

Beyond the Walls

Louisa Borg-Costanzi Potts, Programme Manager and **Kate Wakeling**, Research Fellow, Learning and Participation at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance reflect on an innovative piece of artist-research, offering audiences personal insight into the inner workings of a participatory arts project for people with dementia in a care home

Chairs are set out in a neat circle. Chatter from other parts of the care home flickers in and out of earshot. A snippet of music plays. A tea cup clinks. Participants hesitantly find their way to a chair in the circle, greeted by a warm smile. Slowly, gently, the dancing begins...

Choreographed and performed by Trinity Laban dance artists Lucy Evans and Stella Howard and lasting 45 minutes to live music, the piece aims to conjure the lived experience of being present at a care home arts intervention, reimagining the evaluation report as a living, breathing, multi-sensory encounter. The piece thus takes flight from conventional accounts of participatory projects and aims instead to spark new conversations about how we might more effectively express and share the value and meaning of participatory dance.

Created in 2016, *Beyond the Walls* is a collaboration between Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance and reminiscence arts organisation Age Exchange. From 2012-2015, Age Exchange worked closely with researchers from Royal Holloway University of London to explore the impact of their work in care homes on the well-being of participants with dementia. At the close of this research, Age Exchange wanted to find an alternative way to demonstrate the impact of its work to funders and other parties – but in a more dynamic, immersive and multi-sensory way than the customary end-of-project report. So, Age Exchange commissioned Trinity Laban's Learning and Participation (Dance) team to work on a performance that encapsulated the impact of Age Exchange's practice. Stella and Lucy spent three months immersed in one of Age Exchange's care home arts projects, acting as

'participant-observers' while Age Exchange facilitators worked with residents on a range of dance and visual arts activities. From here Stella and Lucy devised a piece of choreography and a live music score, working with musician Elliot Lloyd-Short, that distilled and expressed their findings. The piece has since been performed to great acclaim at the Battersea Arts Centre, at the Laban Building as part of the London Arts and Health Forum's Creativity and Well-Being Week and, most recently, at the 2017 People Dancing conference, in Glasgow.

Our emerging research interest in *Beyond the Walls* recognises,

and seeks to unpick the potential value of this form of artist-research, which we are terming 'performative dissemination'. We are intrigued how the piece functions via a form of 'kinaesthetic empathy' – the idea that an individual has the capacity to experience empathy just by observing the movements of another human. Kinaesthetic empathy was at the heart of Stella and Lucy's observational work in the care home: it was through their own lived, empathetic encounters that they gathered the research data which underpins their choreography. But perhaps more significantly, it is this same process of kinaesthetic empathy which audience members

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Lucy Evans and Stella Howard, International Conference: Glasgow 2017. Photo: Rachel Cherry.

are invited to be part of too. By sitting in the circle and taking part in the performance, audience members are offered a certain 'lived experience' of this setting. The choreography seeks to transform the space, embedding its audiences in a heightened reimagining of the workshop environment, in all its intimate, complex sensibility. Embracing the subjectivity of the artistic encounter, the audience may then experience something of a project's challenges, its triumphs and critically, its emotional core. It is something that far transcends the experience of reading a report.

From the outset of the devising process, Lucy and Stella were clear their choreography would not seek to imitate or mimic the movements of the project participants. While some marked changes were observed in individual participants across the 12 weeks, the choreography is focused primarily on exploring the relationship between facilitator and participant, and the different forms of engagement that Age Exchange's work unlocks in project participants. The resulting work is a playful, moving and uplifting piece of choreography. It tells the story of the participatory project that they observed, but reframed in an imaginative, largely abstracted way, with a keen focus on the nuance and minutiae of what 'engagement' might mean in this context. That said, the piece is also particularly powerful in conjuring the feeling of being present at a session. The work's opening, for instance, seeks to recreate the mixed sensations that participants may experience at the start of a session. Audience members enter the space to a soundtrack of lightly distorted sounds – fragments of music, conversation fluttering by, doors opening and closing – and they then take their seats in the circle while the dance artists move quietly behind them. As Stella notes, "it is to evoke the feeling of being a participant... that sense of uncomfortableness, of multiple things happening, of not quite knowing what's going on." The piece is thus not just about the 'end result' of a participatory project. Instead it invites audiences to experience something of the sensation of taking part.

Central to the piece are a set of white cardboard suitcases. These



Lucy Evans, International Conference: Glasgow 2017. Photo: Rachel Cherry.

suitcases are stacked, pushed, thrown, and, on occasion, passed around various audience members. Lucy explains how Age Exchange "often use suitcases in its practice, and this eventually morphed into the idea of us using cardboard suitcases – so that we could build structures, spread them out, open them, take things out of them. The suitcases let us construct, deconstruct and reconstruct the space... so that we could chart a space for the audience that was constantly changing." These suitcases sometimes feature in the choreography as physical obstacles, while at other moments stand as receptacles for precious memories. And at the close of the work, some of the suitcases are opened to reveal a joyful array of sensory 'prompts', from lavender stems to autumn leaves to a box of mints that the audience is invited to pass round and enjoy. Stimulating different senses through different objects is a key technique used by Age Exchange facilitators. Prompts which awaken smell, touch and taste are used to change the energy of the space, to evoke memories, to spark a sense of play, and to refresh interaction and engagement. Stella and Lucy's choreography here seeks to give us a 'taste' of this positive, playful approach.

Beyond the Walls has been performed to a broad range of

audiences, including groups of older people, a wide variety of arts and health professionals from across the sector, and project funders. Responses have been overwhelming. While we understand the call for 'robust' quantitative evidence that validates the impact of the arts in our financially-straitened times, we believe there is also a powerful need for evidence that communicates the value of art on its own terms. We also believe this invitation to gain insight into a project via a creative, lived experience is an exciting proposition. It feels timely. We are keen to challenge the 'instrumentalist' turn that is shaping a great deal of current arts and health work. We appreciate that it is challenging to use anything beyond quantitative data or verbal accounts, be it testimonies or written descriptions, to communicate the value and meaning of participatory arts projects. However, we suggest the work of organisations such as Age Exchange is fundamentally rooted in an embodied understanding of 'meaning'. As we see it, the core value of such projects for participants lies in participants' embodied experiences. But how can we communicate such complex, nuanced, non-verbal experiences when we talk about the 'impact' of our work? We suggest it is through commissions like Beyond the Walls that we may redress the current imbalance, placing the emphasis on the lived experience of creativity as the crux of what the arts are about, rather than the 'stats' or indeed the single end-of-project performance.

When audiences reflect on their experiences of Beyond the Walls, they talk about connecting to the emotional heart of Age Exchange's work. This, for us, is what 'impact' is all about. And this is why we are excited at the potential of projects like this to help us reimagine the creation and dissemination of research and evaluation, bringing alive something of the splendid colour, mess and emotion of the arts.

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