social justice and equality" (p. 265). As with any humanitarian work, practitioners of Applied Theatre need to be responsible, ethical and reflective in their approach. It is crucial that all stakeholders, from those in power, to the participants, are consulted and informed about the project from planning to implementation stages. Mackey (2016) acknowledges the many voices that contribute to Applied Theatre projects, including co-facilitators, participants

and other community members (p. 15). Whether projects are a result of an invitation from the community or are initiated by the Applied Theatre practitioners, the work (whether product or process oriented), should be driven by the needs of the participants. No participant should ever be coerced into involvement. The work needs to be with the community and not for the community; there is no place for saviours or lifeguards, even when there is perceived struggle in the deep end of the water. The assessment and evaluation of the work's impact also needs to include all stakeholders, particularly the participants (Prendergast & Saxton 2016, p. 24).

While it is hoped that the processes and products of Applied Theatre can lead to change in people's lives, Helen Nicholson (2005) speaks of the work as more likely to be a process of transportation versus transformation in a community (p. 12). In my work at Frederic Place, I felt that transforming people's lives would be a challenge, but facilitating moments for participants to be transported elsewhere through the work seemed more plausible.

2.2.1 *Applied Theatre with the Elderly*

Applied Theatre work with the elderly holds the same importance and significance as it does for any age group. Prendergast and Saxton (2016) affirm that the "needs of the elderly are the same as for humans of all ages: affirmation of their presence and value in the world" (p. 216). This statement forms part of their explanation of Reminiscence Theatre, a form of theatre that seeks to affirm elders through honouring their memories. Applied Theatre activities are used to stimulate the sharing of stories and experiences which are sometimes "simply shared and enjoyed by the group" and at other times "developed into performances that may be played either by the elderly themselves or by professional actors" (p. 215). Prendergast and Saxton mention that the value of reminiscence theatre is that:

it provide[s] meaning and confirmation, not just to those whose stories are being told but also as prompts for the stories of its senior audiences and, often, their caregivers and family members (p. 216).

An American Applied Theatre practitioner for the elderly is Ann Bastings, whose work is described as Senior Theatre. The basis of her work lies in the use of the imagination versus the use of memory, which is suitable for people

dispossessed of their memory by disease. Her work *TimeSlips* which is story-making with the elderly, and others suffering from dementia, has the following tag, “a method that opens storytelling to everyone by replacing the pressure to remember with the courage to imagine” (TimeSlips n.d.). The method provides a stimulus like a picture or photograph to a group, and allows people to make up a story from what they see in front of them. Bastings also worked with an entire long term care community, from the elderly residents, to the care workers and family members in multi-year project that culminated in *Finding Penelope* based on the story of Penelope from Homer’s *Odyssey*. “Its goal was to improve the quality of life of people who live, work, and visit in a long term care setting through creative engagement” (Animating Democracy n.d.).

Paula Crimmens is a Drama Therapist who has done extensive group work with institutionalised elderly in the United Kingdom. She emphasises that laughter and play are essential ingredients in her work; “playfulness is much more about ‘being’ while at the same time leaving space for spontaneity and creativity” (1998, p. 22). One of her main activities in homes for the elderly is to tell stories and get the residents to act them out; her success lies in the fact that she does not put pressure on participants. Her theory is that “the less we are expected to perform, the lower our level of anxiety; the more relaxed we are the more likely we are to be creative” (p. 29).

An example of Playback Theatre with the elderly is found in *The Australasian Journal on Ageing*, Vol 37, March 2018 which published a report of a project with older adults in Singapore. The purpose of the study was to examine the effect on the cognitive function and well-being of the participants who were taught to use Playback Theatre in a six-week research programme. No significant changes were recorded in the participants’ cognitive function but an improvement in their emotional well-being was evident. The measurements of the participants were made in pre- and post-programme neuropsychological testing. This preliminary study of the use of Playback Theatre concluded that the form has “... potential ... to improve well-being in older adults” and also reported that “...

the dimension of social cognition should be explored further as Playback Theatre is seen to embody social and emotional elements” (Chee et al. 2018, E35).

2.3 Playback Theatre

2.3.1 *The Origins and Ethos*

The original Playback Theatre company had their first performance in 1975 with Jonathon Fox at the helm (Fox 1994, p. 2). He describes his aim for this “contemporary, interactive, nonscripted theatre” (p. 5) to:

enable people [to] see their stories acted out and share with their neighbours aspects of their daily lives and deeply felt concerns (p. 2).

The company’s mission included enabling “anyone and everyone to be heard” (p. 8) as an “act of service” (p. 213). “Service without security, without fanfare, without adulation” (p. 214) which required great humility and commitment. People’s experiences are honoured in Playback Theatre and given meaning in a public forum, and as Salas (1993) says, “individual experience expands to become part of a shared sense of purposeful existence” (p. 23). Salas expands:

We dignify stories with ritual and aesthetic awareness, and link them together so that they form a collective story about a community of people, whether the temporary community of a public audience, or a group of people whose lives are connected in an ongoing way (p. 22).

What started in 1975 has grown into an internationally recognised and practised form of Applied Theatre (Fox p. 210, Salas p. 17). On one hand Playback Theatre can appear simple, on the other, most profound. The simplicity is that ordinary people’s everyday stories are used to create the theatrical event. The profundity arises from the immediate nature of the improvised, spontaneous performance, the careful aesthetic presentation, the ritualised structure and the fact that those performing are doing so with humility, and as a service. From my own experience as an audience member and a performer at Playback Theatre performances I have observed that when the audience members witness the performance of their stories there is individual validation and the ‘temporary community’ grows in knowledge of each other, both profound needs of human beings.

Fox (1994) speaks of care (p. 206), grace (p. 214) and selflessness (p. 171), without which Playback Theatre would be empty echoes in an alien space.

2.3.2 The People, the Space, the Props, and the Forms

The people present at a Playback Theatre performance consist of the audience, the actors, the musician, the conductor, a person for the front of the house and possibly a lighting technician. The person who runs the performance and helps to elicit stories from the audience, is the conductor, a “conduit, the channel through which audience and actors can meet” (Salas 1993, p. 65). Salas lists all the possible roles and tasks a conductor may need to perform at different times in a performance: “a master of ceremonies, a director, a therapist, a performer, a showman, a shaman, a clown, a diplomat” (ibid). These roles encompass massive responsibilities that are carefully juggled while facilitating a performance. As Chesner (2002) puts it “[t]he conductor has the crucial task of maintaining a meta-level awareness, taking care of the individual [the teller], the performers and the audience” (p. 53, my parentheses).

Like most Applied Theatre work, Playback Theatre can take place in a great variety of spaces. It started in a church hall (Fox 1994, p. 1) and has since expanded to schools, hospitals, prisons and many other settings (Fox 1994, p. 207, Salas 1993, pp. 131-133). Wherever it happens, in countries all over the world, there is always the same physical set-up of the performing area and audience. The audience, if possible, is seated on chairs with an aisle between them to allow space for a teller of a story to join the conductor on stage. The audience and all the performers form one group for the event (Chesner 2002, p. 46), and there is no boundary or curtain between the two entities.

On the stage, the actors (between four to six people) have crates or boxes upstage where they listen to the audience’s stories; a musician sits stage left facing diagonally toward the audience with her instruments around her, and the conductor has a seat stage right opposite the musician with an empty crate – the teller’s chair - beside her. The performance of stories takes place in the space between these three points with movement beyond

the parameters occurring when actors move up stage right to collect brightly coloured cloth that can be used in the enactment. The long, narrow, coloured cloths, used symbolically in long stories are pre-set on a structure that allows for access to an actor's chosen colour. This "prop tree" (Fox p. 1) is usually set upstage right and provides a brightly coloured part of the otherwise simple set. The crates that the actors sit on are also used as set or props, for example, to create literal objects like a box, or symbolic props like an inner burden.

In Playback Theatre the method of playing back a moment, an anecdote or a longer story falls under the names short forms, short narrative forms or long forms, and they are either narrative or non-narrative. Narrative forms can portray a story, while the non-narrative forms are more suited to portraying "feeling states without narrative" (Salas 1993, p. 44). Two of the short forms I taught at Frederic Place were non-narrative short forms - Fluid Sculptures and Pairs, while the V-Narrative is a narrative short form. These forms were described in detail in Chapter One, Section 1.2. Other forms include among others: Tableaux, Chorus, Three-Part Story, Three Sentence Story and Scenes² (Salas 1993, pp. 33-43). The performances are improvised enactments of a teller's story but are carefully structured in terms of length of the enactment and formation of the actors, and within the overall ritual of the event. The conductor is the person who gauges which form best suits a particular story and communicates her choice to the actors.

2.3.3 Ritual and Aesthetic within Playback Theatre

A Playback Theatre performance is a highly structured event and depends on a ritualistic approach which is based on a slow build up to the sharing of long stories. As Dennis (2008) says there is "consistent shaping by a conductor who primarily uses repetition (of the invitation to tell a story) to build momentum in the process" (p. 212, parentheses original). Dennis (2007) paraphrases Turner (1983) and Schechner (1982) in explaining that

² In the Drama for Life Playback Theatre Company, Scenes were referred to as "Long Stories" – these were the stories told by tellers from the teller's chair.

once recognised, the ritual can help people to become involved in a Playback Theatre performance:

Establishing a ritual frame serves to announce that a certain set of rules are at play and *releases* participants to act beyond their constrained domestic roles and engage in other ways with themselves, with each other, and with the social environment (p. 62, italics original).

The conductor warms the audience up to the idea of sharing stories, by asking them to communicate a brief moment, for example, about their day, with the people around them where they are seated. The conductor then asks for any willing volunteers to share these moments with the whole gathering; these are played back by the company members, usually in Fluid Sculptures or Pairs, depending on the nature of the story. Next the conductor asks for longer moments that people could share, for example, something that may have happened to them during the week – these are played back in either narrative or non-narrative short forms. Every enactment consists of a ritual that begins the playing back with “Let’s watch” said by the conductor, and ends with the actors looking directly at the teller in order to symbolically send the story back to its author.

The event is now warmed up to the point where people are invited to the teller’s chair to share longer stories. In one performance two to three people (one at a time) can share long stories which are each played back by the actors. The long story has its own particular ritual steps: the interview of the teller by the conductor, the set up (silent preparation) by the actors while music plays, the enactment, the sending back of the story and then a final interview of the teller by the conductor. This ritual, as well as the larger ritualistic structure of the whole event ensures that tellers feel safe, heard and validated. The aesthetic of the work and the ritual element both help to create distance for the teller from possible strong, personal feelings (Chesner 2002, pp. 49-50).

The aesthetic of the work lies in the combination of the carefully practised ritual as well as the innate beauty of the elements of theatre. Moloney (n.d.) says “stories reveal themselves to audiences through the whole language

of the theatre” (p. 1). The theatrical element of language is present in multiple layers, from the words, expressions and body language of the teller, to the language (both verbal and non-verbal) used by the actors. The musician, who is part of the playing back of the stories, uses the language of music to add to the mood and tone of the enactment, as well as using humming, song and echoes of words appropriate to the scene. Sounds like utterances, gasps, squeals and sighs are used by all performers. As Chesner puts it, performers use “non-verbal sound to convey a feeling or dynamic in a new way” (2002, p. 47). Movement is another language used in Playback Theatre from exaggerated gestures, to mimed movement, to dance, to focused stillness.

The other elements of theatre – character, themes, ideas, actions and plot are all suggested by the stories which tellers share with the company. The actors then represent some or all of these in the playing back. All story enactments, whether they are long or short, narrative or non-narrative, are pointedly enacted from the point of the view of the tellers; their experiences and emotions are always the central focus. Without this commitment to the teller, this theatre loses its core. For a long story, before the conductor hears from a teller, she asks them to choose an actor to represent themselves. Some Playback Theatre companies also suggest that the teller choose other actors to represent other characters in the story.

2.3.4 Spontaneity

Playback Theatre requires its actors to absorb what they hear from and see in a teller, make sense of it, and then perform an improvised response with action and voice; there is a massive demand for spontaneity, as there is no planning in the performance. Fox explores the concept of spontaneity in depth. “[S]pontaneity is the ability to maintain a free flowing constantly self-adjusting cycle of sensory in-put, evaluation and action” (1994, p. 101). The ability to be spontaneous, whether on stage or in life, can be difficult, and thus requires practice. Fox (1994) and Barolsky (2008) explain that Playback Theatre performers practise physical and nonverbal skills to push actors beyond the “thinking mode” (Fox 1994, p. 87). Keith Johnstone, the

founder of Theatre Sports, created many games to assist with spontaneity and improvisation. He taught the opposite of what he had been required to do at school: “I had been urged to concentrate on one thing at a time, so I looked for ways of splitting the attention” (1999, pp. xi-xii). He explains that “splitting the attention allows some more creative parts of the personality to operate” (p. 130).

