

Changing the script: using forum theatre to reimagine the future in later life

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Abstract

Dominant narratives told about older people typically foreground the past and downplay the significance of the future. This reinforces a particular ageism that is predicated not so much on how many years a person has lived, as how many years they are assumed to have left. This article explores the potential of Forum Theatre to produce emancipatory counterstories of ageing futures. We present findings from qualitative research conducted with older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine older adult participants co-created two Forum Theatre scenes (Waiting for Dot and Return to Wonderland), that were then shared and reworked virtually with a public audience of over 150. We argue that the participatory and inquiring techniques of Forum Theatre are useful in making visible how structural ageism operates in everyday discourses to marginalise, exclude

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and oppress people in later life, and to provide people with the opportunities to change the script by challenging such narratives and storying their own futures.

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Introduction

Having a sense of the future is important to how we understand ourselves. Future time is meaningful to us because our identities are in part shaped by a forward-oriented perspective of what we want to do in our lives. The narratives we tell about our futures reflect our aspirations, expectations, fears and hopes, but these are influenced by the dominant discourses that are told about the social categories to which we belong, or to which we are identified as belonging (Andrews 2009). Our ability to construct stories of how we want our future ageing selves to be is hampered by a lack of cultural narratives that we can use as resources (Laceulle & Baars 2014; May 2018). Laceulle and Baars draw on Hilde Lindemann Nelson's definition of master narratives as "the stories circulating in our culture that embody socially shared understandings" (Nelson 2001: 84). Master narratives construct and reinforce ideas about social groups and the members who belong to them; they can be empowering or damaging. Laceulle and Baars (2014) argue that the master narratives told about people in later life are harmful and limiting as they tend to either reinforce a decline ideology (Gullette 2004) or an age-defying approach, which by focusing on successful, active and positive ageing, fails to engage with the full range of possibilities of what it means to age, and the potential intrinsic value of later life. The disproportionate number of deaths of older adults in care homes during the COVID-19 pandemic exposes the dangerous consequences of disregarding futures in older age (Gullette 2024) and highlights the urgency of challenging damaging and ageist master narratives.

While master narratives can damage identities, counterstories can repair them. Nelson (2001) defines a counterstory as "a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect" (p. 6). In addition to the potential of counterstories to

diversify the repertoire of master narratives, we suggest that the imaginative inquiry that enables people to create stories is just as important. This requires an approach that foregrounds the reflective process by which stories are conceived, narrated, received and refined. We argue that Forum Theatre is one such approach. In this article we explore the potential of the participatory technique of Forum Theatre to produce counterstories of ageing. With its iterative nature and its emphasis on process, democratic engagement and critical inquiry, Forum Theatre is helpful in facilitating not only the analysis of “finished” counter-narratives, but the elements that enable their creation. This makes a significant contribution to the literature on counter-stories, as it emphasises how the *form* of narratives can influence their creation, performance and reception.

The research presented in this article is from the project *Reimagining the Future in Older Age*, which explores the socially constructed relationship between future time and older age. This article focuses on the potential for Forum Theatre to challenge oppressive, stigmatising narratives about later life that can undermine the ability to think meaningfully about the future in older age. We begin by reviewing literature on futures and later life and elaborating on the concept of the counterstory as a way to challenge stigmatising and oppressive discourses. We then outline our theoretical framework, drawing on Levitas’ utopia as method. Following this, we introduce Forum Theatre and explain how its principles and practices cohere with our theoretical stance. We then introduce the project from which this article derives before presenting findings on participants’ critique of existing master narratives of ageing, the process by which participants developed counter-narratives, and the reception of these during the final performances of the Forum Theatre pieces. We argue that the technique of Forum Theatre is not only conducive to the development of counter-narratives, but is helpful in developing understanding of how existing master narratives can oppress and stigmatise; facilitating democratic engagement among participants of how to challenge master narratives; illuminating how the different elements of counter-stories can “change the script”; encouraging ongoing critique, resistance and democratic participation.

Storying the Future in Later Life

The field of narrative gerontology emerged from a humanistic concern with how we narrate our lives in older age as a way to contextualise our later life experiences and circumstances within the life course (Kenyon & Randall 1999). Telling stories about ourselves is a central way of understanding who we are, how we have come to be “ourselves” and how the future matters to us (Côté-Boucher et al. 2024; De Medeiros 2014; Sools 2020). Narrative gerontology is concerned with both the stories we tell and with the act of telling. The narratives themselves can be analysed for what they imply about prevailing ideologies of ageing (Zeilig 2011) but a central tenet of narrative gerontology is that making sense of who we are is a lifelong process (Blix et al. 2015: 169).

