

CHAPTER I

Setting Up a Reminiscence Theatre Company

In this chapter I shall describe my discovery of the value of reminiscence work, my first experience of making reminiscence theatre and the setting up of Age Exchange in 1983 as a professional theatre company dedicated to this work.

In the early 1980s, after ten years of teaching drama and humanities in secondary schools, I was appointed Education Officer in a voluntary organisation called Task Force working with pensioners, with a brief to explore potential learning opportunities in inter-generational co-operation. Up to that time, the work between old and young had always been seen as the children *doing something for* the old people, such as decorating their kitchens or digging their gardens, things at which incidentally the young people were not particularly skilled. It concerned me that the older people were always seen as passive recipients of the young people's 'good works'. This confirmed the idea of an unequal relationship, wherein young people were effective and older people were without resources of their own.

Sharing the past in the present

Reminiscence: a new idea

Reminiscence was a relatively new idea in the early 1980s (Bornat 1989). Talking about the past was still generally seen as something not to be encouraged amongst older people, since it implied that they were also living in the past and bordering on senility (Coleman 1986, 1994). My introduction to reminiscence was visiting Minnie Bennett House, a sheltered housing unit in Greenwich, to observe a facilitated session for a group of elderly ladies, in their 80s.² There were about half a dozen of them and they were all completely lucid, if a little hard of hearing. They were reminiscing in a group about their younger days and they were very lively and animated, reminding one another of things they had done and places they had been. Some of these memories were coming back very vividly after a long time and I was surprised that the older people could recall experiences from another era with such clarity. I found what they were remembering fascinating and rich in detail,

and was eager to hear more. I felt myself to be in a very privileged position listening to these stories, and was sure they would be of interest to many more people, young and old.

Renewed energy and new connections

As the older people reminisced, they were bringing the remembered energy of their younger days into the present, so that I could see the 17-year-old girls inside these 90-year-old story-tellers. The old people were apparently making new connections with one another as they told their stories, discovering things from the past which they had in common. In a sheltered housing unit it is often difficult for older people to make new friends and the reminiscence sessions seemed to be providing a basis for developing new but strong relationships founded on shared experience.

Remembering in dialogue

I noticed that they were telling a lot of their memories in the form of dialogue, and almost performing their stories as though they were happening in the present. For example, one lady might say, 'My Mum, she says to me, "You'd better be in by nine or your Dad'll be after you."' And I says, "Yes Mum, I will." And then when I come back, it's "Sorry Mum, I couldn't help it. I missed the bus. Don't tell Dad." Cos if Dad found out, well...' Being someone with a background in theatre, I could immediately see the stories they told as dramatised scenes. The switches they made between narration and approximately remembered dialogue were so natural that I could readily imagine transforming the two types of recalling into a performable play text, with story-telling and enactment side by side. It was obvious that this material, collected and edited, could form the basis for a piece of theatre in a style of its own, mirroring the way in which the original speakers remembered the past.

An Age Exchange

Old and young agreeing to work together

It also struck me that the young people in schools with whom I was working could learn a great deal from hearing the older people's stories. If they were then to undertake curriculum work based on these memories, they might have a more equal and dynamic relationship with the old people who had related them, who would, in effect, be the experts. I decided to ask the older people in this group if they would be willing to talk to a group of 'A' level Theatre Arts students, aged 16 to 17, in a local girls' comprehensive school to put this idea to the test. They agreed to have the students visit them in the sheltered housing unit and, together with their drama teacher, these students agreed to try to make a play from the memories they would hear and submit the resulting play as their examination piece.

Asking and telling

At the first session there were six old people and six 17-year-old girls. The students had prepared some questions and came equipped with tape recorders. They asked the older people about what life was like when they were their age, what they had worn, where they had gone for entertainment, how they met boys, how they learned to dance and what music they liked to dance to, how they got their first jobs and what they were paid. Because the young people knew they were going to have to perform these memories they listened intently and their questioning had a certain urgency. They had to get enough information to enter into the period and the specific experiences of the old people. Recognition of the students' needs made the old people much more willing to go into detail. They could see that the students were not just asking for the information out of politeness, but because their stories were going to be used in a project that was crucial to their studies.

