

# MAGIC ME KNOW INTERGENERATIONAL ARTS BENEFIT WHOLE COMMUNITIES

By Deborah Mason

Anyone signed up to Age of Creativity has already probably signed up to the idea that creativity and the arts can benefit older people, particularly in combatting isolation and improving health and wellbeing. Magic Me believes that intergenerational arts can do all that and more, and are important not just for older people, but for communities everywhere.

We are repeatedly told by media, commentators and politicians that we live in a country that is deeply, socially divided. The same commentators present better community cohesion, celebrating our 'more in common' as part of a solution that will tackle social mobility, health inequality, isolation and loneliness. Whilst we wouldn't make the claim that intergenerational arts projects are a panacea for all ills, they do have a part to play in combatting negative stereotypes across generations and amongst communities.

Working in East London we find that by creating intergenerational projects we are also creating inter-cultural ones, different waves of people coming to live in East London, whether migrating from outside the UK or just inside London, mean that different age groups also may have different cultural backgrounds. Working together – often one-to-one – on creative projects that require discussion and collaboration, they find out more about each other. This then dispels stereotypes of what older people or younger people are like, and also stereotypes about their cultural backgrounds. At one of our Decorum project sessions we spoke to some of the participants and the comments below give an illustration of how minds can be changed: "At the beginning of the project I thought it would be sad working with older women, but I was

surprised, it was not at all, they are so fun and funny" younger participant



"It doesn't matter how old you are you are still learning, and hearing the young ladies' stories of what they want to do in the project – you think hmm it isn't going to work – but then it does work – so it's good to see that kind of psychology – they are lovely youngsters and lovely ladies to get to know". Older participant

In the Decorum project, quoted above, the older women involved in the project were recruited from a pool of regular participants, most of whom live independently in East London. Recent projects

have seen us in care homes, extra care schemes and community drop in centres. Each environment provides a new challenge for our artists and project teams and each setting puts young people in touch with older people with a different range of needs. In some of the care homes the younger people will work with older people who have limited mobility, speech impairments or are living with a dementia – it is encouraging to see how quickly they adapt to these, finding ways to communicate and ways to work together that they are unlikely to discover in other places.

Our culture places a lot of emphasis on language as a way of connecting to each other, it's something that most of us don't really think about consciously. If you then find you are losing that ability because of a dementia or struggling with speech because of stroke, then you can feel isolated and fearful. Another challenge can be that languages learnt in adult hood get lost with dementia. Finding other ways of communicating is something the arts does very well. It is that extra dimension that takes our intergenerational work in care homes beyond 'befriending' or more passive 'performing to' to something where everyone in the room is engaged fully with the project. This inclusive approach also helps the younger people who may be struggling with English as a new language, or have other barriers to engaging fully at school.

Both sides of the 'team' have the time and patience to listen to and work with each other as equals – there are no impatient 'adults' here to hurry along a discursive story or a long pause as a participant struggles to find the right word. The younger people develop confidence and the older people reconnect with the

outside world, with thinking and activity that isn't just about getting through a day in a care home. One of the older participants in our recent 'Stepney Stories' project said to us 'Coming here is like going on holiday'.

The creative element of all our programmes is integral to their success. Our flagship project Cocktails In Care Homes might seem like just a fun way to run a befriending programme, young people, mostly working or living in London, volunteer to come and have a chat and a drink with residents in care homes and extra care schemes. The difference from this, to a more traditional scheme, is the party element. Instead of the volunteers coming in on their own and just talking to one particular resident, they come together, often regularly to the same home, building up relationships with each other and the staff.



The care home room that hosts the party is transformed with decorations and props – often on a theme – that help to provoke conversation that is rooted in the present moment. The props also offer activity where conversation is difficult - for example the British Seaside theme had sunglasses and seagulls and miniature sand trays where party-goers could make sandcastles. Sitting at tables together residents can chat with each other and also to the volunteers, but the volunteers can also chat, bringing in the residents but also taking the pressure off them to 'make conversation', whilst still being included. We know that one of the things that the residents value is the idea of the outside coming in – recreating as much as possible the 'night out' – with music, lights, props, decorations but also the potential for random conversation and interesting discoveries. At one of the parties recently two women, who both lived in the care home but on different floors with different mealtimes, met for the first time. They had much in common. They have become friends, the ongoing benefit of that to both is something we are very proud of.

In a life where routine is very 'routine' the sense of occasion presented by the parties is also important, one of the staff reported of a resident who had just been to his first Cocktails In Care Homes party: 'This is the first time in many, many years that he has taken pride in his appearance'.

As we prepare to celebrate our 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2019 we find ourselves looking to the future. We have always been pioneers and we continue to ask "What is needed now?". How can we do more work and benefit more people? How can we encourage others to take an intergenerational approach and create projects across the UK that will give many people, old and young, and many communities, the benefits outlined here? In January 2018 the players of the People's Postcode Lottery awarded us a grant to help us do just this. Our approach is to work in partnership with others, building capacity in arts organisations to deliver more work. We have begun by spreading out of London eastwards (a traditional migratory route) at the end of last year we were commissioned by Essex County Council to deliver a workshop to local artists and to work with two artists in Rochford, Essex on an intergenerational project. In 2018 we have been asked back to deliver workshops to care home activities organisers. We are also working with Metal as part of our Decorum project and two artists from Metal will lead on the project in Southend and Peterborough. If organisations are interested in working with us or commissioning us to help implement an intergenerational arts programme in their area then please get in touch with Susan Langford on 020 3222 6064 or by email to [info@magicme.co.uk](mailto:info@magicme.co.uk)

Photos Top Photo c. Holly Falconer, bottom c. Roxene Anderson.