Fox and Johnstone speak of different fears which can inhibit or block spontaneity: “We may fear to stand out, to make a mistake, to fail, even to succeed” (Fox 1994, p. 82). In addition, it could be “fear of being unoriginal, fear of being crazy, and fear of being obscene” (Johnstone paraphrased in Fox, 1994 p. 86). Overcoming such fears takes practise, but it also involves letting go of two attachments, that is, the love of a finished product, and the desire for order (Fox 1994, p. 94-95). The improvisational, non-scripted actor also has to keep in mind that getting it wrong is always a possibility, but “... the tangible possibility of failure is what makes success possible” (ibid p. 96).

Given these multiple, sensory activities happening in what can be a very short time, this could be a tall order for an elderly person to ‘be spontaneous’, but even on a small scale, and with side coaching, unplanned responses were possible with my participants.

2.3.5 Listening to Stories - an “Act of Service”

The most important aspect of Playback Theatre is the act of witnessing and validating the tellers of anecdotes and stories. The performers listen carefully as people share their stories; this deep listening and the playing back of what they hear is considered an “act of service” (Fox 1986, p. 6). In everyday life too, we serve others by allowing them to speak. *Tell Me More*, an article written by Brenda Ueland (1993) discusses how listening to others enables them to open up. She says if we can truly listen to someone, we allow “a creative fountain (inside them) to spring and cast up new thoughts and unexpected laughter and wisdom” (n.p., my parantheses).

Linder Sanders used Playback Theatre with educators who commented that the “process honored participants by providing opportunities for listening and understanding, as well as storytelling” (2008, p.9). Moran and Alon did Playback Theatre training with people recovering from psychiatric illness and found that:

the lack of formal therapeutic stance in playback theatre may enhance its benefits helping individuals to meet as equals and provide dignified service to each other by playing out each other’s stories. This mutual service helps build community amongst the participants, helping counter isolation and stigma (2001, p 321-322).

Qualitative reports from their work showed “an enhanced sense of empathy and connection for others” (ibid, p. 319) which were inspiring factors for my work at Frederic Place, where participants were present as witnesses to each other’s anecdotes that were told, and re-enacted.

Psychologist Bonnano confirms that stories need to be heard, and when heard, give credence to and confirm the existence of the teller:

[w]hile some stories are sweeter than others, all long for the benefit and necessity of a witness, for a witness assures us that our stories are heard, contained, and transcend time; for it can be said that one is never truly forgotten when one is shared and carried in the hearts of others (2013, n.p.).

In Playback Theatre, when stories are told, the act of witnessing is not only done by others, but also oneself. Chesner (2002) says that “[t]he teller’s experience of witnessing their own story being creatively enacted can be a moment of heightened awareness” (p. 53). Such an experience can possibly lead to self recognition and a further understanding of oneself. This phenomenon is highlighted by the philosopher Cavarero who gives an example of Ulysses weeping into his tunic when he hears a bard’s rendition of the Trojan war: “[i]n hearing his story, then, Ulysses is moved to tears. Not only because the narrated event is painful, but because when he had lived them directly he had not understood their meaning” (Cavarero in Baldini 2019, p.135). In a Playback Theatre performance such moments of “recognition/comprehension of self”(ibid) are carefully contained and held within the ritual frame and by the conductor.

2.3.6 Examples of Playback Theatre in a Variety of Settings

Playback Theatre is many things at once – it is a theatrical, aesthetic event, a catalyst for connection and change in the community of the audience, and it can serve as a generator of information about the people at the event. At a Playback performance where I performed, the event was specifically for the celebration of a young woman turning twenty-one. All the guests (audience members) were invited to tell stories about the ‘birthday girl’ and thus the event was an opportunity for her biography to be revealed through other people’s memories of her.

Playback Theatre has been used in many instances as a tool for effecting change in people and communities, for examples, Jo Salas describes performances in schools, jails and conferences (1993, pp. 132-133). Hutt and Hosking discuss Playback Theatre as a tool for reconciliation “in a number of communities grappling with major social change and with the effects of protracted conflict and war” (2004, p. 4).

Moran and Alon (2011) cite a study by Kintigh (1998) focusing on playback as an education tool, the results of which showed “that classes using playback action methods enhanced the quality of interpersonal relationships and the participants’ perceptions of the group as an interconnected community” (p. 319). Sanders’ study with educators also showed connectedness amongst the participants:

One can often feel alone, and it’s easy to forget (or not know) that our feelings and experiences are largely universal. Playback Theatre makes them feel universal, but unique and ours at the same time (Sharon in Sanders 2008, p 9).

Conclusion

This chapter has given the background and theory of the elderly, Applied Theatre and Playback Theatre. The intention of both Applied Theatre and Playback Theatre to enable people to speak for themselves was highlighted as an appropriate objective in an institution for the elderly where a sense of loneliness and loss of identity can dominate residents’ lives. The core principles of Playback Theatre, namely its commitment to personal story

and 'acts of service' were brought to light as factors that can encourage connection and community between people. The following chapter will outline how the research took place and highlight the methodology that was used.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology and Process

This chapter first describes practice as research as the methodology I employed at Frederic Place. Secondly, I discuss elements of the research process that I considered to be core: the participants, language, themes and ritual. I then present details of what occurred during the research period in every session, both for the participants learning to use Playback Theatre, and those who attended open sessions.

3.1 Methodology

3.1.1 Practice as Research

Practice as research is a research methodology common in the performing arts where research and production of knowledge depend on practical activity involving the chosen art form. The methodology relies on embodied, tacit practitioner knowledge that is supported by conceptual frameworks and critical reflection (Nelson 2006, p. 114). Nelson summarises the accomplishment of this type of research which has not always been a readily accepted methodology in academic institutions:

[n]ot only has practice-as-research yielded knowledge of many kinds in many forms over the past decade, it has contributed significantly to a shift in the language of knowledge through its emphasis on 'know-how' and the relational and the experienced as distinct from the purely cognitive-objective (p. 115).

In order to plan my research project at Frederic Place I used my 'know how' or pre-existing practical and theoretical knowledge of Playback Theatre to enable me to practise with my elderly research participants. In practice as research "[t]he practice is designed to investigate, respond to or directly address research questions, or experiment with hunches" (Mackey 2016, p. 480). My hunch was that Playback Theatre short forms could increase the extent of my participants' engagement with each other, and their sharing of stories.

Mark Fleishmann states that "[c]reative practice which is framed as a research question/investigation can be evaluated as research when the research output is contained in the practice itself" (2006 n.p.). My

participants' increased level of engagement and storytelling were the output that I aimed for. Mackey says that "[i]n applied theatre it is often the participants and their processes that are researched, ... , and their responses are often an 'output' " (2016, p.486). The answer to my research question (and thus the assessment of the research output) could best be found through practical engagement with the participants and could be evaluated in situ during the sessions which contained Playback Theatre. I was aware that the conclusions I reached would be subjective, but I could also observe participants' comments during meetings to pinpoint their perceptions of the level of sharing and storytelling (see section 3.4.1 which details one such observation).

In my role as an Applied Theatre practitioner and facilitator at Frederic Place I engaged in practice on a number of levels. As a facilitator I was in a state of constant practice, trying to hone my skills in communication, group processes, teaching, decision making, reflection, documentation and more, including "deep honesty, humility, buoyancy and courage" (Preston 2016, p. 230). In addition, during the research period my involvement as a performer with the Drama for Life Playback Theatre company gave me further occasions to practise Playback Theatre skills which informed my work at the home. But as Mackey says of Applied Theatre practice as research "[o]ur own practice – or artistry – is most likely to be as facilitator-researcher but we rarely expect our art, our facilitation skills to be the focus of our PaR. It is the 'matter' of the research project that is the focus" (2016, p. 482). The participants' learning and practice were indeed the most important.

The small training sessions with a core group and the large group sessions where stories were encouraged and played back were opportunities for both me and my research participants to practise Playback Theatre. This involved practising the short forms that were learned which included techniques such as embodying interpretations of stories, making shapes with the body, making expressive gestures, and starting and ending a performance. Within these techniques we practised the Playback skills of listening, witnessing, trust and spontaneity. The process of gathering

together as a group was also a phenomenon that was, and needed to be practised; it presented such a stark contrast to participants' silent moments in front of the television, and often required a shift in people's energy. The procedure of the gathering of the participants, finding a venue³ and arriving there, were elements that needed 'rehearsal', and at times the practice achieved effective results, for instance we were able to start promptly, thus gaining time for activities.

3.1.2 Practice as Research as a Layered Dialogue

Mackey uses the metaphor of a polyphonic conversation for Applied Theatre practice as research; in the conversation there could be many people talking, while in some moments there could be dialogue between two people, and at other times, monologues could take place (2106, p.489).

Considering applied theatre practice as research as privileging practice (as all PaR does⁴) but also as a polyphonic conversation recognises the many voices in such community-based work as well as the confluences and individual sway of practice, theory, reflection and action (ibid, parentheses original).

This metaphor of practice as research helped me to recognise that I had many voices in my journey to Frederic Place and the practice of Playback Theatre there. These voices were heard not only within the period of the research implementation but also preceding the research. I will briefly describe them to indicate their importance in my journey and to show how ideas, action, practice, theory and reflection do indeed merge and overlap as part of the research conversation.

First and foremost, there was the practice with my research participants; our work together started without a specific focus on Playback Theatre but it later became the overarching conversation. Another conversation was a women's workshop with Tossie van Tonder, *Act Your Age - An Extraordinary Journey of Enquiry into the True Power of Ageing* (2016)

³ Different venues for training and meeting were used according to their availability.

⁴ Mackey's use of the abbreviation 'PaR' in the parenthesis refers to practice as research. In the period of my research at Drama for Life the abbreviation PaR referred to performance as research, and PAR referred to practice as research.

which helped me to embrace my aging boldly and bravely. Dialogues which occurred in my interviews with two elderly women in my proposal writing phase helped me to understand different perspectives of the aging journey. More dialogues and conversations took place within the context of my MA studies at Drama for Life which also guided my thinking about, and approach to the elderly. Firstly, during a Theatre as Activism, Education and Therapy course which formed part of my MA coursework I designed and implemented an Applied Theatre programme called Swinging Sages - an embodied Bible study for the elderly at my church which inspired my approach at Frederic Place. Secondly, as part of a Performance as Research course I created a piece that explored the feelings of an old woman being packed up and moved from her home to an old age home. The latter had the effect of creating an anticipated fear in me (the fear of the same experience that one day I may have to endure), which I then had to work against.

All the above voices in the conversation were echoed or questioned in monologue through my reflections. Mackey speaks of the reflective process in applied theatre practice as research:

‘Reflection’ implies a thinking back and analysis, a form of reflexivity. For applied theatre PaR, this reflexivity might well be immanent reflection within the practice moment or it can imply a distanced, ‘rational critique’ of the theoretical and practical processes, that then facilitate subsequent action (2016, p. 488).

My practice with my research participants was my foremost concern, but I came to accept that interweaving all the above-mentioned parts of the conversation into my research, helped to both mould my enquiry and make me sensitive to the participants. Part of my reflective and reflexive process included dealing with my fears of aging. Travelling boldly into the identity of middle aged was important; my psychological border between what I saw in the mirror and what I felt – “the necessary disjuncture between the inner self and the image of the body” (Turner 1995, p. 248) had to be crossed. It was important to work through my own fear in order to begin work with the elderly without any sense of revulsion. Empathy was needed, not sympathy. Prentki says that the “..ultimate expression of border-crossing [is] empathy”

(2009, p. 251). Without an acceptance of who I was, I could not work with an empathetic approach at Frederic Place.

3.2 Elements of the Research Process

3.2.1 The Participants in the Research

There were two overlapping groups of participants in the research process: a small core group that received training in Playback Theatre and a large group that was a combination of the core group and other members of Frederic Place. The large sessions were the continuation of the previous intervention I held at the home which was centred on singing, Bible stories and Applied Theatre exercises. It was important to maintain the continuity of meetings for the existing group in order that members who were not part of the core group, did not feel a break of trust in our relationship, or experience a change in their weekly expectation of a session with me, or did not feel left out of a new process which they may have observed when I started to appear at Frederic Place twice a week.

The core group who learned the Playback short forms and then applied them in the larger sessions were on two parallel journeys – they were in training as Playback Theatre performers, as well as being members of the large group where they could apply their skills - in service to their co-residents. They appeared to cope well with being in two groups, most likely because the processes felt similar to each other, for instance a meeting with others with interactions, sharing and learning.

The participants were men and women ranging between 60+ to 90+ years; the small core group varied in size from 5 to 10 people, while the large group fluctuated between 6 and 15 participants which would include members of the core group. There were wheelchair occupants, some of whom were stroke survivors, and there were also able-bodied people, some of whom walked with the assistance of walking frames. The stroke survivors who had only one fully functional arm were capable of doing the activities if they were carefully placed in the space in relation to each other to accommodate their wheel chairs and to make the most functional arm available for action.