Processing the information

The young people recorded the stories on tape and they then worked as a group in subsequent weeks to develop scenes through improvisation from the material. Their task was somehow to transmute those stories into something which had a theatrical life and structure of its own. They had to make sense of the memories they had heard and shape them so that they could convey them dramatically to an audience. Each girl took on the part of one of the older ladies, so they had to try to empathise with that person's experience and imaginatively identify with it, however different it was from their own, in order to perform it, to make it theirs, to own it.

Valuing the experts

Checking with the sources

As part of their scripting and rehearsal process, the students then took these scenes back to the old people, who watched with great interest, occasionally interjecting with comments like, 'No, no. You'd never have spoken like that to your mother in those days.' Or, 'We wouldn't have been allowed to do that.' Basically they were the experts, the sources, and they were providing a service for the young people. The relationship was reciprocal in the sense that the students were preparing to give back an original piece of theatre that celebrated the stories they had collected.

Performance as stimulus

After some rehearsal back at their school, during which the comments and further memories of the elders were incorporated into their script, the students then performed the play at the sheltered housing unit, not just for the half dozen older ladies who had given the original stories, but also to a larger audience, including all the other residents. There was a great sense of occasion as they all came down from their rooms to see what had been going on. The performance itself triggered many

memories amongst people who had not originally been involved in the reminiscence sessions. After the play, there was a buzz of conversation between the tenants, stimulated by the stories of work, leisure and pleasure amongst the young in the days before 'teenagers' were invented.

Pride and ownership

There was evident pleasure and pride on the part of the contributors, who at certain points would turn round to the rest of the audience and say: 'That's my story. That bit was mine.' So they had a sense of ownership of the stories as performed by the students. The presence and vitality of the young people had had an energising effect on all those involved and had created a rare sense of occasion in the communal lounge. 'The value of reminiscence theatre lies in the past becoming not just the property of the old person himself but being involved in and related to problem-solving in the present' (Witkin 1982, p.34).

A few days later, the students performed the play as part of their 'A' level drama examination, and they all achieved excellent results. This was partly because they had co-operated well with one another in producing the piece, but also because their integrity and commitment to this project shone through their work and the material had yielded an original and effective piece of theatre, showing sensitivity towards their intended audience.

A valid experiment

I found this whole experience most enlightening and encouraging. I had seen the power of reminiscence to revitalise older people, to put them in touch with their own past and with one another. From the work with the students, I also saw that the young people had gained artistically, educationally and socially. They had taken something from the old people, worked with it, shaped it and given it back in a form through which it achieved a higher profile. The wider audience of residents in the sheltered unit had clearly been very stimulated by seeing stories performed to which they could relate, and that, in turn, had triggered their own memories and involved many more old people in the reminiscence process.

The only drawback was that, because the students were strapped to a rigid timetable, and were involved in a heavy schedule of exam work, their show could only be performed once for the residents and once for their own Theatre Arts examination. At that point, I realised how valuable it would be to have young professional actors involved in creating such a show, as they could do 30 or 40 performances of the finished product, taking the show to thousands of other older people who had not been involved in the original creative process.

And that was how the idea came about to set up a professional theatre company. I wanted to continue the fundamental idea of a partnership across generations based on mutual respect and creativity and, with this in mind, I decided to call the new theatre company Age Exchange Theatre.

Setting up a professional theatre company: Age Exchange

A target audience

From the outset I decided that all the productions of the new company would be based on the memories of older people and that the performances were not going to happen in conventional theatre spaces. We would take the shows to day centres, pensioners' clubs and community centres, sheltered housing units, care homes and hospitals: all places where people had very little entertainment, or stimulus of any kind. The shows could act as an important trigger to stimulate exchange of memories between older people and to remind them that they had lived through the same period, experienced the same major events, social changes, advances in technology and changes in society's attitudes on key social issues. Our efforts in researching the plays would be focused on working people's memories, since their voices were rarely heard and they were the least likely, for educational and social reasons, to record their lives in writing. In reflecting their experience, we were most likely to relate effectively with our intended audience in local authority-owned venues, who were also predominantly from a working class background.

