

Experience 2024: An Introduction to Arts, Health and the Older Person

A Reflective Report by Joanne Ryan

On December 5th 2024, Age & Opportunity, the national organisation working to enable the best quality of life for us all as we age, and Réalta, the national resource organisation dedicated to developing arts + health in Ireland, presented *Experience 2024: An Introduction to Arts, Health and the Older Person* in Limerick City Gallery.

This day-long training session aimed to outline the essential elements involved in working with older people in an arts and health context. As a theatre artist whose work often sits at the intersection of arts and health, I was delighted to be invited to attend and reflect upon the day's events.

The line-up of speakers on the day included Dr Trudy Meehan, Clinical Psychologist, with a specialty in the Psychiatry of Later Life; dancer and choreographer Mary Nunan; composer and musician Justin Grounds; dementia specialist Sarah Cairns; artists Caroline Schofield, Marie Brett and Joanna Hopkins; dance artist Katy Hewison; Dr Tara Byrne and Brian Dooney of Age & Opportunity, and Claire Meaney of Réalta.

Easing in

To begin, dancer and choreographer, Mary Nunan eased us up onto our feet and into the day with a gentle movement session that helped us to harness our Qi through the body and ease out the creaks in a soothing, energising sequence. It left me settled and focused and was a great way to prepare us for a day of sitting and listening.

Session 1: Framing and Inspiring

In their welcome, Tara Byrne and Claire Meaney expressed their hope that it would result in more opportunities for artists to work with older people and their delight at the range of disciplines in the room. The most diverse group of artists they'd ever had at this kind of event!

Clinical Psychologist, Dr Trudy Meehan began her keynote address by encouraging us to approach work with older people with an 'internship mindset' and used the analogy of a forest to draw several beautiful parallels.

She explained how mycorrhizal fungi form a silent network that connects trees, allowing them to share nutrients and information. In a study Trudy referenced, one tree was connected to 47 others! Like these 'keystone trees,' as humans we are tethered to others in ways that may not be immediately apparent to someone landing into our forest. In supporting one individual in our work, she says, we may support an entire network.

She spoke about 'forest time,' how trees live for hundreds of years so time is different and allows for a broader sense of memory. The most striking of those for me was 'bone memory' which can include things like collective storytelling, history, intergenerational and culturally specific knowledge. Forest time, Trudy said, makes space for all of these.

One of the most striking moments of the day for me was an observation Trudy made in the Q&A after her keynote. "Like kids we all want to know, am I real and am I safe? One of the

best gifts we can give someone is to acknowledge in the moment that they are real. 'That's important. I hear that. That's real.'"

Composer and Musician, Justin Grounds described himself as a "classically trained punk" and outlined his political manifesto as a composer which was that every town should have one in residence!

Speaking to his community practice he echoed Trudy's advice on acting as an intern. "My job isn't to impose my creativity, but to be led." He spoke later to the importance of context and of keeping projects small, so they are always at a 'human scale.'

Justin introduced us to some of his projects, among them a short film he made with patients in Skibbereen General Hospital informed by sounds from their clinical environment. One sound gathered was the ubiquitous rattle of the tea trolley. It sounded like a train which led one patient to write a poem about the 'clickity clack' of a train journey which the beautifully meditative film was then based on.

Session 2 - Diversity of Older People

After coffees and pastries, Brian Dooney of Age and Opportunity bounded up to the podium and spoke about the many selves within us. So many selves that "each of us is a crowd" an image that stayed with me. "It's time to remember freewheeling into the diversity of aging" he tells us, because aging is not generic but a spectrum of possibilities and there are multiple, unique courses of ageing which exist. We should honour the many selves within us, and within those we work with, at any given moment.

Dementia Educator, Sarah Cairns explained that dementia is an umbrella term and that there are actually over 600 different types. The condition can be broadly divided into four main groups, however, and, of these, two are not associated with memory loss until the very end which I found surprising. Shockingly, Sarah tells us the number of people with the condition will more than double in the next 25 years.