Most participants seemed to be sound of mind, but there were some who did not appear to be fully present, due perhaps to medication, among other possible reasons. I made a choice to not enquire about the details of people's medical problems or challenges unless these arose directly in the sessions, either through the storytelling, or in an incident such as someone constantly slipping out of their chair. In the case of incontinence, I also decided to minimise the event; if a small puddle on the floor could wait to be mopped up, I opted to leave it. I wanted to take and respond to the participants at face value. This was initially an unconscious choice in my pre-research sessions – a choice probably framed by my Christian lens, as well as those of Applied Theatre that all are welcome and all are equally important. This was also in keeping with what Carl Rogers coined the “person-centred approach” which “focuses on the person and not on the disease” (Crimmens 1988, p. 25). Later my choice to be ignorant of medical and other challenges was more conscious, and was based on the Playback Theatre lens, which is not dissimilar to the aforementioned approaches, that works on the premise that everyone has a story and everyone is welcome to bring their story (Fox 1994; Salas 1993).

3.2.2 *Spoken Languages*

There was a mix of languages in the group: I was cognisant of English, Afrikaans, seSotho, seTswana and isiZulu. I suspect there were other mother tongues represented in the group, but I was not aware of them, and did not acknowledge them in the English-dominated sessions that I facilitated. With some knowledge of Afrikaans, and a smattering of seSotho and siSwati, I sometimes did a little code switching, but I was entirely dependent on the use of English by myself and my participants. The effect of the dominance of English is discussed briefly in Chapter Four which is an analysis of what happened in the project.

3.2.3 *Stories and Themes in the Sessions and the “Red Thread”*

The stories that were heard during the research sessions, some of which were played back through the Playback Theatre short forms, came from participants who shared stories about themselves, and sometimes about

others. There were two occasions where personal stories were offered by non-research participants: in the first core training session, two social work students briefly visited the group, and one of them told an anecdote about her morning. And in the open session where Matron and other staff were invited to attend, the administrator shared her account of how she came to be at Frederic Place.

Some of the themes of the sessions were planned in advance but when the participants steered the theme in a different direction, I would let this occur. At times conversations started naturally at the beginning of a session which set a theme for that day. Jonathon Fox speaks of the “subconscious power” that a phrase used by a conductor or a teller can exert on participants’ choice of stories (1994, p. 39). One person’s choice of a story easily influences the next story and similar themes can keep recurring in the session. This phenomenon is referred to as the “red thread” in a performance, a term coined for Playback Theatre by Hoesch (1999). Editorial notes in her document explain that the reference is from weaving, where a red thread guides the weaver in the pattern, and furthermore, the term is “a common phrase in German for ‘the connecting element’” (Fox and Dauber (eds.) in Hoesch 1999, p.22) The red thread is not always immediately visible in a performance (or training session); Chesner elaborates:

[t]he content and mood of the performance can be very varied , and the connecting ‘red thread’ may emerge during the performance, for example as a subtextual dialogue about worldviews, the nature of suffering, power, spirit (2002, p. 46).

Themes that arose and also those that did not arise at Frederic Place are discussed and analysed in more detail in Chapter Four.

3.2.4 The Use of Ritual and Song within the Sessions

In keeping with my previous work at Frederic Place our sessions had a short ritual to begin: we started with singing, possibly some stretching and mobilising of the upper body (either in relation to a song, or independent of the song) and most often conversations about the day (weather, activities of the day, people’s health). Most sessions, if there was time, also ended

with a song. The songs we sang were mostly Christian choruses and hymns stemming from the previous work based on bible characters and stories, as well as the suggestions of songs given by participants. Generally, after greeting each other we would begin with song, a process which ritualised the beginning of our meetings. The songs allowed for contributions to come directly from the participants without any pressure on them to perform alone because if they started spontaneously singing a song, others would join.

There were some exceptions to our repertoire of spiritual songs, both of which were pre-school songs. The one song, useful for its actions to warm the body, was “If you happy and know it clap your hands”. The other was “Mary had a little lamb” which Simon (participant) often sang. After a number of sessions with this song, I adapted the words to suit the theme of Frederic Place being a home, and a family: “Here we are at Frederic Place, we are family”. This was a reiteration of a similar process where as a group we had adapted the song “Kumbaya my Lord” to describe actions of faith by Bible characters and by the participants themselves. One of the lines was “By faith we came to Frederic Place”. In changing the nursery rhyme “Mary had a little lamb” to a song about family I was trying to maintain a tune that the group sang in beautiful harmonies while at the same time have words that related to their present lives.

3.2.5 Time-frame of the Research and Number of Sessions

The research period consisted of thirteen sessions over ten weeks, with some of the weeks containing two sessions, for example a core group training session and large group session. The length of the sessions ranged from half an hour to an hour, depending on the participants’ schedule, as well as their stamina.

The core group had six sessions, the first of which was an introductory discussion explaining the aims and process of the research. The following four sessions, which were run on consecutive Fridays, were used for the introduction and practice of the Playback forms. The final core group session was a focus group discussion in the tenth week. The purpose of

the focus group was to hear about the group's experience as performers and to ascertain their perception of the project's efficacy in generating shared story telling in the group.

The mixed group met eight times and consisted of members of the core group and other interested residents. A summary table of the chronology of these sessions, their location, the stories that arose, and the Playback Theatre and Applied Theatre tools that were used appears in Appendix C.

3.2.6 *The Use of Camera and Voice Recordings*

As discussed in Chapter One, the ethics procedure required that I obtain the permission of the participants to document the sessions through photos or voice recordings. Many of the sessions were recorded on my voice recorder on my mobile phone, but due to technical challenges, some sessions were not captured. As can be seen from the photos in this chapter, some of the stories that were played back in Fluid Sculptures or Pairs were captured in still photographs. Again, due to challenges – of a technological nature as well as the difficulty of balancing the flow of the session, I did not take photos in every session.

In writing up my research, the captured data was useful to me as a record to ascertain and analyse the participants' level of involvement and skills acquisition. I have not analysed the impact the voice recording or the taking of photos may have had on the participants and their level of involvement but I suspect that in some cases, for some people, it may have had the effect of making them take part in a more active manner than if there had been no technological data capture.

3.3 The Core Group and their Training

Six members of my original group of approximately fifteen people were able-bodied or active in their wheelchairs and seemingly sound of mind; they had responded positively and actively to the previous work with me and I chose them to be part of my core group for the research. I invited them each in private conversation to attend an introductory meeting. The intention for this core group who acquired the select Playback Theatre

skills was that they would apply the forms in the context of the larger group in order to explore the research question proposed for this report: *to what extent can the use of Playback Theatre short forms and short narrative forms help elicit anecdotes and stories in a group of elderly residents at Frederic Place?* The four training sessions for the core group were not strictly exclusive because when people whom I had not invited to be part of the training arrived at a session, I could not exclude them. They were incorporated into the session in as fluid manner as possible with explanation of what they had missed, encouragement to join in, and demonstrations from those who had been at earlier sessions. This process may have slowed down the skills acquisition but the presence of additional people may have contributed to more stories.

The first three Friday sessions with the core group were planned to deal with the Playback Theatre forms in the following order: Fluid Sculptures, Pairs and V-Narrative. My method of teaching was to explain a form and then engage the participants in conversation, talking about incidents that either arose from the group, or topics I introduced in order to inspire stories which could then be represented, or played back through the form we were learning. Skills learned by the core group were implemented within the larger group as soon as opportunities arose. The instances of Playback Theatre performance by the core group within the larger group were on-going moments of learning. In my own experience as a Playback Theatre Company member, I was learning all the time when I was in performance.

3.3.1 The Introductory Session

In our introductory meeting I explained what Playback Theatre is and its purpose to encourage people to tell their stories, and have their stories witnessed. I explained that in playing back people's stories our faces and bodies would be the instruments to represent what we heard; we would respond to stories by showing our understanding with our bodies. As a way of introducing the concept of embodied responses, I asked the participants how they would react if they found themselves at the basin, with a mouth

full of toothpaste and no water in the tap. Agatha answered that she would try to call caregivers to see if they could help. I explained that I was asking what their immediate response might be – right at the moment of discovering the dry tap; how would they use their faces, hands or bodies? Some of them immediately conveyed a response with facial expressions or an utterance of “aaaargh”. Thus began our process of discussion and analysis around moments of human experience and how to possibly represent the emotions associated with them.

The group discussion of their understanding and interpretation of the stories that people shared was essential in the first three core sessions where the forms were introduced, experimented with and practised. This approach also became the operating method in the mixed group sessions. In Playback Theatre performances the physical performed responses are made without any discussion among the performers; in our research period, due to the short time frame, and the mixed abilities in the group, such a level of sophistication was not attained. It felt essential that we discussed the story we had heard, the emotions involved and how to perform them.

3.3.2 First Training Session – Introduction to Fluid Sculptures

The aim of this session was to learn and practise Fluid Sculptures. We remembered the previous week’s discussion about the “Colgate Story” and the embodied responses, and we discussed a story from the large group the previous day, where Gertrude had reminisced about the sharing of a slaughtered animal when she grew up in Lesotho; we called her story, “Lesotho Braai”. After remembering parts of this story, I told the participants that from our seats we would each try to show a part of what we remembered, using our bodies:

Don’t think too hard; take anything from Ma’m Gertrude’s story and show the action; I’m going to count to three, and on three, you going to make that action ... it could be the slaughtering, it could be the cooking, it could be the calling (of the people); we going to repeat, repeat, repeat and then I will say ‘freeze (Hall 2017, Core Group Training, 20 October).

After this we set up our first Fluid Sculpture; volunteers were asked for, and they found a place in a group to make up the sculpture which was like a tableaux (frozen image) of the activities of the event; see Photo 1.

Photo 1. Fluid Sculpture: “Lesotho Braai” – from left to right, the representations were: calling people to come and eat, skinning or cutting the cow, calling people, about to cook in a big pot.



I then asked if anyone had something to share with the group about what may have happened during the day. Beatrice told the story of how most people had had their nails cut that morning. As a group we discussed the feelings associated with the nail-cutting and expressed it in a Fluid Sculpture with four people.

In this session we were also briefly joined by two young social workers, and one of them responded to my request to share a story about her morning. She told the story of her taxi stuck in traffic on the way to Frederic Place, her new placement for clinical practice. The group and I discussed what she may have been feeling; Veneese suggested she may have been frightened, and Lorna, an Afrikaans speaker, said in her mother tongue that she would have been “baie onrustig” (very restless). The young woman’s experience was played back in a Fluid Sculpture; see Photo 2 below.

Photo 2. Fluid Sculpture: “Late on the First Day of Work” – the worry of being late for a new job while sitting on a taxi which was delayed in traffic.



As we progressed with this session, I commented to the group that the Fluid Sculpture was similar to summarising someone's story; almost like taking a picture.

3.3.3 Second Training Session – Introduction to Pairs

The aim of this session was to review Fluid Sculptures and introduce and practise Pairs. As a way of introducing Pairs, we recollected the previous week's Fluid Sculpture of the social work student and discussed whether there may have been conflicting feelings in her story; we decided she might have been scared of being late, but excited about the new opportunity. I asked how we could show those two different emotions and Naledi volunteered a gesture of 'excited'; I then stood next to her and embodied the 'worried' feeling. These representations were performed by another pair once we had decided what emotions each person could embody. We discussed the difficulty of doing the Pairs in the regular formation (two people standing in front and two behind) because of people's wheelchairs, and decided our Pairs could take the formation of four people side by side in a line.

In looking for more examples to continue with Pairs I mentioned how we can have opposite feelings almost at the same time, for instance love and anger for a child. I asked two pairs to practise performing these feelings in their chairs. Then Agatha talked about the experience of cooking and being surprised by an old friend at the door. We contrasted and practised the

chore of cooking with the joy of a surprise visit. Shortly after this Naledi shared a time in her life when her son had wanted to leave her and get a job; we discussed her feelings, and summarised them as “surprise” and “relief” which was performed in Pairs. While we decided who would do this performance, I explained that Naledi would not perform because the teller should always watch their own story.

During this session, although I had not planned to, I also used the V-Narrative form because in the big group session the day before, I had introduced it for a very long story that someone had told. Now Beatrice shared a story about Gavin walking his sweetheart (a worker from the laundry) to the gate with an ensuing goodbye kiss. In my training with Drama for Life Playback Theatre I had learnt that Playback Theatre discourages people from telling stories that are not about themselves as the purpose of honouring the teller through the playing back would fall away. However, in order to acknowledge Beatrice’s offering, sustain the spirit of storytelling and practise the playing back, I decided that the story should be represented even though it was not her own.

Gavin was present as an unexpected attendee at this session; he did not give his permission to have his story told or for it to be played back, which as a facilitator I failed to notice, and went ahead and represented the story through the V-Narrative. I asked two people behind me to copy my gestures (the usual way group movement is presented in the V-Narrative) and I retold the story of the sweethearts’ walk to the gate. Gavin did not seem uneasy with this process, but truthfully, I was not completely aware of him, as my main focus was to give my trainees the opportunity to practise the V-Narrative form and to keep the flow of the training session.

3.3.4 Third Training Session – Practice

The aim of this session was to practise all three of the forms that had been introduced in the previous two sessions namely the Fluid Sculptures, Pairs and V-Narrative. The caveat was that they would be practised only if stories which were offered in the group lent themselves to being played back through these forms. A discussion was started by a resident at the

beginning of this session about a death at the home; someone very close to her had passed away. The conversation turned to the fact that deaths and arrivals were not always announced to the residents at the home which seemed disturbing to the group.