Free performances

I felt strongly that no older person should be expected to pay for a ticket. It would not have felt right to have people staying away from a performance because they were worried about the cost, when the purpose was essentially to enhance the quality of life of all the older people in the culturally deprived environments where they spent most of their time. For this reason it was crucial to find funding to cover the full cost of employing professional performers, and for the first show the Greater London Council generously agreed to provide this. I auditioned professional actors and recruited five talented players with musical skills, who demonstrated a particular interest in being involved in this area of work.

Deciding content

And then the question was: what should be the subject of the first play? In the year I set up the company, 1983, there was a lot of anxiety about unemployment, with three million unemployed. I discovered that in 1933 there had also been three million unemployed, so I decided to use the subject of how people had coped with unemployment during that time as the theme of the new play, which would be called *The Fifty Years Ago Show*. The choice of subject ensured that, during the research phase of the play, the older people would be the experts, that their many individual tales would contribute to a more general portrayal of the period, and that the resulting production would have meaning in the present for younger audiences and the younger performers.

Researching the first professional play

Group reminiscence sessions

In order to introduce the actors to the reminiscence process, I invited them to attend and participate in a series of group reminiscence sessions in four local sheltered housing units. There were as many as 20 or 25 people in each group, and the hope was that a smaller number of individuals would emerge who had strong recall of their daily lives during the period in question and who could then be privately interviewed in their own flats by the actors.

Stimulus

As a way into the period, and a means of focusing the older people's memories, our pianist played favourite songs from the 1920s and 1930s. The older people remembered the words of the songs, the artists who had originally performed them, the circumstances in which they had first heard them, and what was happening in their lives at that time. Then we darkened the room and projected slides taken from copy-shots of items from local newspapers of 1933 to stimulate the older people to remember what life was like for them around that time and to create a local context for their stories.

Common memories

In the 1930s, some of the residents, now in their 80s, had been setting up home as 'young marrieds'. They remembered buying furniture on the HP (Hire Purchase) and struggling to keep up the payments as wages fluctuated. They remembered the Relieving Officer coming round to their homes and telling them they would need to sell everything of value before they could claim any benefits, and that this often included highly treasured pieces of china handed down over generations or the piano that had been in the family for years as the focus of family celebrations. They remembered haggling with the money-lenders, taking in washing from the more well-to-do houses, and seeing the Jarrow Marchers go by on their great unemployment protest. Some had been involved directly in fights with the British Union of Fascists and had been influenced by key figures in the labour movement at a local level. Everyone remembered the plight of Edward VIII around the time of his abdication and their reaction to it. As they were recalling these events, they were in fact tapping into a communal identity (Buchanan 1996). As the detail of their own lives came back and they listened in the group to one another's stories, they were able to see their own personal experience against the wider historical backdrop of what was happening in Britain in the 1930s, the inter-war period and the economic depression.

Sad memories shared in the group

Many of the memories were very sad. There were people who had lost children to malnutrition and disease, and there were people who had coped with very difficult family, housing and work situations. By telling those stories in the group they

found that they were not alone, that other people had similar stories and that there was a groundswell of sympathy and mutual understanding. Although the older people we were working with were living in the same sheltered unit, they did not necessarily know the other residents very well, so the group sessions enabled them to learn more about one another and to find past experience in common.