Despite this, many of the dominant cultural narratives told about older age perpetuate an idea that from the standpoint of older age, “everything worth doing” has already passed, leaving only “a period of wisdom, reflection, and acceptance in older age” (De Medeiros 2016: 66). De Medeiros identifies one reason for this as being the common trope of “life-as-journey narrative” where significance is placed on the past rather than the present or future (2016: 66) (De Medeiros 2016). More fundamentally, the assumption that as we age the past becomes more meaningful, and the future less meaningful to us, reflects and reinforces dominant ideologies that privilege youth and marginalise older age (Degnen 2021; James et al. 1998). Reluctance to contemplate the future in later life also reflects linear conceptualisations of the human life course. As the writer Penelope Lively (2013) puts it:

What is at issue, it seems to me, is a new and disturbing relationship with time. It is as though you advanced along a plank hanging over a canyon: once, there was a long reassuring stretch of plank ahead; now there is plank behind, plenty of it, but only a few planks ahead. (p. 43)

The association of old age with death has “resulted in the neglect of the future as a suitable topic for investigation into late life” (Bornat & Jones 2014: 4) and the future in later life is under-researched and under-theorised (Wright & Lovatt 2024).

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the paucity of narratives told about older age and the consequences of this. Older people were typically constructed in political discourse as vulnerable (Vasara et al. 2023), which in turn affected people's storying of their older selves, with younger people expressing an increased fear of ageing (Anderson & Gettings 2022). The designation of older people as vulnerable also had immediate detrimental consequences for older people's mental and physical health through increased social isolation (Derrer-Merk et al. 2023). Where the master narratives told about social groups limits the repertoire of stories we can use as resources to story our futures, it can be difficult to imagine alternatives. Bauman suggests that being able to "emancipate oneself from the ... dominance of the routine, the ordinary, the 'normal'" requires utopian thinking (Bauman 2009 [1976]: 16). The utopian thinking that underpins the project from which this paper derives is informed by Levitas's "utopia as method" approach. According to Levitas (2013):

Utopian thinking is not about devising and imposing a blueprint. Rather, it entails holistic thinking about the connections between economic, social, existential and ecological processes in an integrated way. We can then develop alternative possible scenarios for the future and open these up to public debate and democratic decision - insisting always on the provisionality, reflexivity and contingency of what we are able to imagine, and in full awareness that utopian speculation is formed always in the double squeeze of what we are able to imagine and what we are able to imagine as possible. (pp. 18-19)

Levitas's insistence on democratic engagement and "the provisionality, reflexivity and contingency" of imagined futures requires a methodological approach that foregrounds these elements. With its emphasis on participation, emancipation and ongoing critical inquiry, we suggest that Forum Theatre is one such approach.

Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre was one of a number of techniques developed by Brazilian drama theorist Augusto Boal (2008) as part of a wider methodology called "Theatre of the Oppressed." Boal's intention was to create theatre practices with marginalised groups as a way of making visible systems of oppression and offering opportunities to "rehearse" social action and resistance. In Forum Theatre the distinction between actors and audience

is blurred, and audience members – called *spect-actors* – are invited to participate in performances and change the narrative, in order to encourage debate and discuss strategies for collective action. The Forum Theatre event begins with the performance of a short theatre piece, which introduces a protagonist (who wants something), an antagonist (who stops the protagonist from getting what they want) and perhaps one or two other characters relevant to the scene, who could potentially help or hinder the protagonist. Importantly, the antagonist is not just “a bad person” but represents structural oppression and inequality, and the performance takes place within a social context. The first performance ends in a defeat for the protagonist: they do not get what they want; however, there are possible alternatives. Following the first run through, the spect-actors are invited to participate in a discussion about the performance, analysing why the protagonist was defeated and what strategies the protagonist could adopt to try and get a different outcome. The piece is then performed again, with spect-actors invited to step in to the performance to replace the original actors and try out different strategies. The intention is not so much to secure a “victory” for the protagonist, as to raise consciousness of the structural discrimination impeding them and identifying how this could be challenged. In other words the emphasis is on ongoing inquiry, rather than providing solutions.

Participatory theatre – including Forum Theatre – has been used as a social research methodology in a number of settings. A recent scoping review identified how Forum Theatre can develop critical consciousness and increase confidence among various social groups that experience marginalisation as a consequence of, for example, bullying, homelessness or racial profiling (Puvaneyshwaran et al. 2025). In research with migrant and refugee communities it has been found to be an effective way to identify and articulate forms of knowledge that can lay the foundations to challenge discriminatory and stigmatising practices and discourses, and be individually and socially transformative (Erel et al. 2017; Kaptani & Yuval-Davis 2008; Opfermann 2020).

Research has found that involvement in theatre can improve older people’s health and wellbeing and community engagement (Bernard & Rickett 2017; Bernard et al. 2015) and documentary theatre techniques, which create and perform fictionalised characters and dialogue based on interviews with older people, can help to counter-ageist stereotypes (Black &

Lipscomb 2017). However, applied theatre that relies on reminiscence and memory work with older participants has been criticised for reinforcing ageist assumptions that reduce an older person to “a historical artefact rather than a being who is in a constant state of emergence” (Bowers 2023: 85). A small number of projects have used Forum Theatre with older participants, such as Parker’s (2017) research to increase intergenerational dialogue between younger and older adults and Rice et al.’s (2007) use of Forum Theatre to elicit requirements from older people for inclusive technologies. The Canadian older adult activist group Ressources Ethno-culturelles Contre l’Abus envers les Aîné(e)s, Respecting Elders Communities against Abuse (RECCA) uses Forum Theatre to raise awareness of and prevent elder abuse (www.recaa.ca). To our knowledge, our project is the first to use Forum Theatre to explore imagined futures with older people.