I extended the conversation to *their* arrivals, and asked whether they had been welcomed when they arrived? And how had it felt? Had there been any mixed feelings? Agatha expressed the concern of not knowing what it would be like when she arrived; we discussed this anxiety and the contrasting feeling of thankfulness that some participants had experienced on arrival – gratitude for safety, new friends. After discussing who could represent which feelings, we used Pairs to represent arrivals at Frederic Place; see Photo 3 below.

Photo 3. Pairs: “Arrival at Frederic Place” - feelings of anxiety and gratitude



I suggested that we try to do another Pairs formation, asking for a situation where there may be two feelings at the same time. I talked about the tension inherent in my experience of Christmas, a time of celebration, contrasted with the painful absence of my late father and brother. Veneese echoed similar feelings about Christmas – and we decided how her suggestion of “Festive yet Lonely” could be captured in Pairs; see Photo 4.

Photo 4. Pairs: “Festive and Lonely at Christmas”

– from the left: festive, lonely, festive, lonely.



Each of the pairs managed to portray both feelings.

I suggested that the choice of who would do which emotions should not be discussed, and that the performers should look at each other to see if their partner was portraying the same emotion as they were; if they saw that they were the same, they should change. This generally proved to be too difficult for the participants. Rather than allow the participants to have a sense that things could go wrong, and rather than demand a spontaneous decision-making process that seemed beyond the capabilities of some people, I chose instead to have the communal moment of discussion and decision-making.

The stories in this session did not lend themselves to playing back through the V-Narrative. My last training session was planned as an exercise in physical group work particularly for the proximity needed for Pairs and Fluid Sculpture which meant that once again the V-Narrative practice would probably not arise. I therefore had to rely on possibilities for the use of this short narrative form in the remaining large sessions.

3.3.5 Fourth Training Session – Proximity

Our last training session together, in week five of the ten weeks, was aimed at working closely together in pairs or a small group, to get used to physical proximity working as an ensemble or group of performers. Moloney (n.d.) describes Playback Theatre as Chorus Theatre, emphasising that as

groups work closely together and let go of a focus purely on self, then trust can grow, risks can be taken and a collective energy is experienced (n.p.).

We worked in pairs to make basic shapes with the arms and hands, for instance squares, circles, rectangles and triangles in different ways. We then moved onto the theme of sports, initially creating shapes of balls, for example beach balls, rugby balls, tennis balls. From here the pairs mimed sporting actions or games: one pair played hockey, another netball and a third pair played tennis. I then made two groups of four: one pair in the group created a tennis net, and the other two played tennis over the net, and then they swapped roles.

Next, we discussed emotions associated with sport: disappointment from losing and the elation of winning. We represented elation with a repeated cry of 'Yes!' while raising a fist and then freezing the shape of the upraised fist. The disappointment was symbolised through the slow opening of the fist and a pulling back down of the hand. Afterwards we had a conversation about the contrast between the two embodied emotions, particularly the pace and quality of the movement: the "Yes!" was strong and fast, while the pulling back was light and slow. As we all worked on the same movement in a synchronised, focused manner there seemed to be that collective energy that Moloney talks about. .

3.4 The Sessions with the Large Mixed Group

The large mixed group sessions occurred during the same four weeks as the training of the core group, as well as a further five weeks subsequent to the training. The participants who had learnt the Playback Theatre forms and who were present in the large meetings would practise their newly acquired skills to play back their co-residents' and each other's stories where appropriate and when possible. Although the focused teaching for the core group ended in the fourth week, training continued through practice in the large group.

The purpose of all the large mixed group sessions was the same, namely to encourage residents to share anecdotes and stories about themselves.

Each session aimed to use a stimulus, either from conversations which started spontaneously at the beginning of the meeting after the ritual beginning, or from themes that I introduced to encourage sharing of stories that could then be played back through the Playback Theatre.

3.4.1 Mixed Group First Session – Starting to Play Back

The first large session held during the research period took place a week after the core group had met for their introduction to Playback Theatre. Lindi, who regularly had a story to tell, quickly indicated that she wanted to share how she had made lunch for her teacher husband, and how his lunchbox was mistakenly swapped for another. Prior to the research period whenever Lindi told a story, because she was a stroke sufferer and extremely soft spoken, she would speak, and I would reiterate so that all could hear. This was possibly the inspiration for my title of this report “Echoes of our Anecdotes”.

When the story was over, I asked if anyone could volunteer to try and repeat any part of Lindi’s story that they remembered. Gertrude was brave and acted out one aspect of the story, the cooking of boerewors. This was the first moment of one of the core group playing back someone’s story in the mixed group – the first echoes of someone’s anecdotes by a fellow resident.

Following this a participant suddenly started to pray in her mother tongue and then said the Lord’s Prayer in English with others joining in. When she finished, I commented on the importance of the use of people’s vernacular languages and encouraged that people should feel free to speak in the vernacular if they wished.

I then asked if anyone else had a story about food. Gertrude offered a detailed, descriptive account of how people cooked and shared a slaughtered animal in Lesotho. Most of the time as she spoke, Simon repeated many of her words and phrases with soft echoes. I chose to repeat Gertrude’s story by summarising it with accompanying actions which was a foretaste of V-Narrative. I thought that as Simon had been so

engaged, he would be happy to copy my actions as is done in a V-Narrative, but he found it very difficult to switch from verbal to physical echoes of the story. I proceeded with the reiteration and it became a communal effort with Simon continuing to repeat many words and many people doing actions. Gertrude then told a Lesotho childhood memory which she repeated in the next session, and which we played back then.

Agatha then picked up the thread of a Lesotho theme and asked if people had seen the movie *e'Lollipop* which was set in Lesotho. From that discussion we chatted about the movie *Tsotsi* and we discovered Naledi's family member had been involved in it. I asked the group why they thought we were talking so much in this session. Simon commented that it was a combination of things; we agreed the combination could have been: Agatha's song, Lindi's story, the prayers, the discussion about food, and my "tuition" – the latter comment being offered by Agatha. If this was true, it would be a good recipe going forward as it seemed as though the aim of the research, which was to get the residents to talk to each other and share stories about themselves, had already been fulfilled.

3.4.2 Mixed Group Second Session – First Fluid Sculptures

This session occurred after two core group training sessions had taken place in the two previous weeks where the trainees had learned and practised Pairs and Fluid Sculptures and had been introduced to the V-Narrative. As a continuation of learning embodied responses, after we sang the Frederic Place family song, I suggested that we make symbolic gestures or physical representations of positive family images. We created shapes with our bodies, for example, 'love' – making an embrace with arms across the chest, or 'support' – stretching out an open hand. Lindi offered a metaphor for family in the image of *dipatsi* which is the seSotho word for firewood that has been bound together, and we then made actions of binding.

Lindi was then keen to once again tell a story, but I asked her to wait as I wanted to encourage others to share too. I explained that it could be any kind of story, for instance from that day, or from long ago. Nthabiseng

shared something from that morning when she had dreamed she had a piece job, but unfortunately on waking, she fell out of her wheelchair. I asked two participants to join me in a Fluid Sculpture: I knelt on the floor with two women behind me, one seated, one standing. They showed the dream's surprise of getting a job, while I showed the falling upon waking.

The second story was Gertrude's which told of a memory from childhood of the miracle of a Lesotho mountain, Thaba Bosiu, rising at midnight. I decided that this story could also be shown with a Fluid Sculpture, and after three women agreed to perform, we discussed what they would each like to represent; one would show the mountain rising, one would show Gertrude's grandmother calling the people, one would show the amazement of Gertrude. I asked Gertrude if she could see her story and with excitement in her voice she replied with a definitive, "Yes!" I said to the group who had just performed, "Thank you for doing that. Because that is the Playback. Even if you play back for five seconds, it's like we giving you a gift" (Hall 2017, Mixed Group 2nd Session, 02 November). Gertrude responded enthusiastically, "Oh it is!"

I now returned to Lindi who told a story she had heard about someone else. Rather than stopping her offering in the name of correctness, it seemed important to encourage any contribution from the group. The story was long and complicated so I decided that the best way to honour it was to summarise it in a V-Narrative instead of a Fluid Sculpture or Pairs. I said I would retell the story, and we chose people to do the actions, including Lorna who was blind. I asked her to do actions that she heard as she would not be able to copy the actions which I would offer as part of the narration. As I retold the story, Simon once again reiterated many of the phrases with soft echoes of recognition. The session ended with Nthabiseng spontaneously singing "Swing low, sweet chariot".

3.4.3 Mixed Group Third Session – A Singing Session

This session was scheduled to be a core-group training but this did not happen, as a broken lift meant that some participants could not get to the meeting room. Rainy weather further complicated movement to the

meeting room, and in the end only a few people gathered in a small upstairs room. As some of the core group were absent due to the broken lift, there was no Playback Theatre attempted in this session. Inspired by the prompting of Agatha many hymns were sung and the theme that arose from the songs was that of finding release beyond the present.

3.4.4 Mixed Group Fourth Session – Of Suns and Spirits

A week prior to this session the core group had practised ensemble work through “shapes” and “sports, and embodied the emotions related to winning and losing in sport. During our ritual singing, I wanted to build on this and give the larger group an experience of working physically with another person. Thus, as we sang a song “From the rising of the sun”, we did rising and falling actions of the sun in pairs and groups. I referred to the previous day’s hymn offered by Agatha which spoke of the day ending, and dark falling. After this I told a story called “How Squirrel Helped Free the Sun” (Bloch 2017).

The discussion that followed was about spirits, ghost and *tokoloshes*⁵. Some people shared anecdotes of people they knew who had seen ghosts. Veneese described her own story of being accompanied home by a white horse after her boyfriend left her standing on the pavement. After this story we made hand gestures to represent the idea of walking side by side. Gertrude shared her disbelief in ghosts; Anthony said that some people are born with the gift of seeing ghosts (“met die helm gebore”). Agatha said that the tokoloshe for some people is like the devil playing with you or working on your mind. Lest anyone had a sense of unease from the discussion, I suggested that we do strong actions with our arms to say ‘Go away!’ ‘Hamba!’, ‘Voetsek!’⁶ to any feelings of, or about ghosts, spirits or the devil. In this session as the facilitator or conductor I did not feel prompted to

⁵ A tokoloshe, according to the Collins Dictionary online, is “(in Bantu folklore) a malevolent mythical manlike animal of short stature” (Collins Dictionary 2020)

⁶ The English translation of ‘Hamba!’ which is an isiZulu word, is ‘Go!’; ‘Voetsek!’ is an Afrikaans derogatory term for ‘Go away’ or ‘Get lost!’ and is commonly used for animals.

represent anything through a Playback Theatre form, and merely chose to respond to some of the information with movement.

3.4.5 Mixed Group Fifth Session – What Moulds Us?

This session followed the fourth mixed session the previous week, with no core group training in between. It was my aim that the participants who had gained skills in the Playback Theatre forms would be able to practise their skills within the context of the mixed session. Due to the broken lift and the nature of the fourth session, the last implementation of the forms had been three weeks prior in the core group's third training session. In discussion at the beginning of this session I heard that the lift was still broken which meant that some people who were upstairs were stuck there and could not come to the session and others like Anthony (who was present) had been unable to get upstairs to go to bed the previous night.

For this session I brought in a stimulus for discussion and possible stories in the form of beach stones and beach glass that had been rubbed smooth in erosion processes. We passed these around the circle so that people could feel them; while we did this, we chatted about how they may have become smooth. I likened the process to how, as human beings, we too get our rough edges knocked off and rubbed smooth, but the metaphor seemed difficult to grasp. I realised in retrospect that the people more apt to understand metaphorical language, Beatrice and Lindi, were absent. I proffered that the broken lift which forced Anthony to sleep on the couch was like a process to rub people smooth. The metaphor still did not seem to make sense. I did not dwell on this but dived straight into a Fluid Sculpture with two others to show Anthony on the downstairs couch. Then Agatha spoke of climbing twenty stairs to bed which a few others represented through a Fluid Sculpture.

Shortly after this Agatha made a comment about how a diamond cannot be beautiful unless it is irritated a lot. Here it appeared that the stimulus of the beach stones had begun to weave a connecting thread in the conversation. I started to suggest a Pairs formation to show the irritation process of the diamond contrasted with its beauty, when Anthony suddenly said he had

worked in a diamond polishing factory, and one day he dropped a diamond he was polishing and could not go home until it was found. I felt the story suited a V-Narrative and so I asked for volunteers to help me to tell the story of this wheelchair-bound man in his former life. I took on the role as the narrator and asked for people to copy my actions as I told the story.

We eventually got back to the Pairs to represent the irritating of a diamond, and its subsequent beauty. Much negotiation was needed to establish who would perform which emotion or concept but eventually two pairs were settled. One succeeded in showing the contrasting elements associated with a diamond - see Photo 5, and the other pair both made diamond shapes - see Photo 6.