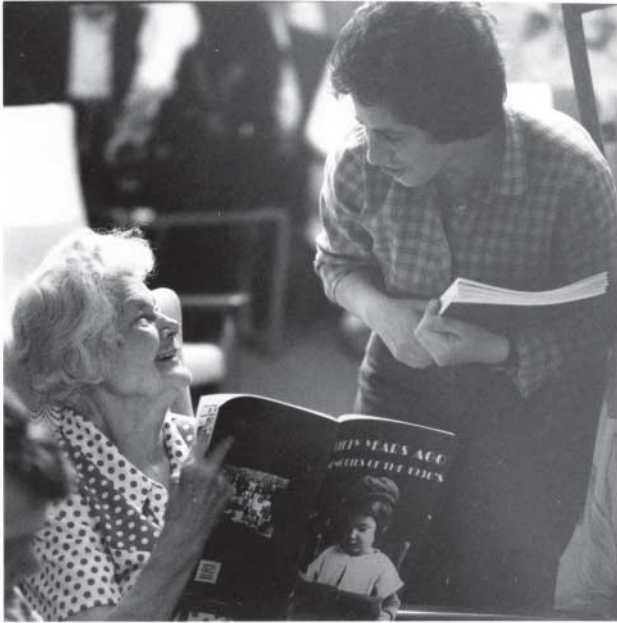
Building older people's confidence as story-tellers

Many of those attending these group reminiscence sessions were not used to being asked anything about themselves and they said very little at first. There were comments such as: 'I don't remember anything. It's all so long ago.' Or women in particular would say things like, 'Nothing much happened to me; you would find my life rather boring really.' But as other people's stories suddenly reminded them of incidents they had not called to mind for 50 years, these normally reticent people blossomed. The older people stimulated and entertained one another, as well as giving us invaluable material. Once they could see that we relished the details they were recalling from their own long lives, they gained confidence, saying: 'Oh is *that* the sort of thing you want? Oh, right, I can tell you all about that.'

In a relaxed atmosphere the sessions began to feel less like a means of gathering historical information and more like social events. We often had to say: 'Please don't all talk at once because we're going to transcribe this tape, so you've got to take it in turns. But just let us know if you've got a story that you've suddenly been reminded of.' During the sessions, there was much laughter and animation. The older people seemed surprised and delighted by what they *could* remember and also by how highly it was being valued by our company. The majority of the older people had left school at 14 and, although some of them were very bright, they were mostly not confident about speaking about themselves in public. Very few of them had thought of committing part or all of their life stories to paper, so our process of witnessing and recording their memories felt special, important and even necessary.

Individual follow-up interviews

After the initial group sessions, the actors then went into the flats in the sheltered housing units and interviewed individuals. We agreed beforehand the kinds of questions we were going to ask (concerning family life and working life) but allowed the interviewees to determine the direction of the sessions according to what they were spontaneously recalling. (A more extensive discussion about interviewing individually and in groups appears in the next chapter.) The actors' close involvement with the interviewees increased their commitment to the project and their emotional investment in the show's creation. In fact we all began to feel concerned that these older people's memories would disappear after the theatre production, so everyone wrote up the best of the stories they had recorded and these were included in a book we published to accompany the show (Schweitzer 1983a).



Leaving behind in book form the stories and photos collected for the show

Devising the play from the stories

Assessing the assembled material

Working from the taped interviews, the actors wrote down from the tapes the stories that they liked most. We met up to talk about what they'd found, and on huge pieces of wallpaper lining paper, we all noted down the stories we thought would make the strongest scenes. The actors played a very important role in suggesting ideas and scenes for the show. That company was full of intelligent and creative actors who all had their own ideas as to how the show should be developed. In fact, every actor had written the show in his or her own head as he or she wanted it, in styles varying from Brecht to Lloyd Webber!

Finding the story

We finally agreed to focus the chosen stories around one particular family coping with the anger and humiliation of unemployment and we built in a love story which centred on the son, his flirtation with fascism and his courting days at the cinema and dance halls. Into this framework, we could fit the best stories we had collected, find a through-line with characters and plot, varying the mood and pace to include moments of exuberance, bitterness, contentment, despair, love and hilarity.