Just as I began to panic, some good news; we can prevent it by keeping healthy hearts and brains. Incredibly, dehydration is the number one cause of the condition! Suddenly very thirsty, I make a mental note to drink an entire jug of water at lunch.

We take a moment to imagine what it might be like if we had no access to our short-term memory right now in the room. Where are we? we would wonder. Who are all these people? What is happening?

When running a session with people with dementia, Sarah regularly and casually mentions where they are, what the session is, how long it will last, where the toilets are, if there's food. People, she tells us, want to feel safe. She also advises not to ask a question someone with dementia won't know the answer to. "A question that includes the answer brings dignity without anxiety."

Fascinatingly she explains that, when trying to understand what's happening in a moment of memory loss or confusion, our brain will connect it to the most similar thing it can think of in

the past. At a session she's giving, people might think they're in a college lecture. Justin shares that once after a session, someone thanked him for a wonderful mass.

Session 3: Artist Workshops

For this session, we break into two groups. I join artist Marie Brett for her workshop on self-care for the artist and we sit around a low table upon which she has placed a bowl of shells and pebbles, a candle, a bell, vials of clear liquid. During the session we each take a shell which we are to keep as a touchstone, inhale lavender-infused well water and answer, privately for ourselves, a series of rapid-fire questions about self-care. I enjoy the ritual of the workshop and thinking about things that give me energy and help me to recharge.

Session 4: Practical Admin Workshop

After lunch, Joanna Hopkins shares some funding tips.

Interspersed with her advice she introduces us to some of her wonderful projects with older people. In one, participants grew potatoes, watched them grow, then picked, boiled and ate them. In another, they picked blackberries and used them to make jam and create artworks. The projects all struck me as slow, nourishing, and deeply rooted in the earth and in nature's cycles.

Session 5 The Participant Voice

In *Why I Dance*, Gerardine O'Rourke, a member of Dance Limerick's High Kicks, a dance club for over 50s, chatted to the group's teacher Katy Hewison.

A dynamo of energy, Geraldine jumped to her feet to address us whenever she spoke. She shared evocative childhood memories of dancing in the kitchen with her father in their tiny kitchen. "The memories are vivid. I can even feel him here this minute." and her passion for the group: "When you expose yourself through dance, you have a bond with those people forever."

They spoke about an intergenerational piece made with Age and Opportunity for Bealtaine festival that brought the High Kicks group together with 4- and 5-year-olds. It gave Geraldine the chance to dance with her 5-year-old grandson. "One of the nicest things that's ever happened to me."

I was really taken by Katy's approach to holding space with groups. "You can hold something so tightly that neither of you can be present," she explained. "But if you hold the space gently and flexibly- tightly at first because that's what needed, but then more loosely over time- then you can both really be together."

Session 6: Thoughts for the Road

To finish the day, Justin played a recording of a 90-year-old woman he works with singing on an old Super 8 and played the violin live, improvising over it. I felt the tears come almost immediately. There is always something so moving about the quality of a recorded voice and Justin's response felt very honouring. It was an emotional end to a very thought-provoking event.

Slowing and stretching – final reflection

A recurring theme for me through the day was about being outside time, or a slowing or stretching of time. Mary leading us through gentle, mindful movements and explaining as an older woman she uses the Qi to find a different kind of strength and energy; Trudy's exploration of forest time; Justin's film which took the repetitive rattle of a hospital trolley to create a slow meditation, clickity clack; Brian talking about all the selves co-existing, Marie's session where we held pebbles, inhaled lavender and spoke about space and time; Sarah's talk on dementia when the short term memory and the linear experience of life as many of us know it ceases to exist; Joanna's slow projects rooted in natural cycles.

The importance of time, of a different sort of time, as interconnected through the sessions as the mycorrhizal network Trudy first spoke of.