Photo 5. Pairs: “Irritating the diamond and the beauty of the diamond”



Photo 6. Pairs: This pair both made diamonds



A conversation ensued about other things that can be transformed into something beautiful: Agatha mentioned thread work, Anthony talked about

making furniture from rejects, and I mentioned gardening. We also spoke about how Zimbabwe's new president, Mnangagwa, being inaugurated that day, might bring new hope for Zimbabwe, and Gavin and I danced a Zimbabwe rising dance!

As we were ending Anthony remembered that as a truck driver on the way to Zimbabwe, he had eaten the lungs of the sheep. A short discussion about food took place which I decided to carry into the next session.

3.4.6 Mixed Group Sixth Session – Food and Fun

For this session I kept the theme of food which had sparked conversation in the last session. There was a lot of reminiscing about favourite dishes and treats. The recollections were initially around the eating of specific dishes, and then I asked people what they remembered about making food; a long conversation ensued about different ways of making dumplings. I referred to the heat of the steam as an agent to perfect the dumplings being similar to the water and soil smoothing the stones from the previous week. The conversation dissipated after this and so I suggested that I read a silly story to relax people and stimulate their creativity.

I read from a picture book called "Mama Don't Allow" (Hurd 1985) where a young group of possums who had formed a jazz band saved themselves from being eaten by alligators: the possums played a lullaby that put the alligators to sleep, and thus avoided being put in the pot. The link between this story and the preceding food discussion was a little tenuous, other than the potential possum stew. It may have been a better choice to steer the conversation in a direction based on the story, for example, 'Do you have a story of how you managed to get yourself out of a difficult situation?' But after the story I again asked if people had memories or stories of food. When little or no sharing happened, I suggested we move our bodies, and so we made dumplings including mixing and kneading actions and rising dough.

I then brought up a memory of my uncle making ice cream though I was uncertain how he did it. Much discussion about the technicalities of ice

cream making ensued, following which we did a small ice cream dance. We contracted our bodies as small as possible like the milk freezing and I suggested everybody then hug themselves because we were 'cold'! There was much laughter! The next question I asked was whether anyone had a favourite pudding. Due to the presence of Gavin who loved to dance, we embodied his favourite pudding in a shaky custard and jelly dance. There was again great laughter after which I announced that we would do another dance to summarise as many of the food stories as possible. I explained I would just make it up as we went, and that it would be like our training, our practice. I asked that they would just follow me. It was very similar to what would happen in a V-Narrative, but where the V-Narrative would involve only the actors, in this case the whole group could move.

After this Veneese gave a long description of fat cakes and pumpkin cakes and added a brief anecdote about sharing them with her sister and mother. It seemed to me that the food dance had woken Veneese up to share. As a conductor I missed a moment here to encourage the performers to play her story back to her, as the conversation suddenly got heated again about other delicacies and time was drawing to a close.

3.4.7 Mixed Group Seventh Session – Journeys to Frederic Place

This Open Session had been nervously anticipated by the participants and me because we had invited Matron and other members of the community to come and witness our way of working with Playback Theatre. It was almost the culmination of our work together in the research period; the following week would see one last mixed group session and a core group focus group discussion.

Matron arrived after we had done our usual ritual of singing and some movement; by the time she entered we were discussing how people had come to be at Frederic Place, a theme I had chosen for the day. In my role as a conductor, I asked the introductory questions, as well as giving many suggestions:

Does anybody actually have a memory of how it was when you came, or a memory around getting here. You know, was there a story, a story

to get here? Maybe you had to wait, maybe you had to wait a long time, [Sound of door, Matron entering] or maybe, yah, or maybe there was a waiting list. So, the story we are telling now M'am Thuli (Matron), and you can even tell your story, is there a story to how you got here? Did it take long? Was it easy? Did you hear about it maybe from a friend? Maybe you heard about it from a family member. I don't know how you guys got here. (Hall 2017, Mixed Group 7th Session, 07 December)

I then summarised the Playback Theatre short forms as an explanation for Matron and as a refresher for the participants. From here Beatrice and Anthony shared stories about their journey to the home. Beatrice's experience of disappointment - thinking she was not accepted into the home, was contrasted with the joy of her acceptance. This was performed as Pairs; see Photo 7.

Photo 7. Pairs: “Beatrice’s Disappointment and Joy”



Anthony shared that before arriving happily at Frederic Place, he had a brief stay at another home where the smoke of other residents bothered him. This anecdote was depicted in two Fluid Sculptures; see Photos 8 and 9.

Photo 8. Fluid Sculpture: “The Smoke Bothered Anthony”



Photo 9. Fluid Sculpture: “Anthony’s Happy Landing at Frederic Place”



Both these photos show the communal involvement in the moment of the playing back with Anthony and another seated person getting involved in the action; Matron looks on, equally involved in the expressiveness.

Anthony’s smoke story prompted Beatrice to explain her conundrum of being a smoker at Frederic Place and becoming very agitated when she could not go outside to smoke, due to the broken lift. Her story was also shared in two Fluid Sculptures; see Photos 10 and 11.

Photo 10. Fluid Sculpture: “Beatrice Agitated”



Photo 11. Fluid Sculpture: “Beatrice Calming Down”



Beatrice then encouraged Geraldine to tell her story which was played back in a V-Narrative: Beatrice retold the story while Veneese and Anthony, on either side of her tried to copy actions, though there were very few movements. At this point we were joined by Nannete, the home’s administrator who immediately offered her story of how she got to Frederic Place. Her anecdote was played back as Pairs but the paired emotions were separated between two groups of people, so it was more like two Fluid Sculptures; see Photo 12 for one of them.

Photo 12. Pairs: “Nannete Worried”



3.4.8 Mixed Group Eighth Session – Looking Back, Looking Forward

In this session there were two new people who joined the group, both of whom offered stories. Alan, one of the newcomers, directly after the Frederic Place family song, spoke about the importance of looking back at the stages in one's life and remembering the different chapters. I asked him if looking back made him feel anxious or content. He replied that it made him content and that it was almost like looking in a book. I decided Alan's experience could be shown in a Fluid Sculpture and we settled upon the people to do it and where they should be in the space. We discussed showing contentment, looking back and an open book; see Photo 13.

Photo 13. Fluid Sculpture: “Alan’s Contented Thinking Back”



Then Beatrice shared a dream about leaving Frederic Place and trying to have everything ready to go: in the dream she asked her daughter to type up her list which needed to be taken to the police station to be stamped. As

a group we briefly analysed the dream and then we saw it played back to her in Pairs; see Photo 14. The Pairs form was done in a way that seemed the easiest for the group: two people side by side did the sense of hopeful anticipation while the other two, side by side, showed the gesture of writing a list.

Photo 14. Pairs: “Beatrice’s Dream of Leaving Frederic Place”



This photo shows the modus operandus that emerged for most of our Pairs, that is, that two people, side by side did the same emotion or action.

The last story for this session came from the other new attendee, Robert, who shared the fact that he used to be a light-weight champion boxer. On further prompting from me he also spoke about his seven children and that his wife had died many years previously. I asked Beatrice if she was willing to narrate Robert’s story in a V-Narrative, while I did actions in front of her wheelchair and others copied me. She briefly relayed his details and we did some accompanying gestures and movement.

In this session, apart from these aforementioned stories and the playing back, there was again discussion about arrivals at the home and what made Frederic Place feel like home. There was also a tender moment of compassion when Agatha suggested that Nthabiseng, who had slipped down in her chair and had been propped up five times, “might like to show us the chariot coming to take us home” (Agatha 2017, Mixed Group 8th Session, 13 December).

This was the last session where Playback Theatre forms would be used for the retelling and encouraging of people’s stories; in other words, it marked

the end of the research period. I acknowledged this finality in the meeting and thanked those present. I also reminded the core group members that we would be meeting the next day for a focus group discussion. The observations that arose from the focus group will be discussed in the next chapter, woven into issues that arose from the research period.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the activities of the research period at Frederic Place and, in line with Mackey (2016), has highlighted Applied Theatre action as research as a conversation that includes many voices such as those from pre-research activities, to the work with the participants. The following chapter will offer reflections on and analysis about what occurred.

Chapter Four: Analysis

This chapter reflects on and analyses what occurred during the research period, with particular focus on the core group that learned and performed the Playback Theatre forms, including challenges in training, adjustments made to the forms, and omissions in the training. The effect of some individuals on the group is considered, as well as skills that were gained and themes that arose from the work. One open session (where Matron attended) is discussed in depth to analyse why it produced the most played back stories. An additional analysis considers the question of why people may be reticent to share stories in Playback Theatre. Lastly, I suggest that those who do not tell stories still have a voice in the proceedings.

4. 1 Reflections on the Teaching of the Forms

4.1.1 *The Challenge of Embodied, Spontaneous Responses*

An important part of learning Playback Theatre forms is honing the ability to listen to a teller's story and then respond physically to what you have heard. An embodied response for the elderly can be difficult if there has been trauma to the body, like a stroke, and also because it challenges the usual, sedentary lifestyle in the institutional setting. Even so participants showed willingness to learn and experiment with how the body, (even if only the upper body) could be used to express emotions in stories.

Training participants to practise physical representations of emotions happened during group discussions about people's told stories. The conversations included physical examples of an emotion, like raising hands for joy, which helped to build the actors' embodied response to what they had heard. When a participant spontaneously showed, for example, a contorted face, wringing hands or a twisted body, I would encourage everybody to also attempt the embodied emotion in order to practise the skill of physical responses.

The next challenge was to promote not only embodied responses, but ones that were spontaneous in nature. The participants needed to understand that the Playback Theatre forms required that each individual would make a

personal, improvised choice about how to respond to the teller's story. In a Playback Theatre performance, even though Fluid Sculptures and Pairs are performed as a group, each person offers their own unrehearsed, un-negotiated response. This was a level of sophistication that was not easy for people without any previous experience of embodiment and improvisational drama. As discussed in Chapter Two, spontaneity can be blocked by a number of factors which can also be compounded by age. Improvised responses were not necessarily beyond all of the participants' ability, but because it seemed to be a challenge for the majority, we usually negotiated everybody's offering, sometimes practised what might be done, and only then played the story back through the forms. Given the lack of previous experience this seemed an appropriate level of sophistication for the group. With a longer training period and more chances for performance, it would have been interesting to see whether some people may have become more adept at responding immediately and individually.

Sometimes Beatrice, the youngest and most alert member of the group clearly wanted to start the playing back immediately, without debate and negotiation. However, it was difficult to break an established procedure, and so actors' gestures were still discussed before performing. In addition, in the very last session, once Alan's sculpture had been seen, Alan gave his interpretation of it, which led to even more consultation before a reiteration of the sculpture. Although such discussions and reiterations somewhat slowed down our process, they were often some of the finest moments of shared group focus and activity; moments of community where echoes could be heard.

4.1.2 *Adjustments in the Performance of the Forms*

Minor adjustments were made to the forms as they were learned, practised and performed. In addition to our discussions before the performances of Fluid Sculptures and Pairs, we also had a ritualised technique for the start of a performance: somebody would count the performers into action with "One, two, three". This ritual which started during our training remained throughout the intervention and often involved a group participant in the

counting. Asking audience members to count in the action helped them to be active and possibly gave them a sense of importance.

The counting was used as a coordinating mechanism to get everyone into a performance mode at the same time. Some of the actors seemed nervous and needed encouragement; the counting and starting together seemed to embolden them. The counting resulted in an instant, frozen group image, instead of the usual build-up of the Fluid Sculpture or the Pairs, with one actor starting, and others coming in one after another. The frozen image also meant that the usual fluidity, or amoeba like quality (Mooney n.d., n.p.) of the Fluid Sculpture was lost.

Another adjustment was in Pairs, where instead of two pairs each encapsulating the conflicting emotions, we often had two people together, or even a group representing one emotion or state, while another pair (or group) showed the opposite feeling. This happened partly because of the difficulty of arranging people to be one behind the other with wheel chairs and walkers, and partly because actors seemed much more at ease working with another actor, doing the same emotion or action.

The V-Narrative form also seemed to be a challenging form for our group judging from the fact that only one person, Beatrice, would volunteer to verbally recount a story. She was gifted in the verbal rendition of the story and was competent at recalling details of tellers' stories, but hand gestures, an essential part of the form, were a challenge, as she had only one working arm. In addition, the placement of people around her wheelchair proved difficult. As a result, V-Narrative was the least used of the forms except where Beatrice or I did it. This is a little ironic as the actors in Pairs and Fluid Sculptures would often find it easiest to copy someone's actions (the norm in V-Narrative) than come up with their own.

4.1.3 Omissions in the Training – Diminishing a Sense of Theatre

I omitted to teach two very important rituals of Playback Theatre: firstly, the ritual of the conductor saying, "Let's watch" and secondly the ritual of the actors sending a story back to the teller. I may have spoken about them, but

I failed to implant them in the sessions as elements that would be consistently, ritualistically repeated; elements fundamental to this theatre form. In our training “Let’s watch” was replaced with counting “One, two, three” to indicate the start of a performed moment. Either of these utterances can help build a sense of anticipation in an audience, but the convention of “Let’s watch” could give the teller a feeling of importance (‘We are all going to watch *my* story’) that counting in would not.