Drafting a script from the scenario

The agreed scenario formed the basis for more in-depth exploration of each possible scene through improvisation. The actors called on their written records of what people had said, and phrases they remembered from the interviews they had conducted, to inform the improvisations. Scene by scene, we developed the story-line and the characters, recording the improvisations and noting down the strongest versions to form a draft script. A mixture of scripting styles began to emerge, from naturalistic scenes played between the characters to monologues giving one person's perspective addressed direct to the audience, with much inter-twining of these styles.

A collaborative rehearsal period

A continuing relationship with the sources

We prepared three or four scenes and arranged to play them back to residents in the sheltered housing units, including the individuals who had given the particular stories in the first place. This would enable us to test our dramatic approach and to gain further authenticating detail from the story-tellers to bring the scenes to life for other audiences. We also wanted to include the older people as far as possible in our creative process. It was our way of saying, 'Thank you for your stories. We value them. Here's how we are working with them. What do you think?' There was a very positive response to this initiative. Contributors became increasingly enthusiastic about our process the more they understood it and they expressed much interest in seeing the resulting show.

Corroboration and further detail

One story that we wanted to use in the play concerned a woman who had been a seamstress in a tailoring factory in the East End of London. She had told us how she had to work all hours of the day and night, including Sundays, which was strictly against the law. Her mother had finally gone to the factory to complain about this. However, when we arrived, the woman who had given us this story was not present. We were told that she was feeling unwell and rather miserable and did not want to attend. I went to her room with the warden and said to her, 'If you could possibly come down just for a few minutes, it would be wonderful because we've worked on your story and we'd like you to see it.' Very reluctantly she came and watched it.

Seeing the health value in playing back memories

Seeing her reaction was like witnessing a medical miracle! This depressed, rather sickly woman just came to life as she saw her own memories being acted out before her. When she saw our representation of the story, she remembered the whole event much more clearly than when we had interviewed her first, and added many details she had not recollected for 50 years. As she recalled, she repeatedly brushed

her hand in front of her face, almost as if she were brushing aside the cobwebs which had obscured the sharp detail. The interchange with the actors and the development of the story had an extraordinary physical effect on this woman. She sparked to life and became the 'star' of the place! The whole incident was, for me, a very significant indicator that reminiscence work of this kind was not just serving the artistic process and giving the actors valuable additional material to work with; it was also promoting health and personal re-orientation and could be a means of recovering past identity in the present.

Role play by the older people

Another memorable occasion from the same week, but in a different sheltered unit, was when the actors played out a scene prepared in rehearsal about the arrival of the Relieving Officer at the family home. I wanted to know if the scene felt accurate to them. In fact, some people pointed out that the actor playing the Relieving Officer was far too courteous, and the family too quick to answer back, and that this did not tally with their memory of similar events. We persuaded two residents, albeit a little reluctantly at first, to take on the roles of the mother and father to show us exactly how the scene might have been while the officer was there and once he had gone. Two very old people, well into their 80s, acted out the scene for the company, building the tension, saying little until pushed beyond endurance, and then exploding into anger and injured pride, as a result of which they lost their claim. They stepped into their roles and achieved absolute authenticity of tone because they were doing what they remembered and they did it in the spirit and language which was right for the time.

The actors were very touched by this experience and one of them commented that it was quite humbling to watch the old people reliving the painful situation to show us how it was for them. The older people who acted rose to the occasion and were enthusiastically applauded by the other tenants. It was clear that they had really enjoyed participating and had apparently never shown that outgoing side of their personalities before.

Relocating remembered energy in the present

The woman who had performed said to me, 'Oh I enjoyed that. I'll do anything if they ask me. I will really.' I assumed this was true and congratulated the warden on having such a lively and confident tenant. I said, 'She's a natural, isn't she? She's exceptional! How wonderful that she's willing to do this and that she's got the style and she's got the feeling for it.' The warden then told me that this came as a total surprise to her and the other tenants, because this woman was often depressed and rarely came out of her room.³

I thought that we had witnessed something very powerful; that the dramatising of the older people's lives by the actors had enabled them to tap into an energy and confidence from their younger days that had been dormant for a long time. Their involvement in the dramatising process demonstrated for them that their story, which perhaps they did not initially think was very interesting, was actually

being worked on, that they were the experts on it and that something very effective was going to be made from it, which would be seen and appreciated by many others.

