



Suitcase Stories The Play 2020 Evaluation Report by Jenny Davis



Introduction

In March 2020 Britain went into lockdown and all of Arts Uplift CIC's projects were postponed. Arts Council England in the meantime launched their Emergency Arts Fund and Arts Uplift CIC were lucky enough to receive £18,052. This fund was towards a research and development project using the Suitcase Stories stories and songs created from the memories of people living with dementia as a stimulus to create a new theatre script.

Project aims and objectives

The aims of the project were;

To test using an online platform to deliver a Research and Development theatre project. Also, to create a draft script ready for production at a later stage based on the Suitcase Stories songs and stories and improve people living with dementia and their carer's well-being.

The objectives of the project were;

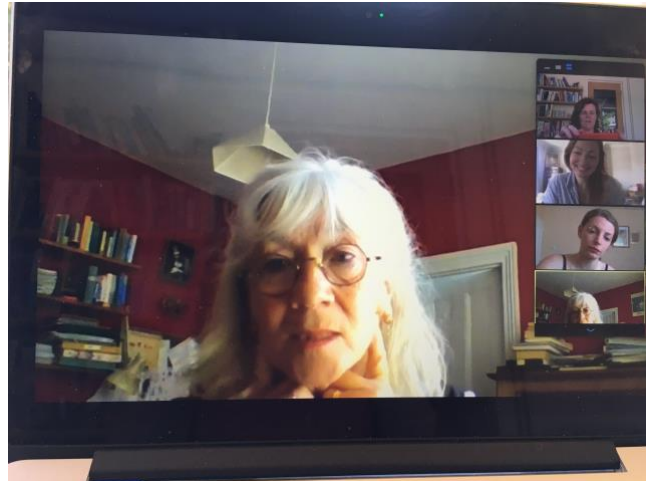
- To deliver 11 x 3hr online theatre rehearsals through Zoom to explore the songs and stories and possible characters and storylines for the play using professional actors and a theatre director
- To transcribe the audio recordings of the Suitcase Stories stories
- To deliver an online Zoom sharing of some of the scenes from the play to an invited audience

- To deliver 10 x 30mins choir sessions online through Zoom with people living with dementia and their carers

Delivery

The Play

The artistic team (director and four actors) were brought together through known contacts based on suitability for the play. The Zoom sessions consisted of many improvisations and discussions based on the stories and songs as well as the research that the director did on dementia and Worcestershire. The stories were transcribed and used in the rehearsals also. There was a gap in the Zoom sessions where Helen the director went away and wrote some scenes based on the improvisations.



The company then got back together and workshopped the scenes with Helen adapting them in between. The rehearsals ended up being very text based due to the limitations of Zoom and the actors being isolated in their own homes. The final two Zoom sessions were used to rehearse the script for Zoom and also deliver a performance of some of the scenes for an invited audience on this platform. The audience included local authority Arts Officers, University of Worcester, past related artists, a person living with dementia and their carer's and artists whose family members were affected by dementia. We used different Zoom backgrounds and some props to enhance the scenes.

The choir

Claire Fowler was the choir leader who has been running choirs for the Alzheimer Society. The participants were recruited through contacts we already had, press releases, social media and organisations like Onside Advocacy, Alzheimer Society and Age Uk helped to promote the project. We had a big response to this recruitment, and we supported the participants to download Zoom and understand how it works. Initially,



the technical aspects of the sessions were a little difficult, but after a few sessions things seemed to work better as we all learnt how to deliver the choir well. Not everyone had good enough internet, so some care homes dropped out, but as word got around, we recruited more people from the community and care homes as well. People came from much further afield than we thought including one care home from Dorset. The sessions were a mixture of familiar songs people already knew and also, they learnt one of the Suitcase Stories

songs. As time went on people got more familiar with each other and started to chat more. Jenny Davis the Creative Producer also supported the sessions as well as a volunteer later on.

Outcomes

The Play

The Zoom sessions went extremely well although it was quickly discovered that physicality was hard on Zoom and we needed to rely on text based scenes more. The online performances of the scenes equally went well and the slight chaos of the Zoom platform seemed to enhance the experience of dementia. We received verbal feedback on the day from the audience and also feedback via questionnaires from people that watched the recording of the performances at a later stage.



This was very valuable and the writer/director has used this information to adapt the script more. The actors and director spoke of the project being really enjoyable to work on but also something that kept them sane through a very difficult period of time. They were also very grateful for the work when everything else was drying up.

Quotes from the audience

"I think everybody should see Suitcase Stories. People living with dementia (if you can get them to sit still !) , carers, carer's friends and family, even people who have no connection at all to Dementia this would really help them to understand....even though everybody's dementia is different , many of the themes explored unite us."