Methodology

In 2021 researchers from the University of Stirling worked with project partners Active Inquiry – an Edinburgh-based theatre company – and a team of older participants to develop, write and perform two pieces of Forum Theatre. This was part of a larger project, *Reimagining the Future in Older Age*, that explored the socially constructed relationship between future time and later life. The aim of this stage of the project was to support people who identified as “older” to create and perform pieces of theatre that challenged dominant “master narratives” of the future in older age. Our specific research question for this stage of the project was “how effective is Forum Theatre in providing older people with the means to create ‘counter-narratives’ of the future and challenge dominant, ageist discourses?” Ethical approval for the project was granted by the General University Ethics Panel at the University of Stirling (Reference 828) and all participants provided informed consent.

Recruitment and Methods

We initially held three online workshops in February 2021 to give participants an opportunity to get to know the aims of the project and to try out Forum Theatre techniques, before committing to a longer involvement.

Our intention was to use these initial “taster” workshops to recruit participants for a series of twelve workshops later in the year, in which participants would devise pieces of Forum Theatre that would then be performed online to members of the public. The first two taster workshops were with established community organisations that had previously worked with Active Inquiry, whom we approached directly. The third taster workshop was open to anyone over the age of 18 and living in Scotland who identified as “an older adult.” We advertised this on social media and via relevant age-related organisations. Our decision to not define older age chronologically was informed by our interest in how meanings of older age are socially and culturally constructed. Reasons for participating included interest in the topic of older age and the future, and/or existing interest/involvement in theatre.

In the end, only participants from the third “open” workshop committed to being part of the longer project. Of the twelve people who participated in the open workshop, seven went on to join the “performance” group and we also recruited more people via snowballing/word of mouth. While not all participants were able to attend all twelve of the workshops and take part in the final performances (due to illness, family or work commitments), Table 1 includes pseudonymised details of the

Table 1. List of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Babs	67	Female
Pam	65	Female
Andrew	Not disclosed	Male
Jade	56	Female
Robyn	70	Female
Kenneth	75	Male
Magdalene	69	Female
Anna	66	Female
Diana	84	Female

nine participants who attended several workshops and made a significant contribution to workshop discussions and the devising and performance of the Forum Theatre pieces. All were white, most identified as middle class, and most were in reasonable health.

All of the workshops were held on Zoom, as social restrictions were in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While this likely deterred some people from participating who would have otherwise attended in-person workshops, attending online widened participation in unexpected ways. For example one participant told us that her working-class identity meant that she would not have been comfortable attending in-person theatre classes, but being able to participate from her own home allowed her to feel included and comfortable.

Active Inquiry facilitators devised innovative and effective ways of using the “boxes” of the Zoom screens to compensate for the lack of in-person interaction; this helped to retain the physicality and movement of Forum Theatre and to foster a rapport between the participants. Every workshop included a warm-up exercise. For example one week, the exercise involved naming one of the other participants and “throwing” them an imaginary ball, which the other participant had to “catch.” Another week, participants were asked to engage in a “treasure hunt” and find various items in their home, such as “something yellow” or “something round” and hold it up to the camera. These activities were beneficial for several reasons. They were fun and helped to develop intimacy and trust between everyone on the call. They also helped us to explore the form or affordances of Zoom and establish what it was possible to do with the tools of the platform. They helped with the devising process of developing potential characters, plots and genres. They also helped to break down boundaries between researchers, the artistic facilitators and older participants, all of whom actively participated in the workshops. Rapport and trust were also supported by the use of break-out rooms; towards the start of each workshop, participants were paired up and put into break-out rooms and encouraged to talk to each other about whatever they wanted. This was particularly important given the ongoing social restrictions and potential for isolation. In this way, the affordances of the technology helped to generate trust and intimacy (Lovatt et al. 2017).

The initial workshops were spent introducing people and exploring issues such as identities of older age and cultural representations of later

life. Other workshops involved activities around character development, before starting to narrow down the topics that participants wanted the theatre pieces to explore. This resulted in two groups, one of whom wanted to explore activism in older age, the other ageism. The remainder of the workshops were largely spent with these two groups in different break out rooms, each including older participants, members of Active Inquiry and members of the research team. Over the course of a few weeks, the groups decided on characters, genres and scripts. This resulted in two short theatre pieces: *Waiting for Dot*, which featured a character called Dot who was being prevented from remaining an activist in later life, and *Return to Wonderland*, which featured an older Alice who wanted to continue having adventures in Wonderland but was facing resistance from the characters the Hatter and the Red Queen. Both pieces were performed live on Zoom in June 2021 to an international audience over three performances.