Deciding the form

Separate scenes interspersed with participatory discussion

Around the time of establishing the Age Exchange Theatre Company, I became aware of a theatre group called Fair Old Times, working in Dartington, Devon, under the direction of Bazz Kershaw and performing in old people's homes (Langley and Kershaw 1982). They had been developing programmes of short theatrical scenes, using reminiscence objects and back-projected images as visual stimuli, and interspersing these scenes with facilitated reminiscence sessions with the audience. Their guides in this work had been Gordon Langley, an old age psychiatrist, and his wife, Dorothy, a drama therapist, who together had extensive experience of working with older people and understood the potential value of reminiscence as a means of stimulating feelings of self-worth. The project was well grounded in the locale and used memories of places and events which had meaning for many of the residents and which were particularly effective in evoking further memories, so that the process was cyclical. The company's brief was to use theatre to stimulate reminiscence to meet the social and emotional needs of older people in residential homes and hospitals, so there was a much stronger therapeutic direction to their work than to the fledgling artistic policy of Age Exchange.

Performance followed by discussion

There was some discussion with the cast of *The Fifty Years Ago Show* as to whether we too should intersperse the scenes with reminiscence with the audience, rather than perform the show straight through and then hold informal conversations with the audience afterwards. Our feeling at the time was that the power and tension of the play would lose its impact if constantly interrupted, and that there would be many logistical problems around the older people switching focus and hearing one another's stories, especially when the seating was arranged 'theatre style' to help them see the performers. It seems that such concerns were aired in the Fair Old Times Company too. Jacolyn Corder, their administrator/researcher, wrote: 'The actors seriously questioned whether the stimulation of immediate feedback should be the main objective... They sought to raise the intellectual pitch and depth of response beyond that of simple recognition and factual recall' (Langley and Kershaw 1982, p.19).

In the event, we all felt that the play should be a free-standing artistic event, especially as it would be performed to a wide range of audiences and levels of understanding, and that we should not sacrifice the potential emotional and aesthetic impact by breaks for a very different kind of engagement. (Chapter 8 will detail an Age Exchange production by Clare Summerskill based on a variation on the Fair Old Times approach, exploring the advantages and disadvantages of this

approach.) However, we did all recognise the value and importance of exchange with the audience around the issues the play raised and their personal experience of comparable situations. So, built into the touring schedule of this first show and every subsequent production was a minimum of half an hour's audience discussion time at the end of the performance. This would normally be informal in style, with the actors sitting with audience members and talking to them over a cup of tea, but it could be offered as a more formal facilitated discussion if that was the preferred format of the venue, and this would normally be led either by the director, if present, or by one or more of the actors.

The central role of music

It had already become very clear in the initial group sessions that music was a highly effective agent in stimulating reminiscence. When the older people were talking, they would often remember the songs, sing them quietly together and be transported back in time to the age they were when they first heard them. It seemed clear that any show we did would need to have a great deal of music in it, so that when the actors performed it they could trigger memories of favourite singers, films, dance halls and shows from their younger days and associated memories. In a dramatic context, the use of music could also accentuate an emotion or atmosphere, or enable a change of mood or pace, especially when we touched on painful memories.

We built intensive music sessions into the rehearsal period, locating music of the period to complement the scenes, with the actors singing full harmonies accompanied by piano and violin. We were guided in the choice of songs by the older people's suggestions during our initial group reminiscence sessions. Many of the songs we used in the show were from the well-known musicals of stage and screen, including numbers such as 'We're in the Money', 'Lullaby of Broadway', 'Pennies from Heaven' and 'On the Other Side of the Hill'. They were all songs of the period, many of them expressing, with gentle irony, the fundamental hopes and anxieties of that era.