"I thought the Zoom format worked really well. If anything , it added to the disjointed nature of the thought process experienced by J ... and I - it rubs off on the carer !"

"There are so many aspects of the performance that are relevant to our lives ... It was like holding a mirror up to so many elements of our daily life . For me , and for our carer friend Jenny , this is what made it so moving, being able to say " that's just like us " and empathising with the characters"

"Very moving especially via Zoom!"

"Our carer friend J also asked me to pass on her congratulations , once she had put her handkerchief away!"

"Overall it is engaging and you can associate with the characters clearly. I think the changes in time frame work well."

"I think it was well balanced between the perspectives of people involved when somebody is diagnosed with dementia. I think that there is a good balance of learning and showing solidarity and understanding."

“The play stands as a great story to tell in its own right - brilliantly directed, casted and acted; an utterly watchable, well-written, informative, emotional and marvellously creative show! That it is about living with dementia feels like a bonus.”

The Choir

The choir was so successful that we continued to deliver another 9 Zoom sessions using our contingency money and there is a core group that now participate regularly. We also made the sessions 45mins as we felt 30 mins was too short. We hope to carry on beyond October by charging a small amount to cover our costs. It is essential in these times of living with the Covid-19 virus that we continue to offer these choir sessions for the well-being of the participants.



Each week the carers asked the participants how they were feeling at the beginning and end of the session, poor, ok, good, brilliant. They each then were asked to fill out a Survey Monkey questionnaire and reported on the feelings and also any feedback they had.

The results

After every session all of the participants mood improved and every week most people felt either good or brilliant when they finished and on 3 occasions everyone felt brilliant afterwards. This proves how participating in a choir session can improve mood.

Quotes from the participants

“Very up lifting. Mum really enjoyed it and felt very connected to the leader”

“One of our ladies had a Skype call half-way through from her son in Australia! She didn’t want to stop singing and shaking her pom-poms so she sang to him a bit on Skype. He could see how happy she was and enjoying being with the others so was only there for about 5 minutes! She smiled so much during and after it!!”

“My residents were feeling good at the start as they were looking forward to choir practice, then after they said they were feeling fantastic and thoroughly enjoyed it.”

“Initially J was a bit confused to what was happening but engaged, sang along and was much better in herself and more focused afterwards. Really cheered her up.”

“I only wish the sessions were longer as Mum loves them . Seeing how they lift her mood is magical.”

“N stayed awake through the whole session this time and I thought at one moment he was going to join in. It may not sound much, but this is progress.”

“I hadn't realised the power of the arts to help my mum for the rest of the afternoon she is brighter and has songs in her head”

Learning

The Play

Here are the things that worked doing an R &D on Zoom;

- Text based improvisations
- Using break out rooms for pairs of actors to improvise and discuss
- Using different backgrounds for performances
- Performances
- Breakout rooms can be used to encourage the type of team building that, in real life, would normally occur during coffee breaks

Here are the things that didn't work;

- Ensemble and movement scenes are more challenging due to the limitations of a fixed camera and far better suited to in-person work

The Choir

We didn't know what to expect with delivering a choir online at first but here are the things that worked;

- Allow time and space for people to get set up and get the technology right
- Allow a few minutes at the beginning and end for a chat with everyone
- Mute everyone when doing the actual singing because of the time delay and background noise
- Get participants to just have audio on if having technical difficulties as this helps
- Having a second person to support with the technical side of things is really useful such as a volunteer
- Make the sessions no less than 45mins
- Create a Zoom information sheet for participants and carers and your expectations
- Survey Monkey questionnaire was a simple and effective way of getting feedback as you are unable to talk properly to people on a one to one basis
- Let the group know what songs you will be singing in advance so if they want they can get the words of the songs before hand
- It improved the well-being of the artists and support staff involved especially through the difficult lock down period

Here are some things that didn't work;

- We lost some care homes as their internet connections weren't good enough
- We lost one participant who's dementia was at a later stage and the delivery online was not enough to engage him
- Even though people did chat a bit before and after the session it was short compared to when it happens face to face
- The quality of the music playing wasn't as good due to the Zoom platform and sometimes the connection was lost
- We were unable to hear the group singing apart from the choir leader

Conclusion

We found that delivering a choir on Zoom is not as good as doing it face to face, but equally we found through our results that the choir still had a positive impact on the well-being of the people that participated and reached out to those that are isolated and vulnerable enabling them to be creative.

We also found that delivering an R and D theatre project online is doable and that some exciting creative improvisations are still possible. Performing some of the scenes also can work well online through Zoom and the platform can add to the creative delivery. Performing online can also still create an emotional impact on an audience and inspire and educate.



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