The whole of this stage of the project was led by Active Inquiry and the workshops were facilitated by author Gavin Crichton and Liz Strange who are both experienced theatre makers trained in Theatre of the Oppressed. Gavin Crichton also has extensive experience of running community arts projects and is an established workshop leader and theatre director. Active Inquiry were equal partners who had a full and shared understanding of the research objectives and the value of inclusion that underpinned them. They brought their experience and skill as arts practitioners to encourage contributions from all participants, following up where participants introduced unexpected ideas, and encouraging considered debate where participants did not always agree with each other. They planned and facilitated all of the workshops and performances, supported participants in developing the scripts, arranged for costumes and set backdrops to be delivered to participants' homes, and arranged the publicity and registration for the performances. While artistic partners are more commonly used in social science research to communicate findings and generate "impact," it is less common for artists to be involved in data collection and knowledge-generation activities. Active Inquiry's approach always involves approaching theatre projects as research projects, with a genuine inquiry at its core, and the academic partners benefited from Active Inquiry's expertise and experience in this. As with Black and Lipscomb's research (2017) Active Inquiry having "creative control"

benefited the project and generated knowledge that the academics on the project would not have been able to.

Data Collection and Analysis

Authors Melanie Lovatt and Valerie Wright attended each workshop and took reflective notes, typing them up afterwards. Our comments were expansive and included reflections on our own participation, group dynamics, how participants responded to prompts and general discussions. The project had been conceived and planned before the pandemic, and our original intention was that data would comprise solely of our field notes from participant observation, photographs of the workshops, films of the final performances and reflective diary entries by participants. Moving to Zoom not only allowed us to digitally record every workshop, but the different break out rooms within each workshop. This meant that each of the twelve workshops resulted in four separate recordings taken by two members of the research team at the University of Stirling and two members of Active Inquiry. As each workshop was 2 hours long, in total we collected 96 hours of recordings of the workshops. Similarly the team recorded each of the three, 2-hour final performances, resulting in a further 6 hours of recordings. That the final performances took place on Zoom instead of in-person as originally planned also enabled us to download the chat files of the spect-actors as they responded to the performances.

This gave us far more data than we had originally planned to collect and so it presented logistical challenges in how to make data analysis feasible. Our pragmatic response to this was to start by reading and re-reading our field notes and note recurring themes. Where our notes indicated a particularly salient point with regard to our interests in age-identity, stigmatising narratives and potential counter-narratives, we returned to the original recording and rewatched that section, allowing us to examine the content in more depth, quote participants verbatim and gauge other participants' reactions. We also read participants' diary entries several times, noting salient and recurring themes. Our analysis was also guided by our research question "how effective is Forum Theatre in providing older people with the means to create 'counter-narratives' of the future and challenge dominant, ageist discourses?" We present findings on three stages of the process: (1) participants' critique of existing master

narratives; (2) participants' creation of counter-stories through characters, genre and plots/scripts; (3) the reception to the performances of the Forum Theatre pieces.

Results

Participants' Critique of Existing Master Narratives

In the first workshops, participants were asked to engage with a number of activities that prompted them to reflect on their own ageing identities and consider cultural representations of ageing, as a way of starting to understand and articulate the relationship between their own identities as an older person, and "master narratives" of ageing. For example, in one exercise, participants were asked to write down their reflections on what it meant to be a self-identified older adult on virtual post-it notes which we stuck to a Google Jamboard – see Figure 1.

Responses varied, with some participants apparently advocating for accepting the label or category of old(er) age, as indicated in comments

Figure 1. Google Jamboard displaying participants' reflections on being a self-defined older person.



such as “It’s a club everyone’s going to join one day. If you’re old you’re old,” and “owning the concept of old age and not doing it with any denial. Being realistic about how old you are.” By contrast other comments rejected being categorised, with comments such as “the idea of defining, grouping and labelling people is bad. Who has the right to define a group or people as older and what are the implications?”; “There are so many ways that people are grouped and put into boxes. We are in multiple boxes. How much control [do] we have over that?”

Unsurprisingly, some post-it notes mentioned the impact of the pandemic on ageing identities, something which was later expanded on by participants in a group discussion. Robyn, who had recently turned 70, said that the pandemic and government and media responses to it had changed how she felt about herself. She felt that her age identity was no longer self-defined but that it had been ascribed to her. She felt like she had been told to “sit at home and be patient” and that older people who transgressed from or complained about this were seen as “ungrateful.” Another participant said “I didn’t feel vulnerable but if I didn’t do what society expected of me I was deemed irresponsible.” Another said that while she felt that the pandemic “was something bigger” than her, and so she was happy to comply with the restrictions, in the past year she had felt a loss of identity and that her identity was fragmented and drifting.