The actors' relationship with the older people in performance

An 'out-front' playing style

Following our experience of improvising with the older people during the rehearsal period, we decided very early on that the actors would 'play out' to the audience, even in more naturalistic scenes where the characters were relating to one another, as well as, more obviously, in their narrated monologues. This would enable people who were hard of hearing to see their faces and read their lips. Equally importantly, we wanted the audience to receive the stories and experience the play as a dialogue between them and the actors, even if they were not invited to respond vocally there and then, but rather when the performance was over.



The cast of The Fifty Years Ago Show in full song: (left to right) Dianne Hancock, John Patrick Deery, Anna Philpott, Tom Austin

Responding to spontaneous reactions from the audience

This very direct form of address to the audience did sometimes produce unexpected, personal and spontaneous responses from audience members, caught up in the reality of the play. For example, an actor was performing a soliloquy along the lines of 'I've been up since five o'clock this morning looking for work. I've been all over town trying to get a job...' when a lady from the audience called out: 'You look exhausted, darling, come and sit down by me before you go off again.' Of course the actors with experience of performing in cabaret and community venues where they had to respond to audience heckling were far better adapted to the unpredictable environments of reminiscence theatre than those schooled in Stanislavskian immersion in character!

A visible and audible audience

The actors' experience of the first few performances was a very positive one. It was a new style of work for most of them, relating so closely to the audience. None of the rules of more conventional theatre performance applied. Instead of the audience being in the dark and the actors brightly lit, the actors in our show could see the audience clearly and witness their responses to the scenes. And instead of a silence, interrupted by occasional laughs from the audience, our players could hear a constant, if quiet, undertow of vocalised reaction, much of it expressed in phrases like 'Yes, that's right' or 'I remember that' and 'That was me'.

The actors were all moved by playing real people whom they had met and talked to. They felt a continuing responsibility to the particular individuals whom they had originally interviewed or improvised with, and whose lives they were now portraying. One of the actors in the show, Dianne Hancock, said, 'I found the whole experience humbling really. The old people know it, they have lived the stories themselves. We are representing them.'⁴

Connecting with the audience in post-show discussions

During the performances, the actors were so close to the audience that they could see when they had struck a chord for an individual, and when particular people were responding strongly to particular scenes. In the post-show discussion period, the actors could pick up on these signals, and talk quietly with the individuals concerned. This opportunity for personal exchange elicited many more memories and gave to every new audience a sense that they also had a contribution to make. It also showed the actors that the play on tour was reaching out way beyond the original story-tellers, and was triggering spontaneous reminiscence exchanges which would never have taken place without this theatrical stimulus.

Playing for 'special needs' audiences

In some venues where we performed, there was a preponderance of people with dementia, and for them it was obviously more difficult to stay focused for the duration of the play. In these places, the songs provided little pauses from the dramatic action and a chance for these audience members to reconnect with the story, or, at the least, to engage with the mood and to enjoy feeling part of the event. However, it was clear from very early in the life of the company that it would be desirable to develop special projects geared to the specific needs of these people, with smaller numbers participating and a more flexible framework for involving them directly in the reminiscence process, while still offering the stimulus of music, role play and strong visual images. (This approach will be explored further in Chapter 14.)

Production issues on tour

Problematic performance spaces

The venues on our tour of *The Fifty Years Ago Show* were often far from easy for the actors to set up and perform in. Many had high-backed chairs, which impeded vision, and we sometimes had people unwilling to move, saying: 'I always sit in that space!' The staff were not used to the idea of providing a proper changing area for the actors to get into costume and apply the necessary period make-up. Sometimes the company were not even expected, as the information provided by our administrator had not been fed to the particular staff on duty that day. It was quite a new idea, taking professional performances into homes and day centres, and I remember one terrible time when the cast performed to five people while 50 others who were the intended audience played Bingo in an upstairs room, furious about

having to move out of their usual place! (See Chapter 7 for more discussion about playing in non-theatrical venues.)

