

## Darkness and light in lockdown: Our Time at Leeds Playhouse

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At the Our Time session at Leeds Playhouse on 2nd March, we wiped down door handles and offered hand sanitiser to participants. The usual hugs were restrained and biscuits were offered on individual, rather than shared, plates. The global news of the coronavirus was beginning to feel more local, with cases confirmed in Leeds. So we chose to pause.

Our Time sessions are designed to harness the creativity of people living with dementia and their supporters and are described by many participants as a lifeline. Suddenly the prospect of attending this lifeline came with significant risk. So we asked people to stay away, something that felt unnatural considering the benefits involved for people with dementia in maintaining routine, getting together with friends and feeling free to creatively express their emotions, opinions and imagination.

Amidst the uncertainty, yet with the increasing clarity that older people were likely to be particularly impacted by the virus, we started to explore other ways of staying connected. Aware of the emotional benefits of seeing another human face, we gently coached people in using Zoom video calls. It was a steep learning curve for us all, as our small team were also novices, soaking up as much information and knowledge as we could to safely guide others.

The achievement of simply connecting everyone, with their different devices, data access and tech confidence in a test session, felt important. There was palpable relief as we saw each other again, and shared a sense of curiosity and wonder at the technology. We experienced the success of singing together despite being apart, and we supported a range of emotional responses as we experienced the ups and downs of lockdown – on week one we mainly laughed, on week two we cried together.

Now this video call is our new normal and this requires constant revisiting. We're becoming more tuned into the nuance of designing and managing sessions that are sensitive to the fatigue people experience with video calls. After the initial euphoria, it's noticeable that group video calls work well for some, but certainly not for all our participants. Zoom has its limitations and it highlights miscommunications in a bright yellow frame. When cues go unnoticed or connections are missed, we long to squeeze someone's hand to guide them in participating, to subtly demonstrate that yes, this invitation is for you, how might you like to respond? People need an individual approach more than ever now, something we are striving to achieve, as we continue to adapt and learn together.

Yet shared experiences are still possible - the jubilation in week six of lockdown was felt by everyone when we finally connected one participant by video call. She had previously only been able to phone into meetings, missing the visual connection of the experience. She beamed as she saw her friends for the first time in weeks. Her face lit up, shining as brightly as the ghost lights that are gently lighting our theatre's stages right now, willing the return of gatherings, anticipating ripples of laughter and hoping to offer biscuits from a shared plate again one day.

Photography by Michelle Booth

<https://leedsplayhouse.org.uk/creative-engagement/older-people/theatre-dementia/>