A teller is further acknowledged when the actors complete their performance of a story and send the story back to the teller by looking them in the eye as if to say, ‘We see you and we know what we performed is of you, and you need to remain the owner’. Salas says this ritual of acknowledgement is challenging and it “takes courage to look at the teller with all of yourself” (1993, p. 99). She adds that the process enriches what is given to the teller (ibid). The actors need this ritual too as it reminds them that the story they have just performed is not theirs.

The omission of these two rituals may well have had a dampening effect on the overall sense of theatre in our sessions, and this in turn could have reduced the possibility of people feeling enticed to tell stories. Salas (1993) speaks of the heightened atmosphere of theatre that is gained by three elements: the presentation of the performance, the use of ritual, and the actors’ ability to maintain a focused presence (p. 97). It is important to have a sense of theatre in order to feel that a Playback Theatre gathering and performance are “different from day-to-day reality” (ibid). In our training we did not often move beyond the day-to-day; we stayed very much in meeting mode, or training, or rehearsal. There was one exception to this, and that is the open session which Matron and the Administrator attended. This session moved us into a heightened atmosphere and, I think because of this, it was the session that contained the largest number of stories that were played back through the Playback Theatre forms. I will now analyse the possible reasons for the success of this session.

4.2 The Session with a Sense of Theatre and Abundant Stories

Our open session which Matron and the Administrator attended was a like a mini Playback Theatre performance because we had an invited audience which helped us move beyond the feeling of the normal weekly sessions. I had given photocopied hand written invitations to members of staff, ranging from the receptionist, to head of housekeeping and nursing staff, to join us for our last big session. In our sessions we kept speaking of the fact that staff members, particularly Matron, might be present at this last mixed group meeting. Anticipation and nerves began to grow as we made a transition from being focused on ourselves, to including outsiders. Despite Matron's promises in the proposal stages of my research that I would have staff members with me all the time, we had hardly seen anyone at all, other than the occasional person passing by in the more open spaces, or someone popping their head around a door. Now it was time to step up to the plate, as it were.

The effect of an audience on the group may have been a factor in the success of this session, especially having a figure of authority in the audience. The effect of performing and being watched by outsiders, versus performing within a familiar group was palpable, and it no doubt influenced the proceedings; the need to impress Matron may well have been present. Matron did not tell a story but the group members were quick to show how they could play back stories of members of the group, and when the Administrator joined at the end of the session, she shared a story and the group played it back.

In the moments of our performance for the Matron, it is also possible that the participants wanted to share what competences they might have gained, and those who had received training wanted to perform because they felt empowered by previous sessions. Morell talks of elders' empowerment as having two key aspects – competence and self-definition (2003, p. 71). I believe she speaks of these phenomena as part of everyday life, essential to coping as elders – being able to function and knowing who one is. But her concept also relates to the residents sharing at the session with Matron;

they wanted to show off their newly acquired skills (competence), as well as tell their stories (self-definition).

Another factor that may have contributed to the success of the session with Matron was that the group may have wanted to do their best for me; many of them knew this was part of my work for university, and they wanted me to do well. I had seen this phenomenon when I had worked with a small group of women at St Luke's Church, Bosmont: an examiner came to see a session of ours, and the group were nervous on my behalf, and wanted everything to run perfectly.

Possibly the theme, "How we got to Frederic Place" also influenced the story-telling that day. I wondered whether the participants wanted Matron and the Administrator to hear their stories of, and feelings about how they came to be at the home – 'Please listen to my journey of how I came to be here, at this home, with you.' Moran and Alon (2011), in the context of work with people recovering from mental illness comment that "[r]e-authoring one's own story is the way to shed the identity of 'patient' and adopt a new identity" (p. 321). Seeing embodied representations of these journeys may have enabled Matron to see her residents as people beyond just residents or patients. Kaptani and Yuval-Davis (2008) speak of theatre as a way "we can see ourselves and our interactions between and with the Other/others, in a way that is more distant than in everyday life and thus possibly making it easier to become reflexive" (para. 3.2). It is not clear if reflexivity grew among the participants or even Matron and the Administrator, but it is hoped that the two key figures in the institution may have gained insight into the journeys and capabilities of the residents. They would have seen the residents as active (whether standing or sitting), participatory, creative, laughing, offering stories, analysing the stories' embedded emotions and giving suggestions for further activities.

Lastly, and definitely not least, this was also the first session where I stood back completely as a performer and held more strictly the role of conductor, with just a little side coaching, for instance helping actors with decisions about where to perform and also the choices of who might perform what. By

not performing I gave more power to the participants as actors; it was essential that they had the chance to show what they had learned, and they seized the opportunity. Their acquisition of new skills had come as a result of finding the courage to do something new in the context of Frederic Place, something more than sitting and talking or watching television. The result seemed to be a definite moment of community.

4.3 Skills Acquisition - an Act of Bravery

Participants who agreed to learn and use the Playback Theatre forms embarked bravely on a new journey. During the process of their training they could have developed some of the following skills: spontaneity, listening skills, responsiveness, movement skills, use of the body as a tool of expression, co-operation skills, being comfortable with the proximity of others, learning to trust others and oneself, performance skills and being of service to others. Even if the acquisition of any of these skills was miniscule, it was significant in terms of gaining competence which can be empowering, as Morell (2003) points out. Qualitative feedback from a Playback Theatre project with elderly Singapore participants showed positive comments, most notably “positive self-concept in learning new skills” (Chee et al. 2018, E34).

In the focus group discussion for my study, when asked whether they thought their listening skills had been sharpened, Beatrice responded affirmatively and another person commented that it was “important” (Gertrude 2017, Core Training Group Focus Group Discussion 14 December). On the matter of listening as an act of service, Gertrude said, “It’s appreciation” which I assumed could mean that the listener is showing the teller appreciation. Beatrice commented that it was like counselling and she said:

If Gertrude tells a story and I can tell it over, it means I did listen (others in background: “Yes”). I did listen. She was not just speaking in the wind. If you can play back that story it means you were listening” (Beatrice 2017, Core Training Group Focus Group Discussion 14 December).

As a brief addendum to this section on skills acquisition, I would add that as a facilitator I often err on the side of positive reinforcement, praising people for small achievements. While this can be validating for those receiving the praise, Morell (2003) says “celebrating strengths can inadvertently dishonour weakness” (p 80). This may have had an effect of discouraging those who felt they could not engage in the training or even the telling of stories.

4.4 The Effect of Individual Participants in the Group

There was at Frederic Place, as in any group setting, a remarkable mixture of people who could bring different contributions and strengths to the process of our group sessions. In an ideal world, if all of them could have been present at all sessions, there may have been scope for more learning, sharing of stories, Playback Theatre performance and building of community. I will highlight one or two people and the significance they had to the group and the research process.

Fox (1994) speaks of the prevalence of women in Playback Theatre activities: “[i]t seems women are closer to the expressive value of our kind of drama, while men, indoctrinated by a harder credo, hold themselves aloof” (pp. 93–94). Uleland (1993, n.p.) echoes this in her article on listening. During my research, women were the principal contributors to the activities, both in training sessions and big group meetings, and this was not just because the majority of residents were women.

During sessions before my Playback Theatre research, Lindi often told stories both about her own life and sometimes about others with great detail and a sense of drama. Due to a stroke, she spoke very softly and so I would repeat what she said for the group to hear. During the research period, due to her frailty she attended only the first two big group sessions but her early contributions were possibly an encouraging example for the others who may have wanted to share stories too.

Another woman, Agatha, would occasionally offer a personal story in the period before the Playback research sessions began, but shortly after we

started the training, we did not hear a personal story from her. I wondered if she saw herself strictly as a performer. From the little that I know of Agatha, from private conversations, it is possible that she may have taken the idea of service very seriously and felt she had to volunteer as much as possible to perform for others as an act of service.

One male member, Gavin, would often bring a much-needed energy into the group. His love for spontaneous dance would have the group engaged in laughter. Gavin's habit of grabbing at his crotch or slapping his stomach and buttocks could be disturbing but also caused an energy in the room that we needed more often than we experienced due to his very intermittent attendance. Fox (1994) comments that "spontaneity is juicy" (p 86), and "regressive behaviour is a necessary and healthy phenomenon, a process of transition from the everyday to the actors' world" (ibid).

4.5 Omission of Potential Attendees

As can be seen from previous chapters, elements of Christianity were an integral part of my work at Frederic Place, both before and during the research period. Acknowledging a belief in a higher being and a home in the afterlife seemed important for many of the conversations within the sessions. To ignore this aspect in myself and my participants may have caused me to gloss over an important aspect for the participants, many of whom appeared to be devout in their faith and very comfortable with our singing sessions. However, in relying specifically on Christian songs, I may have excluded other believers, for example, Muslims, or agnostics, or atheists. Frederic Place which was started by the Society of St Vincent de Paul, an international Catholic charity network, is not strictly a Catholic institution. I did not obtain specific details of residents' religious affiliations but I was aware that while a large majority of the people was Christian, some of whom attended a weekly Catholic mass on the premises, there were also those who did not ascribe to this faith.

Despite the fact that my Christian worldview wanted to treat all participants with equal importance, a democratic premise shared with Applied Drama, having started my work at the home under a Christian banner, with Bible

stories, I may have unwittingly excluded potential participants in the research period. For some residents the Christian tag may have prevented them from attending the more open and inclusive Playback Theatre sessions.

4.6 Information from the Residents and the Theme of Home

The Playback Theatre event holds the thoughts and stories of the audience and thus acts (even if only for a moment) as a capturing or documenting of the knowledge from a group of people. Stories and anecdotes by the residents revealed their feelings about experiences at Frederic Place and in the process exposed information about the home. In Session Three with the core group, we spent time discussing the death of another resident; there was sadness at the loss of the man, a boyfriend of one of the participants, and there was also a sense of being uninformed. The group members communicated that when residents either arrived at the home, or died, they felt they were not always kept up to date, or informed timeously of the events. This particular discussion did not re-surface, so perhaps death notices and welcome announcements became better managed but at that moment it highlighted residents' sense of a lack of information, and feelings of an institution versus a home.

The phenomenon of the red thread connecting stories was evident within individual sessions, as well as across all the sessions held during the research period. The theme of home was one of the most recurrent themes across all the sessions, including feelings about the participants preparing to come to the home, their feelings upon arrival, and in the case of Beatrice, the hope of leaving the institution to go to her own home after being fitted with a prosthesis. "Here we are at Frederic Place", adapted to the tune of the nursery rhyme "Mary had a little lamb", had different starting lines, for example "We came by faith to Frederic Place" but always ended with the words, "We are family", reiterating the theme of home.

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was another very frequent song request; this song with the line "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming forth to carry me home" represented a vision of home beyond Frederic Place, beyond earth. For

many people, an institution for the elderly is their last home, and I often had the sense that the chariot was being pleaded for quite passionately. It could be said that begging to be taken home was a negation of any claims made about Frederic Place being a home; the song expressed what no one could possibly say, or dare put into words.

At times I wondered how much more may have been left unspoken by participants. Hutt and Hoskings discuss how an audience at a Playback Theatre event instinctively offers what can be handled:

[t]he group that gathers for a PT performance will tell and hear what they are able to tell and hear which also seems to acknowledge that these subconscious conversations are limited to the palate of those who attend and participate (paraphrased in Sanjani and Johnson n.d., p.6).

My experience at Frederic Place confirms this as the stories and themes that arose were never about traumatic, conflicted events in people's lives; neither from my prompting, nor from the offerings of the participants.

4.7 What Makes it Difficult for People to Share Stories?

Zanjam (2011) talks of the moment of silence that is experienced at a Playback Theatre performance when the conductor asks for stories. She suggests that after the request of the conductor, the audience "are either thinking of which story to share or deciding whether to share or not" (p.75). She offers that some people may be too afraid to share in public, while others are piecing a story together and others are "still surveying the environment to see what is happening in the space" (ibid). Dennis also acknowledges that some audience members may find that the "improvised nature of the performance can represent too great a challenge" (2007, p. 68). She comments that anxiety, fear or uncertainty can also prevent participation (ibid).

In a performance that I attended by the Drama for Life Playback Theatre similar questions came to mind, particularly when three audience members who spoke about having a story, expressed that they had been reluctant or scared to share. One person said, "We are afraid to bring our stories; we put other stories forward as our self". Another member of the gathering

commented “Our biggest fear is who is listening, and it’s hard when the self is listening”. Perhaps there is the fear that we will recognise ourselves, and we don’t want to see ourselves or parts of ourselves.

The question of people’s apparent reticence to share stories – be it at Frederic Place in my pre-research and research periods, or as an audience member in Playback Theatre performances at Drama for Life at the University of Witwatersrand often intrigued and even worried me. As a phenomenon within my research I often wondered, ‘Are people holding back because I have not made them welcome, comfortable or empowered enough?’ And as an audience member in a Playback Theatre performance, I would feel uncomfortable with the silence in the room and begin to wonder if I *ought* to take on the responsibility of telling an anecdote or story.