A subsequent activity was aimed at encouraging reflection on the relationship between older age and the future. Participants were paired up and put into breakout rooms and asked to develop two characters, with one participant asked to play “older age” and another person asked to play “the future,” with the prompting question “if older age and the future were two people, what would the relationship between them look like?” Once the groups were back together, Andrew reported that he was “very unhappy with the separation of the two concepts.” This immediately prompted some nods and noises of agreement and interest from the other participants. Andrew elaborated:

Well I think there is an implication in the distinction between older age and future ... that older ages don’t really have much of a future. But of course a twenty year old doesn’t know how much of a future they’ve got. You know they could have a hundred years but they might only have 15 minutes. The future is such a tenuous concept at any age. And I think I’m kind of concerned that, when you define yourself as an older

person and you think about the future, that might lead to certain acceptance of the expectations of lifespan, expectations of society. And I think that's unhealthy.

Later on when he was back in the break-out room Andrew went on to say that societal assumptions about the relationship between age and the future, "must limit your expectations because you are labelled 'an older person'" and that "if you think about older age and the future you put restrictions on people immediately, and you know, that's oppression." Participants on other occasions spoke of the conundrum of accepting what they perceived of as being "the reality" of an older person, without wanting to accept "the baggage" or ageist stereotypes that accompany that label.

On another occasion participants were paired up in breakout rooms and asked to identify two dominant narratives about older people and then perform them in 20 seconds. Pam and Andrew responded by Andrew reading a fictional article from the UK newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* reporting that the Government had decided not to give the COVID vaccine to people aged over 70 as they needed to "cull the population." Pam, playing a person over 70, challenged this saying that she needed to stay alive as she had plans to go hill walking to celebrate her freedom from an oppressive marriage. This short, black comedy performance articulated participants' feelings that, as people viewed as older, their futures were not valued. In preparation for another workshop, participants were asked to think about dominant representations of older age and identify an image reflecting this. Participants reported frustration at what they perceived was a lack of diversity in representations of ageing. Kenneth, for example, felt that older men are usually depicted as either grumpy, ridiculous or eccentric. Others thought that representations of older age tended to fall into two categories: frail and vulnerable, or "age-defying" and inspirational, and that diversity in older age is not represented.

In summary, while participants' reflections on what it means to be "an older person" varied, there was broad consensus that their experiences and perceptions of ageing were not well-represented culturally. There was also consensus that older people's futures were not valued, and that this was revealed more starkly during the pandemic.

Waiting for Dot and Return to Wonderland: Participants' Creation of Counter-Stories

Having identified and critiqued existing unsatisfactory master narratives of ageing and older people's futures, the next workshops were intended to help participants develop alternative counter-stories. Initial activities during these centred on character development, genre and plot. Following discussions of topics that participants were interested in exploring, participants formed two groups: one interested in activism and the other on challenging ageist structures. The activism group wanted to challenge assumptions that older people were reactionary and conservative and that activism was only for younger people. The ageism group wanted to better understand how structural ageism operates and how it can be challenged.

Each group was then tasked with identifying the protagonists and antagonists in the piece and the basic plot. Melanie Lovatt joined the "ageism" group, which was facilitated by Liz Strange and Valerie Wright joined the "activism" group, which was facilitated by Gavin Crichton. The "activist" group devised a piece called "*Waiting for Dot*." The piece starts with Cheryl, a young activist chairing a meeting of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), waiting for an older activist, Dot, to arrive. Dot is a long-standing member of the CND and is scheduled to be the guest speaker at the meeting. However Dot is ultimately dissuaded from attending by her husband John who cautions her against leaving the house, saying they are still vulnerable to the COVID infection and that, "we don't have to be activists all our life Dot. We've done our bit, why can't we leave it to the younger people?" The piece ends with one camera screen showing Cheryl continuing to wait for Dot, while another camera screen shows a dejected-looking Dot removing her political badges. The play rejected contemporary master narratives of older people as "Boomers" who had voted for Brexit and were responsible for the climate crisis and cared nothing about the future.

In the ageism group, inspired by Robyn's comment to Magdalene that she thought she would make a wonderful Alice in Wonderland, the group devised a piece called *Return to Wonderland*. The protagonist, Alice, wakes on her 60th birthday and decides that she wants to go back to Wonderland to have another adventure, but is confronted by ageist oppression and discrimination in the form of characters such as The Red Queen and The

Hatter. The Queen tells Alice “you used to be Alice, and we don’t have ‘used to be’ people here ... You’re too old. Go away!” The Hatter prevents Alice from joining his tea party, telling her patronisingly that she can’t have a cup of tea because she might burn herself, or that she might slip on a bun and break her hip. The piece critiqued ageist suggestions that over a certain age people are too old to have adventures and that they should be prevented from any activity that might carry with it the slightest conceivable risk. The initial piece ends with Alice looking defeated into a looking glass before giving up and leaving Wonderland.

