

All the World's a Stage

How we're taking theatre to Care Homes in Oxfordshire

The idea came to us suddenly, as with so many brilliant but simple schemes. Living the Drama is a not for profit theatre company, based in Oxford. We produce professional theatre and one of our aims is: *'Connecting to audiences in 'hard to reach' venues.'* And also to: *'Encourage creative playwriting for people with many years experience of life.'*



Scene from *The West Peacock* by Caroline Morrell at London Court

Put those two aims together and what do you get? Great plays written by Third Act, our older aspiring playwrights' group, which are then performed in local Residential/Care Homes.

We admit to being a little apprehensive as this was our first experience of theatre in care homes, and last May, four actors and the director, took two of Third Act's plays on a short tour. In October, we continue with our tour to another five care homes performing 'The Wet Peacock' by Caroline Morrell and an adaptation of 'The Owl and the Pussycat' by Viv Peto.

It's a known fact among actors that even with the same play and the same actors, audiences always respond in differently; a joke which has the audience roaring with laughter one evening, falls completely flat the next. It's one of the mysteries of touring life. And for us, this was even more marked. Half our audience were in residential homes and find it difficult to get to the theatre. They didn't suffer from dementia and totally enjoyed the full 'theatrical experience'. We loved performing to such an appreciative audience and their positive reviews were so touching and much appreciated.

However, our first performance in a care home was daunting! We wrongly assumed, looking round the room that our audience were all asleep – not exactly the best encouragement for the actors in front of a snoozing audience. But never assume! As soon as the energy of the actors hit the room, a number of residents started waking up and joining in. One hilarious moment was when the highly pompous character was shouting for his wife to get an umbrella, a resident shouted out "Get it yerself!" then another chipped in, "Oh, chuck him out the window!". The audience started to imagine extra peacocks strutting in, when in fact there was only one (imaginary) peacock. From their comments afterwards, it was clear they could 'see' more peacocks in the theatrical sitting room. Interactive theatre at its best!



So what lessons have we learnt?

1. Every audience has a special energy and responds uniquely to itself. This is true whether the audience is in the Oxford Playhouse or at the local Care Home. The job of the director and actors is to ensure they engage with the audience, stimulating the imagination, provoking an emotional response and of course, adding to their enjoyment.
2. Never assume those with dementia are unable to enjoy live theatre. Their response may be unexpected or go off at a tangent, but it's their way of engaging in something new – even if only for a few minutes the experience has inherent value.
3. For maximum enjoyment for this type of audience, plays need:
 - To last no longer than 30 minutes
 - Have a cheerful, upbeat, light-hearted storyline
 - Music and sound effects to play to all the senses
 - Movement and physical actions
4. Funding must be planned well in advance. Our income is solely from box office takings, workshop fees and donations, plus grants where we are eligible. Although we pay our actors Equity rates, we made the decision not to charge for the performances as we didn't want money to be a barrier to participation. We were then lucky enough to be offered 'part-funding' by Arts Council England who recognise the value of the arts for older people and we're so grateful to those homes who offered a small donation for our work. It all helps us!

There's something very special about live theatre. It stimulates the imagination, provoking memories and laughter, as well as a sense of well-being and being part of a community. We can't wait to get out on tour again in October!

We've learnt so much from our first foray into care homes, and would be happy to share with anyone else interested in theatre for Care Homes.

For more information or just a chat, please go to our website: www.livingthedrama.co.uk, or email: carolyn@livingthedrama.co.uk or call 077 822 59471. We'd love to hear from you!

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