In a focus group discussion with my core group, when I put the question of people seeming to be reluctant to share stories there were some quick, short answers: “It’s just boredom, laziness” (Beatrice 2017, Core Training Group Focus Group Discussion 14 December). “And some of them are shy” (Gertrude, *ibid*). “They are a bit shy” (Agatha, *ibid*). It is true, some people were shy to speak in front of the group but they were able to speak to me in personal conversations. When I suggested to the focus group that some people may not share because they have trouble remembering things, Gertrude retorted, “No, it’s not that, it’s not that. If there is anything that you saw during your lifetime, you can’t forget it” (Gertrude 2017, Core Training Group Focus Group Discussion 14 December). I questioned, to myself, ‘One may remember, but is one willing, or more importantly, *able* to tell?’

It seemed to me that many of my participants were *unable* to tell stories of themselves, whether from the distant or recent past. I did not know participants’ medical conditions, and chose not to enquire, but it is likely that some of them may have suffered from dementia which may have made it difficult for them to share stories given the disease’s negative impact on memory, cognitive function, language et cetera. To be able to share personal stories, one needs to have a good sense of self, and have the ability to say, ‘This is me, I am here, and these are things that happened in

my life'. Fox quotes a 20th century neurologist, Oliver Sacks: "To be ourselves, we must have ourselves – possess, if need be re-possess, our life stories. We must 'recollect' ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative of ourselves" (Sacks in Fox 1994, p. 186). Many participants were seemingly unable to 'have' themselves in order to share. Baldini (2019) speaks similarly of the skill of personal sharing, "The capability to narrate oneself, to tell oneself, is linked to the capacity to consider oneself as an active subject" (p.139). The ability to be present, recollect stories and narrate them seems to demand much competence and self-definition, phenomena which as Morell pointed out, lead to empowerment.

On the subject of sharing in a Playback performance Fox said that "it's fine to tell just that part that you want to tell. Even though there's more" (Fox & Dauber: n.d. p. 6). For many, whether at Frederic Place or anywhere, it seemed that sharing even a small part of a story was daunting. Hutt and Hosking speak of the courage needed,

... telling requires a willingness and sometimes courage to 'put oneself on the map' and to brave the unpredictability of how your story will come out and how it will be 'played back' (2004, p. 6).

I wondered if some of the reticence at Frederic Place may have been based on cultural expectations that men and women should not share. In the last focus group session with the core group this suspicion was negated: Veneese said "We talk a lot" (Veneese 2017, Core Training Group Focus Group Discussion 14 December), referring to conversations across gender lines.

The use of mainly English may have had a limiting factor on the sharing of stories in that it represents one of the languages of the once dominant, oppressive regime of apartheid under which the majority of the residents would have suffered. Telling your story requires you to be vulnerable but this can be difficult; Brene Brown speaks of how trauma takes away the ability to be vulnerable (Brown cited in Brickel 2017). Some people may have felt threatened or alienated by the dominance of English in the sessions, and being denied the use of their mother tongue may have led to a reluctance to share stories.

4. 8 In the Absence of Telling, One Still Has Voice

Training residents at Frederic Place to do Playback Theatre short forms, was to enable more sharing within the community, and to allow individuals to have greater voice; here I take Noble's definition of voice: "having voice is not limited to the act of speaking, but also includes the performative act, the interactional and interrelational" (2002, n. p.). The performative acts within the Playback experience at Frederic Place were mostly small gestures or expressions – open hands, raised arms, tilted heads, a slight twist in the upper body, a contorted face or a smile. These offerings allowed the tellers of stories and the audience to witness a form of communication beyond that of the spoken word.

It was noteworthy that at times the silent, shy, or seemingly mentally challenged may have used their voice at some time during the group gatherings. Frances never spoke in any of the sessions but she was given voice; her attempts to sing, the lifting of her hands in song, even if only as an afterthought, were soft echoes among the anecdotes. The sessions were moments in her life at Frederic Place that invited her to do more than just sit; she was encouraged to partake in something beyond words.

Conclusion

This chapter analysed the training of participants who learned the Playback Theatre forms, and discussed the adjustments to the forms that were necessary due to the challenge of spontaneity and the participants' mobility issues. The omission of "Let's watch!" and the giving of a story back to the teller were discussed as possible factors that may have diminished a sense of theatre in the research period. A sense of theatre is seen as a tool that could encourage participants to tell stories. People's reticence to tell stories was discussed and it was suggested that people who do not tell stories still have voice in the gathering.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This chapter offers an answer to the research question “*To what extent can the use of Playback Theatre short forms and short narrative forms help elicit anecdotes and stories in a group of elderly residents at Frederic Place – Home for the Aged, Coronationville, Johannesburg?*” It also discusses limitations in the work at Frederic Place and gives five recommendations for similar work with institutionalised elderly. The chapter ends with personal reflections on the process.

5.1 Answering the Research Question

My research questioned the extent that Playback Theatre short forms could help engender sharing of personal stories in a group of residents at Frederic Place. From my subjective standpoint I would say that sharing amongst the participants did increase. The presence of more voices in the room was particularly apparent when the absence of one woman, a regular teller of stories before the use of Playback Theatre, was taken into consideration; even without her contributions, there was a significant number of stories shared, and group conversation. Whether the sharing was a direct result of the Playback Theatre or the process of meeting regularly in a facilitated, creative, reflective practice is debatable.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the session that Matron and the Administrator attended contained the largest number of stories that were played back through the Playback Theatre forms. The echoes of good feelings in the room were palpable after this last mixed group session – the echoes of the anecdotes shared with, and performed by and for the community.

5.2 Limitations in the Project

The irregular attendance of participants was a limitation in this project. Residents had to go for hospital visits, sometimes they were ill and stayed in bed, and some were sometimes reluctant to move, or be moved (in the case of wheelchairs) from their positions in the common areas of the home to the room/s where we had our sessions. The apparent unwillingness could have

been a reluctance to lose a comfortable spot, or may have been related to medication or depression.

There was a lack of practical support from Frederic Place. Other than sometimes helping to get participants to the assigned room, staff members were not present at the sessions. They were either busy with other residents, or had not been informed that they should attend sessions, or did not understand how their presence could be of benefit in the group and to themselves.

In terms of the background research and the written aspects of this report a limitation was, except for the article about a study in Singapore, a dearth of articles about Playback Theatre with institutionalised elderly. One promising thesis by Rooney (2014) had no relevant information, because as discussed by the writer, she discovered too late that the senior communities where she was studying had not experienced Playback Theatre.

5.3 Recommendations

The first recommendation I would make for similar projects would be to have diverse participants from across the institution, for instance not just residents, but staff and even family where possible. Fuller participation by further members of the institution's community would engender greater community cohesion, and build more knowledge of the community at the same time. An advantage of this is that the caregivers would begin to see the residents differently which seemed to be apparent when Matron came into our last session. The residents would also have a different perspective of the care givers – not just seeing staff as those who are bossing them about, but as co-creatives in an artistic endeavour.

My second recommendation for Playback Theatre work with institutionalised elderly (which takes place over a short period of time) is to encourage flexibility in the implementation of the forms. Where it is necessary, because of people in wheel chairs or those using walkers, the accepted group formations for short forms may need to be adapted, for example Fluid Sculptures or Pairs may sometimes be in a line formation

versus the usual cluster or clump of actors. Also, where participants (previously unexposed to theatre) are nervous and shy, one could enable work with a partner; for example, where in Pairs, four people usually offer individual responses, with the inexperienced elderly there could be allowance for competent performers to be leaders with others following.

The presence of more staff and family could possibly help to fulfil my third recommendation which is to work with the diversity of the languages in the group; using a multiple language approach for facilitation, conducting, storytelling and playing back of stories could encourage more participation and storytelling. Hutt and Hoskins speak of encouraging participants at a New Zealand Summer school to use their own languages, and they observed that “rather than causing confusion in the listener it seems to engender a different kind of attentiveness to the person, their body language and their being” (2004, p. 36).

Fourthly in the instance of Playback Theatre training at an institution like Frederic Place I would recommend, if possible, that the participants are given the opportunity to watch some Playback Theatre performances done by trained practitioners. While this could be intimidating, it may also be inspiring. Seeing a performance would be dependent on the availability of Playback Theatre performers, a budget, and a suitable space to make it as big a community event as possible. In addition, if the majority of the residents and staff saw a full Playback Theatre event before the training, it may lend the training more credence and allow it the space and honour it deserves.

Fifthly I would recommend a use of technology in the training, like showing photos and video clips from the sessions with the participants so that they can see their progress. On the one occasion that I showed my participants the photos of their Fluid Sculptures, some of them were very excited to see themselves. I was also able to use the photos as a teaching tool, for example the participants in the Fluid Sculptures were too far apart and I could advise how moving closer to each other would give the sculpture a better form.

5.4 Personal Growth as a Result of the Research Process

Throughout my research period and the writing of this research report I often had in mind the fact that I am part of the next cohort of elderly – the old people of tomorrow. Burack-Weiss and Brennan in writing a manual for gerontological social work supervision note that when working with the elderly, a care giver is faced with one's future self – “the clients served not only *could* be, but *will* be, us” (1991, p. 2). I have frequently asked questions about my own future – ‘what ifs?’ – ‘What if I am unable to ...?’ – ‘What if I suffer great pain?’ Working at Frederic Place and very recently at Dana Tehuis, a frail care unit within a retirement home in my village, I have come to ask new questions which are focused away from myself and my fears, for example ‘How can communication be optimised *between* the elderly and caregivers?’ And, ‘How can both the caregivers *and* the elderly be given chances to tell their stories?’ I ask these questions, because as much as the building of community of a group of residents, as I was aiming for in this MA research, is important, the bonds between all the people present in an old age institution are essential for combating isolation of the residents. Playback Theatre for the entire community is definitely one possible answer to building bonds and creating connection.

The completion of this research report has spanned three years. It has been interesting to return to recordings of sessions more than three years after they took place. I recognised that where I had felt critical of myself or questioned myself for not being able to produce stories amongst my participants, I returned with a greater softness for self, and took pride in my work. I heard in the recordings that there had been a lot of talking in some sessions – not necessarily stories – as defined by a plot et cetera, but statements of who people were or who they had been were shared. My urgency for action had somehow blinded me to seeing the efficacy of those conversations amongst the group of participants. Distance provided me a softer gaze which almost begs the question about research and the urgency it seems to impose on the researcher and researched.

5.5 My Research Experience in a Playback Theatre “Corridor”

I was asked at the late stages of writing up this research report how I would choose to play back the experience of my research through a Playback Theatre form. My mind immediately reached for a Fluid Sculpture – but what experience or emotion would it be describing? There was no time for an answer, because suddenly I imagined my research and this report being described through Corridors – a Playback Theatre form that can express a non-linear story layered with many emotions and experiences. I imagined four people in their different corridors representing aspects of my story:

... a long drawn out process, hating the writing, hating myself, hating aging, resisting a natural process, not understanding degrees of dementia, resisting academia, getting happily lost in the reading, feeling unsupported, loving my participants, missing them, not wanting to be like them, trying to save them, not knowing who my participants are, not wanting to write, only wanting to play, only wanting to allow people.. to talk ... to breathe ... to be ... to know each other ... to be accepted, to connect, in community.

Conclusion

This chapter concluded that the use of Playback Theatre short forms and short narrative forms may have helped to increase the amount of personal storytelling amongst residents at Frederic Place. It also gave five recommendations for similar work: the inclusion of more members of the community in the training and Playback Theatre performances, flexibility in the learning and implementation of the Playback Theatre forms, use of more languages to suit the group if it has diverse languages, greater use of technology in the training, and the showcasing of Playback Theatre for the community of the institution as a precursor to such an intervention.

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APPENDIX A (pages 87 – 94)

Copies of Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms



Drama for Life - Masters Research Project – *Echoes of Our Anecdotes – Playing with Playback at Frederic Place* Participant Information Sheet for Ongoing Member of Story Group

Dear Frederic Place Resident

My name is Sue Hall and I am doing my Master's degree in Applied Drama and Theatre at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. I would like to invite you to participate in my research project called ***Echoes of our Anecdotes – Playing with Playback at Frederic Place***. I would like to find out how much Playback Theatre short forms called ***Fluid Sculptures, Pairs*** and the short narrative form, ***V-Narratives*** can possibly help the Story Group members to tell more stories to each other at Frederic Place.

Fluid Sculptures is a form where a small group of people interpret an idea or feeling in a story through their bodies; ***Pairs*** is where people in pairs show two opposite feelings in a story, and the short narrative form, ***V-Narratives*** is where a story is re-told by one person, and the people behind that teller copy his or her movements.

I would like to invite you to keep attending our Story Group where some of the members will be joining me in the moments when we re-tell the stories. They will be learning the Playback forms described above and they and I will use them together. I would like to see if the Playback tools help people to share their stories in the group over 12 forty five minute sessions.

There are no risks involved in this addition to the Story Group time, but there may be benefits that involve feeling more a part of the group, and feeling good about your story being told and heard. There are no financial benefits to this research process either.