Despite the serious messages, both pieces contained elements of humour, with participants arguing that the messaging was more likely to resonate with audiences if it wasn’t too “preachy.” Members of Active Inquiry and the university research team supported character development, plot and writing the script, and Melanie Lovatt played one of the characters in *Return to Wonderland*. However the central ideas and pieces were led by the older participants. Both pieces explicitly aimed to counter the perceived master narratives that older people have nothing more to give to society, and through ageist systems are denied opportunities to have fun and to take risks.

The Reception to the Performances of the Forum Theatre Pieces

After twelve workshops, the two finalised pieces were performed live on Zoom over three dates in June 2021. The performances were advertised on social media and through personal and professional networks. In total 153 people attended the performances, the majority of whom were from the UK but several people joined from other countries. Following the first run-throughs of each piece, the audience members as spect-actors were initially put into breakout rooms and asked to reflect on the piece, whether they were happy with how it had ended, and what might be done differently. Following this there was a group discussion in the “main room” with participants also commenting in the chat. Unsurprisingly, after the first performance of *Waiting for Dot*, the spect-actors expressed dissatisfaction with Dot’s “defeat.” Comments in the chat rejected the perceived association of older people with passivity and conservatism, with some pointing to their own personal examples:

I was in CND in the 60s, lapsed in the 70s when the momentum lapsed and I was getting on with life. It was the 2014 [Scottish Independence] referendum, which was a period of wider re-awakening of political awareness, that made me feel guilty about my CND lapse and I rejoined. Fighting the establishment is always a long game.

Other comments called for greater intergenerational solidarity in activism:

You need a balance of new, fresh thinking of the youth and wisdom that comes from age. That's how the best ideas are born:

Dot can go to the meeting and start some succession planning so she still has a role and a purpose in the organisation.

Comments rejected stereotypes that older people cannot be activists but also acknowledged differences in perspective and experience in people of different ages. As one spect-actor wrote:

Society is bombarded by the message of "stay young at all costs." The human passage of time is not seen in the Western world as a valued adventure where every decade has its strengths and challenges ... so there is a valued different place for Olders to be seen and be Elders.

Similarly another person commented that "as we get older perhaps the difference in energy levels makes it necessary to rethink how you do things together."

In this way, the reaction to the performances avoided the binary dominant narratives of older age. The scripts and responses to them rejected cultural decline and overly biological deterministic ideologies but were also ambivalent about overly "positive" narratives that do not acknowledge physical changes and the qualitative differences that are experienced with the passing of time.

Some comments focused on the context of COVID, with some people feeling that John was using COVID as an excuse to dissuade Dot from leaving, whilst others were more sympathetic to what they perceived as John's ongoing anxiety about the pandemic. Others focused on the individual relationship between the couple, feeling that Dot and John should have spoken about the issue before and come to a compromise. In this respect perhaps the realist setting of the play, with the "problem" being

exposed in a disagreement within a marriage, diverted attention away from a discussion of structural age-based stereotypes.

After the first run-through of *Return to Wonderland* in which Alice reluctantly accepted that she might be too old for further adventures, spect-actors responded by commenting on the patronising and discriminatory environment of Wonderland. When invited to make suggestions as to how the piece could have ended more positively for Alice, responses were divided between those who felt that Alice should simply reject Wonderland and those who felt that Wonderland needed to change. Reflecting the first view, participants suggested that Alice could host her own, more inclusive tea party, and that, "Alice could seek out connections with different people who are more like minded ... and she can find something more joyful with a new group." In this respect, the fantasy setting of Wonderland perhaps enabled people to feel that it was possible to "opt out" of experiencing ageism in a way that may not have been the case in a more realist setting like that of *Waiting for Dot*, where some element of confrontation or at least negotiation with the antagonists was deemed to be necessary. Reflecting the second view however, one spect-actor commented that, "It's not Alice that has to change, it's the society we live in. It just says it all: "you're too old ... you're past it, you're over the hill." Other spect-actors commented that they recognised the ageist attitudes of the Red Queen and the Hatter in their own lives, reflecting that while often well-intentioned, such behaviours were patronising and excessively risk-averse, denying older people agency. Another spect-actor felt that the Red Queen and the Hatter's behaviours reflected ageist assumptions she felt were common in workplaces, specifically the assumption that past a certain age people had no new ideas.

Other comments reflected spect-actors' dissatisfaction with cultural representations of older people in society, advocating for more positivity but also more nuance in how older people are represented:

About societal attitudes towards older people and ageing - people say too old to do certain things. How to change that? More prominent examples of older people out there doing things to disprove.

So many stereotypes of ageing are just black and white - useful-unuseful/capable or non-capable etc.

Echoing comments made after the performance of *Waiting for Dot*, spect-actors also identified qualitative differences in the experience of being older, but argued that these should not be regarded as a deficit:

The perception of society is because we're old, we're worthless, we're past it. Nothing can be further from the truth. The only change we have because we're old, is we do things slower. We come together, we exercise the skills we want to learn during life with work and things like that. We learn new skills from each other. We help society ... we make ourselves useful We gain the pride of still contributing towards society.