Involving the staff

During that first tour, there were several care staff who used the performance time as an opportunity to take a break and maybe have a cup of tea in their staff rooms, leaving the actors to cope with whatever went on amongst the residents. This was a pity for the staff as well as for the performers, in that they missed all the potential cues that their clients were giving in their spontaneous responses to the stories in the show, and which they could have fruitfully followed up after the actors had gone. In those early days, the therapeutic value of reminiscence had not been widely recognised and staff were not encouraged by their managers to maximise the impact of any structured or spontaneous reminiscence input or to undertake such work themselves. Later, staff at all touring venues were notified by the company administrator of reminiscence training services and many built successfully on the input provided by the performance in their home or day centre.

Audience reaction

Strong identification

The vast majority of the audiences were extremely moved and delighted by the play in performance. They expressed their gratitude very warmly, sharing the long-forgotten memories it had evoked for them. Sometimes there were tears in the audience, but there was also a lot of singing along, a lot of laughing and a lot of vocalised corroboration from the audience. I sometimes felt as though what we were doing was creating a special kind of 'time-jumping mirror', and holding that mirror up for the audience to see themselves as they were when young. They suddenly had all their former vitality and resilience reflected back to them in the truthful performances of their stories by the actors. Paradoxically, exploring the past theatrically had a rejuvenating effect on our extremely elderly audience members, generating present-day energy and present-day engagement with one another.

We had obviously hit a very rich seam, so that people we had never met before would come up and say things like 'That was my story, how did you know my story?', showing how strongly they had identified with the content. This had been our hope at the outset and it had governed our choice of material to go into the play; it had to reflect the specific original story, but it also had to be typical and representative if it was to have reverberations across the lives of the thousands of people to whom we were playing.⁵ Older people and staff bought the book of stories and photos we had prepared and this proved useful as a starting point for small reminiscence groups which sprang up in venues after the performances.

We did a couple of performances for young people in secondary schools on that first tour to see how they would relate to the story and the particular form of telling it. The music clearly presented an aesthetic barrier, being quite alien to

them, but there was an obvious educational value in the content. The play was an effective means of introducing key topics in the social history of the 1930s, especially when the performance was followed by discussion with some of the contributors. However, although we kept the idea of doing a small number of performances for local schools, we all felt it to be important that the target audience had to remain the older people who were getting so little by way of stimulus and whose own lives the play reflected.

The blueprint emerges

And that was essentially the way our first production, *The Fifty Years Ago Show*, emerged. It came about through listening to the stories, working the stories through improvisation, showing them back to the sources and modifying them in the light of additional material and comments, and then scripting.

The key elements to emerge from this first professional production were the following:

- the value of stimulating the older people to share memories in a group, and then in individual interviews
- the importance of locating a subject with wide appeal to which working people could relate and contribute
- the value of creative engagement between the actors and the older people during the whole dramatising process
- the desirability of exploring a full range of emotions during the course of the play
- the recognition of live music as an essential element in the form
- the need for a conversational, inclusive playing style on the part of the performers
- the importance of the older people's involvement and participation in post-performance discussion
- the value of collecting the stories and photos gathered during the research period into a book, or other lasting form, for posterity
- leaving behind a stimulus for discussion to help the audience to remember the show and the staff to continue the reminiscence work.

The blueprint was there, and all these elements were retained in future productions over the next 20 years, even though each show was unique and specific with particular challenges in its creation and performance.

Summary

This chapter has traced the development of an idea, from the point of first recognising the value of reminiscence as an enjoyable and stimulating activity for older people to the creation of a dedicated reminiscence theatre company. It has

described the inter-generational origins of the work through the pilot production by school students based on older people's memories and shown how this led to the setting up of a professional touring company. The evolution of a working method and the creation of a blueprint for future reminiscence shows was explored through the devising, rehearsal and performance periods of *The Fifty Years Ago Show*.