I would like to ask your permission to record the sessions on my voice recorder on my phone to use in my research write up. I would also like to ask you if I may take pictures in moments of Playback to show the examiners how the Playback forms were learnt and used. These recordings and photos will only be used in the research report. Wits University, my supervisor, Frederic Place and you as participants in this research will know the result through the final written report. And you can request a copy of the research study if you wish.

If you choose to remain in the Story Group during these research sessions, please know that you are free to withdraw from the group for any reason, at any time, should you wish. If you find the experience difficult, or stressful, Matron, Sister or the Social Worker can be called upon for help.

Should you have any queries please contact me or my supervisor on the contacts below.

Researcher: Sue Hall Email: sue.hall1@wits.ac.za or sue.lerato.hall@gmail.com
Cell: 082 663 3836 or 011 717 4948

Supervisor: Hazel Barnes Email: barneshaze@gmail.com Cell: 076 334 2231 or 033 386 4959

Wits Ethics Committee Contact: Shaun Schoeman -
shaun.schoeman@wits.ac.za

Tel.: 011 717 1408 or hrec-medical.researchoffice@wits.ac.za

Drama for Life - Masters Research Project – Sue Hall

Echoes of Our Anecdotes – Playing with Playback at Frederic Place

Consent Form for Participation in Study as a Member of the Story Group

I, _____ am willing to participate in Sue Hall's research project. I have been promised that the researcher will not identify me by name but will make use of the following pseudonym (false name) or initials instead _____.

The purpose of my participation in this project has been explained to me and is clear, and I understand what my participation will involve.

I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in her research report
YES NO

I agree that the sessions will be audio recorded
YES NO

I agree that the researcher may take photos of me
YES NO

I agree that the information I provide may be used anonymously by other researchers following this study
YES NO

I understand that I can withdraw from the group at any time. YES NO

Name: _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

**Drama for Life - Masters Research Project –
Echoes of Our Anecdotes – Playing with Playback at Frederic Place
Participant Information Sheet for those Learning to Use Playback**

Dear Frederic Place Resident

My name is Sue Hall and I am doing my Master's degree in Applied Drama and Theatre at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. I would like to invite you to participate in my research project called ***Echoes of our Anecdotes – Playing with Playback at Frederic Place***. I would like to find out how much Playback Theatre short forms called ***Fluid Sculptures, Pairs*** and the short narrative form, ***V-Narratives*** can possibly help the Story Group members to tell more stories to each other at Frederic Place.

Fluid Sculptures is a form where a small group of people interpret an idea or feeling in a story through their bodies; ***Pairs*** is where people in pairs show two opposite feelings in a story, and the short narrative form, ***V-Narratives*** is where a story is re-told by one person, and the people behind that teller copy his or her movements.

I would like to invite you to join a new, small group to whom I will teach these Playback Theatre forms. This group will be separate to our regular Story Group. The idea is that this small group will use the Playback forms in the big, ongoing Story Group when we all meet together. I would like to see if the Playback tools help people to share their stories in the group over 12 forty five minute sessions.

There are no risks involved in learning and using these forms, as you can do the shapes and movements to fit to what your body can cope with. There are no financial benefits involved in this research, but there may be benefits that involve feeling more a part of the group, and feeling good about your story being told and heard.

I would like to ask your permission to record the sessions on my voice recorder on my phone to use in my research write up. I would also like to ask you if I may take pictures in moments of Playback to show the examiners how the forms were

learnt and used. These recordings and photos will only be used in the research report. Wits University, my supervisor, Frederic Place and you as participants in this research will know the result through the final written report. And you can request a copy of the research study if you wish.

If you choose to participate in this new group learning the Playback, you are free to withdraw from the group for any reason, at any time, should you wish. If you find the experience difficult, or stressful, Matron, Sister or the Social Worker can be called upon for help.

Should you have any queries please contact me or my supervisor on the contacts below.

Researcher: Sue Hall Email: sue.hall1@wits.ac.za or sue.lerato.hall@gmail.com
Cell: 082 663 3836 or 011 717 4948

Supervisor: Hazel Barnes Email: barneshaze@gmail.com Cell: 076 334 2231 or
Land line: 033 386 4959

Wits Ethics Committee Contact: Shaun Schoeman - shaun.schoeman@wits.ac.za
Tel.: 011 717 1408 or hrec-medical.researchoffice@wits.ac.za

Drama for Life - Masters Research Project – Sue Hall

Echoes of Our Anecdotes – Playing with Playback at Frederic Place

Consent Form for Participation in Study as a Member of Playback Group

I, _____ am willing to participate in Sue Hall's research project. I have been promised that the researcher will not identify me by name but will make use of the following pseudonym (false name) or initials instead _____.

The purpose of my participation in this project has been explained to me and is clear, and I understand what my participation will involve.

I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes

in her research report YES NO

I agree that the sessions will be audio recorded YES NO

I agree that the researcher may take photos of me YES NO

I agree that the information I provide may be used anonymously by other researchers following this study YES NO

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time YES NO

Name: _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____



Drama for Life - Masters Research Project –
Echoes of Our Anecdotes – Playing with Playback at Frederic Place
Participant Information Sheet for Focus Group

Dear Research Participant

For the last part of my research project, ***Echoes of our Anecdotes – Playing with Playback at Frederic Place***, I would like to invite you to be part of a group discussion, called a **Focus Group**. In this group discussion we would discuss how the process of introducing the Playback went; and particularly, we will look at how much the Playback Theatre might have helped the Story Group members to tell more stories to each other at Frederic Place, or not.

There are no risks involved in this Focus Group, but there may be benefits that involve feeling more a part of the group, and feeling good about talking about what happened in the Story Group's meetings. There are no financial benefits to being in this Focus Group either.

I would like to ask your permission to record the Focus Group discussion on my voice recorder to use in my research write up. This recording will only be used in the research report.

If you choose to be in the Focus Group discussion, please know that you are free to withdraw from the session for any reason should you wish. If you find the experience difficult, or stressful, Matron, Sister or the Social Worker can be called upon for help.

Should you have any queries please contact me or my supervisor on the contacts below.

Researcher: Sue Hall Email: sue.hall1@wits.ac.za or sue.lerato.hall@gmail.com
Cell: 082 663 3836 or 011 717 4948

Supervisor: Hazel Barnes Email: barneshaze@gmail.com Cell: 076 334 2231 or 033 386 4959

Wits Ethics Committee Contact: Shaun Schoeman shaun.schoeman@wits.ac.za
Tel.: 011 717 1408 or hrec-medical.researchoffice@wits.ac.za

Drama for Life - Masters Research Project – Sue Hall

Echoes of Our Anecdotes – Playing with Playback at Frederic Place

Consent Form for Participation Focus Group

I, _____ am willing to participate in Sue Hall's research project **Focus Group**. I have been promised that the researcher will not identify me by name but will make use of the following pseudonym (false name) or initials instead _____.

The purpose of my participation in this Focus Group has been explained to me and is clear, and I understand what my participation will involve.

I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in her research report
YES NO

I agree that the sessions will be audio recorded YES NO

I agree that the information I provide may be used anonymously by other researchers following this study YES NO

I understand that I can withdraw from the discussion at any time
YES NO

Name: _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B – Copy of Ethics Clearance Certificate follows on p. 95



Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 Hall

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: H17/11/17

PROJECT TITLE

Echoes of our Anecdotes - Playing with playback at Frederic Place - Home for the aged

INVESTIGATOR(S)

Miss S Hall

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT

Wits School of Arts/

DATE CONSIDERED

17 November 2018

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

Approved

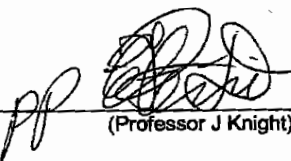
EXPIRY DATE

08 May 2021

DATE

09 May 2018

CHAIRPERSON


(Professor J Knight)

cc: Supervisor : Ms H Barnes

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10004, 10th Floor, Senate House, University. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/we fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee. **I agree to completion of a yearly progress report.**

Signature

Date

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix C Table of Sessions

				TABLE OF SESSIONS	
Week	Day and Date	Place session was held	Group Name and Session #	Themes and Stories	Playback Theatre Forms practised or other Applied Theatre Approaches Used
Week 1	Thurs 12.10	Upstairs Foyer	Small Core Group Introductory Meeting	Introduction to the research	Discussion
				A made-up scenario: "No water and a Mouthful of Colgate"	Mimed responses or actions
Week 2	Thurs 19.10	Meeting Room	Mixed Group 1 st session	"Time Waits for no Man"	Song remembered by Agatha; discussed with group
				"Give me Oil in my Lamp"	Group singing
				Lindi: "My Husband's Swapped Lunch Box!"	Gertrude replays an aspect of the cooking: mime, explained action
				Gertrude: "Lesotho Braai"	V-Narrative type summary with actions
Week 2	Friday 20.10	Upstairs Foyer	Small Core Group 1 st training session		Songs
				"Lesotho Braai" recollected for Fluid Sculptures	Fluid Sculpture
				"Toenail Cutting" a shared recollection of the morning	Fluid Sculpture
				"Late on First Day at Work" - a social worker's story	Fluid Sculpture

Week 3	Friday 27.10	Upstairs Foyer	Small Core Group 2nd training session	Fluid Sculptures revised in discussion	
				Social worker's story repeated for Introduction to Pairs; emphasis on contrasting feelings	Pairs
				Agatha: "An old friend comes to visit"	Pairs
				Beatrice: "Gavin Takes his Sweetheart to the Gate"	V-Narrative
				Naledi: "My Son Wanted to Get a Job and Leave Me!"	Pairs
Week 4	Thurs 2.11	Meeting Room	Mixed Group 2 nd session		Songs, Stretches with arms
				"Here we are at FP, we are family"	FP Song – Family
				Symbolic representations of family	Work in pairs to show representations of family with hands and arms
				Nthabiseng: "Waking from a Dream about a Piece Job and Falling"	Fluid Sculpture
				Gertrude: "Childhood Memory of Thaba Bosiu Rising"	Fluid Sculpture
				Lindi's story of another woman's experience: "The Miracle at Sea"	V-Narrative
Week 4	Friday 3.11	Upstairs Foyer	Small Core Group 3 rd training session	Discussions about death at FP and new arrivals	
				Mixed Feelings about Arriving at FP	Pairs

				Mixed Feelings about the Festive Season	Pairs
Week 5	Friday 10.11	<i>Upstairs Foyer</i>	Small Core Group 4 th training session		Songs
				Making Shapes - Circles, Triangles, Squares, Rectangles	Working together in pairs and groups
				Sports - e.g. tennis, hockey - as suggested by participants	Making shapes, mime Slow motion movements Frozen moments
Week 6	Thurs 16.11	<i>Upstairs Foyer (lift broken)</i>	Mixed Group 3 rd session	A singing session to combat the bad weather outside	Songs
Week 6	Friday 17.11	<i>Meeting Room (lift broken)</i>	Mixed Group 4 th session		Songs
				"How Squirrel Helped Free the Sun", Bloch, J. https://nalibali.org/story-library/multilingual-stories/squirrel-and-sun	Story time
				Miming the rising and setting of the sun	Working together in pairs
				Tokoloshes, Spirits and Ghosts	Group discussion Hand gestures for "Walking together"&"Go Away Tokoloshe!"
Week 7	Friday 24.11	<i>Meeting Room</i>	Mixed Group 5 th session		Songs
				Stones, Sea Glass	Objects passed around as a

		(lift still broken)		What has moulded you?	stimulus for discussion and stories
				Anthony: "Sleeping on the Downstairs Couch"	Fluid Sculpture
				Agatha: "Climbing the Stairs to Go to Bed"	Fluid Sculpture
				Anthony: "Losing a diamond in the polishing factory"	V-Narrative Pairs
Week 8	Thur 30.11	Meeting Room	Mixed Group 6 th session		Songs
				"What Mama Don't Allow" Smith, J. 1989 NY Books, NY	Story time
				Sharing about favourite foods	Interpretive movements/dance A 'group V-Narrative'
Week 9	Thurs 7.12	Meeting Room	Mixed Group – Open Session - an invitation to staff and interested residents for "...a time of stories and sharing.."		Songs
				Symbols of Family	Partner work - embodied expression
				What was your journey to FP like?	Discussion
				Anthony - "Happy Landing"	Fluid Sculpture
				Beatrice - "Needing a Smoke"	Fluid Sculpture
				Geraldine - "I Had a Fall at Home"	V-Narrative

				Nannette - "Getting Organised"	Pairs
Week 10	Wed 13.12	<i>Upstairs Foyer</i>	Mixed Group 8 th session (Two new-comers)		Songs
				Alan - "Looking Back, Remembering Stages of Life"	Fluid Sculpture
				Beatrice - "A Dream -Planning her Departure from FP"	Fluid Sculpture
				Robert - "My Arrival at FP "	V-Narrative
Week 10	Thurs 14.12	<i>Meeting Room</i>	Small Core Group 5 th session	Small Core Group - Focus Group	Discussion

END