Everybody in Wonderland had got older. Time passes and affects everyone. Fun becomes different when you get older ... I don't expect to have the same sort of fun that I had when I was 25. I wouldn't want to ... it changes, and that's *good*.

Spect-actors also debated the responsibilities of older people themselves to challenge ageism – including internalised ageism – and there was some disagreement about the extent to which older people themselves perpetuate self-limiting narratives, as illustrated in the following exchange:

The whole issue is about the perception of ageing and older people, but that also has to come from within older people themselves. And I think one of the difficulties I'm experiencing and have done for the last ten years is that a lot of older people themselves do not believe that it is possible for them to have an adventure or they've given up on the idea that they have got anything to contribute. And if older people themselves hold those views, how are they going to convince younger people or any other parts of society that it is incorrect[?] We have to take full responsibility for that and not blame anyone else in society for misconceptions about getting older.

It's not necessarily older people that have those perceptions, it's the lifestyles that many older people have, especially those in poverty, isolation, [and who are] no longer working. I mean they've got these perceptions of themselves that they're worthless, and this in many ways is reinforced by the interaction with society ... there are so many barriers within society, so it's not just older peoples' perception, it's the stereotypes and images of society in general.

I think you're up against other people's assumptions, you know if you get to a certain age people just assume that you can't do something, but I think it's up to you as a person to stand up and say "no. Well actually yes I'm getting older but so are you, and I've got all of this experience that I want to share." You know just don't assume that because people are getting older they're getting more frail.

In this respect, the format of the Forum Theatre performances and the emphasis on the audience actively stepping into the action and getting involved in discussion and critique, facilitated debate on what “the problem” of ageism is, and how it might be challenged.

Discussion

In this article we have shown how Forum Theatre can be a useful technique in identifying and challenging ageist master narratives and creating counter-narratives. This article makes several significant contributions. Firstly, it contributes to the literature on narrative gerontology by demonstrating how the form of Forum Theatre can successfully identify, understand and challenge entrenched ageist master narratives. Secondly, it contributes knowledge to a small but growing literature on ageing futures about how ageism manifests in narratives about the future in later life and how this can be challenged. Thirdly, it provides evidence of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated media and political discourses had on ageing identities.

In using Forum Theatre we have responded to calls to expand the forms, frames and genres by which counter-stories are produced. As de Medeiros has noted, “limits in the ways that stories are told and received help to enforce master cultural narratives rather than to liberate people from them through counterstories” (De Medeiros 2016: 78). Through our use of Forum Theatre we were not *just* equipping the participants to tell counter-narratives, but teaching them a new form in which they could do this, using particular props, costumes and settings. This elevated the narratives out of a naturalistic or realistic context, with the intention of provoking an audience to think critically about the content. In this way we explored both form and content in the creation of the stories, as well as how aesthetics could be used to illustrate the points we wanted to make.

In beginning with a retelling of master narratives which ended in defeat for the older protagonists, the theatre pieces initially restated ageist discourses. This could be regarded as a limitation of the form of Forum Theatre, whereby performing master narratives, albeit as a prelude to challenging them, reinforces their cultural dominance. However, as an artistic form intended to help marginalised communities rehearse strategies of resistance to oppression, we suggest that it is necessary to first

acknowledge the reality and power of dominant narratives. The initial defeats were provocations designed to elicit further discussion and collaboration with spect-actors in the performance of the theatre pieces, where alternative plots and endings were suggested and practised. The counter-narratives produced by Forum Theatre were contingent rather than fixed and the repetition and disruption of scenes rather than the performance of a linear, unidirectional narrative could be read as subverting the sense that ageing is a predictable story that “unfolds” straightforwardly and predictably during the life course (De Medeiros 2016).

The participants in the workshops and the spect-actors did not always agree on what the problems and solutions were, but this better reflects the heterogeneity of opinions and experiences of older people than would a single, fixed narrative purporting to present a solution. The provisionality of the counter-narratives elicited through Forum Theatre and the collaborative involvement of actors and spect-actors in producing them, puts into practice Levitas’ “utopia as method” (Levitas 2013). As with Levitas’ concept of utopia, the counter-narratives – particularly their endings – were not fixed certainties; while spect-actors were asked whether they were happy with how the theatre pieces ended, the “work” of the performances was in discussing barriers to ageism and rehearsing ways to resist this, which requires a more active and political engagement than simply rewriting an ending.

The capacity to imagine alternative outcomes or futures, though, is not a given. As Urry (2016) notes, futures “are indelibly bound up with the power of social actors to shape futures or even to ‘have’ a future. People, places and organizations that do not have a future are physically or metaphorically pushed into the slow lane” (p. 189). In the context of older age, this evokes Freeman’s concept of “narrative foreclosure,” (Freeman 2002), whereby the absence of meaningful cultural narratives can lead older people to feel that future life has nothing significant to offer them. Forum Theatre’s insistence on the need to question power and how it limits opportunity and imagination aligns with Godhe and Goode’s (2018) *Critical Future Studies*, in which they advocate for an “ethical commitment” to “valuing the widest possible repertoire of ideas about possible futures” (p. 152). We therefore argue that Forum Theatre is a useful strategy to counter-limiting ageist narratives, and encourage democratic engagement with alternative futures in later life.

The research that this paper is based on took place in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the project was devised before the pandemic, its central themes of ageism and the cultural and discursive relationships between later life and future time became even more relevant. Two key discourses during the pandemic that have been identified as ageist are typified by the “Boomer Remover” hashtag on social media (Elliott 2022) and a paternalistic discourse constructing older people as vulnerable (BSG 2020). Both discourses were identified as ageist by the workshop participants. The “Boomer Remover” discourse, with its argument that older people’s increased susceptibility to dying of COVID-19 could be somehow “justified” by their perceived culpability in causing environmental destruction is clearly ageist; people’s futures are discounted and deemed to not matter based on their age. The paternalistic discourse is more complex, as Fletcher (2021) has discussed. Making policy decisions based on chronological age could be justified on the basis of epidemiological evidence that certain age groups *are* more vulnerable. In this respect, age-based policies could be regarded as *valuing* older people’s futures. A central problem though, as Fletcher has identified, is that of accounting for heterogeneity in age. When governments and indeed gerontologists use age as a key distinguishing factor between social groups, they construct people of the same age as an “imagined population” and cannot account for differences at an individual level. The answer, Fletcher argues, is not to discard age as a meaningful category of study, but to “improve our engagements” with it (Fletcher 2021: 489). Our use of Forum Theatre, with its critical and inquiring approach and rejection of neat solutions, is intended to do just this.

A limitation of our research is that participants were recruited from a relatively small geographical area. While we argue that this commonality helped to foster a sense of rapport and recognition between participants, we acknowledge that participation was therefore limited to a particular region and culture and that a broader sample of participants may have elicited different findings. In spite of attempts to recruit a wider diversity of participants, all of the members of the performance group in the twelve workshops and final performances were white, most identified as middle-class, and most were in good health. That one of the counter-narratives the participants were keen to communicate was “still having something to give” perhaps reinforces an othering dichotomy between

third and fourth age depictions of older people (Higgs & Gilleard 2021), with the former being constructed as still “productive” and the latter as “unproductive” (Verbruggen et al. 2020). This is a reminder that in creating counter-narratives of ageist master narratives, we need to acknowledge and be actively inclusive of the heterogeneity of older voices and work harder to not reinforce master narratives that emancipate some older voices at the expense of others.

Conclusion

This article responds to calls for more imaginative ways of engaging with the social world (Back & Puwar 2013) and in particular with futures (Adam 1995, 2014; Mische 2009). For older people to identify and articulate what they desire from the future, more varied narratives of ageing must be created, as there are few cultural narratives of ageing that older people can use as resources to help them construct their own meaningful narratives of ageing futures. Hegemonic cultural discourses imply that the future is less meaningful to older people than it is to younger people. This reinforces a particular kind of ageism that is predicated not so much on how many years a person has lived, as how many years they are assumed to have left. While the research from which this article derives is from a small sample size in one country, our findings have international relevance for scholars of ageing and theatre studies.

Although both theatre pieces analysed in this article rejected stigmatising and oppressing master narratives of ageing, the extent to which they can be regarded as counter-stories in the sense intended by Nelson and Laceulle and Baars is debatable. Nelson writes that: “Because the purpose of a counter-story is to repair an identity, the resistance it offers must, at a minimum, aim to dislodge some portion of a master narrative from a person’s understanding of who she herself is, even if there is no attempt to push the counter-story into the broader community” (Nelson 2001: 169). To a large extent the participants were already resistant to the influence of stereotypical and stigmatising narratives told about them as “older people.” In this sense the performances were also possibly preaching to the converted: the spect-actors or audience members who attended the performances likely did so because of their awareness and rejection of ageism. However, we argue that a key value of Forum Theatre performance

lies in the creation of a space in which people are brought together to talk about issues as a group with people who are strangers, yet have similar values and attitudes. Solidarity is created through strangers exploring how to challenge oppression together and feeling able to participate, knowing their voices are being heard and valued.

Both pieces drew attention to the pervasiveness of ageist attitudes and how these can be revealed in narratives that rhetorically exclude older people from a meaningful future. Importantly, we argue that the participatory and inquiring nature of Forum Theatre facilitates a more nuanced and critical discussion of ageism and how it can be challenged than might otherwise be the case. This can be seen in interactions where participants and spect-actors disagreed with each other and where they called for qualities of older age to be acknowledged and valued, rather than being seen as a deficit. While the performances will not – and were never expected to – succeed at defeating ageist master narratives, we argue that the techniques of Forum Theatre are useful in making visible how structural ageism operates in everyday discourses to marginalise, exclude and oppress people in later life, and to provide people with the opportunities to change the script by challenging such narratives and storying their own futures.

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