

## A report of community theatre groups during the coronavirus pandemic

*Um relato sobre grupos de teatro comunitário durante a pandemia do coronavírus*

*Un informe sobre grupos de teatro comunitario durante la pandemia de coronavirus*

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**ABSTRACT:** The objective of this paper is to present the story of three community theatre groups working with older people from West Yorkshire, England, and how they manage to rehearse and perform before and after the new coronavirus pandemic. The article looks at what factors, such as audience involvement, the groups had in common. Finally, the article concludes that the future is – no one knows.

**Keywords:** Community; Theatre; Pandemic spontaneity.

**RESUMO:** O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar a história de três grupos de teatro comunitário que trabalham com idosos de West Yorkshire, na Inglaterra, e como eles conseguem ensaiar e atuar antes e depois da nova pandemia do coronavírus. O artigo analisa quais fatores, tais como o envolvimento do público, os grupos têm em comum. Por fim, o artigo conclui que o futuro é – ninguém sabe.

**Palavras-chave:** Comunidade; Teatro; Pandemic spontaneity.

**RESUMEN:** El propósito de este artículo es presentar la historia de tres grupos de teatro comunitario que trabajan con personas mayores de West Yorkshire, Inglaterra, y cómo logran ensayar y actuar antes y después de la nueva pandemia de coronavirus. El artículo analiza qué factores, como la participación ciudadana, tienen en común los grupos. Finalmente, el artículo concluye que el futuro es – nadie lo sabe.

**Palabras-clave:** Comunidad; Teatro; Espontaneidad pandémica.

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## INTRODUCTION

This report presents the story of three groups: The first was a social improvisation group for the over 50s that had been running for 11 years at a community arts centre every Tuesday morning for 2 hours. Numbers varied – there were 18 on the books and attendance ranged from 7 to 14. It was known that the group wanted to have fun, did not want to be responsible for the group either financially or in terms of the content and did not want to perform to any external audience. As there was no commitment to attend regularly, it meant each session had to be self-contained. Therefore, sessions ranged from:

- a. Just asking two people to start a story and then adding others in when role opportunities occurred;
- b. Using aids, such as photos or a colour, and then dividing the group into subgroups with each developing a story which they would then perform;
- c. Getting a subgroup to make up and show a short scene and then the next subgroup had to take the action on and so on until all were involved;
- d. Taking the outline of well-known books with participants enacting key scenes;
- e. Improvising around real incidents that had happened to someone in the group or had been reported in the local papers.

Because the group had been meeting for so long, there was little need for a warm-up. During each session, there was a 15-minute refreshment break that provided a social space for people to meet and talk. Friendship groups developed, a poetry class started to meet, people joined up together to go to choirs or the theatre.

The second was a performing group, also for the over 50s, based at a community centre in another city in West Yorkshire, England. This group had had a more chequered career. It had started as a class at a theatre, then morphed into a performing group, but the theatre decided it did not want the group there. The group changed its name to The Curtain Up Players, found a new rehearsal space, often freezing, and applied successfully for funds. It then moved its base again to the present centre.

The group performed plays for a variety of local groups – library coffee mornings, luncheon clubs, care homes, community groups etc. It worked in conjunction with the local university, social services, organisations dealing with issues such as ageing, loneliness and sight impairment. Some plays were serious and some entertainment, such as Christmas pantomimes. The group devised all the plays themselves and they were all unscripted – saved older people having to learn lines (The Curtain Up Players 2017).

The third group was very different. It consisted of Asian health service professionals – consultants, family doctors and a community support worker. The group came together because they wanted to use drama to help inform the South Asian community in the region about dementia. The group found funding, created their own play, which they then performed at different Asian community centres. The plays used a mixture of English, Punjabi and Urdu. At the beginning of the pandemic, the group was preparing to create a new play on the topic of talking about death, another subject that was not always easy for families in the community to talk about.



Because of the group's work and family commitments, it was difficult to find time to rehearse. They tended to use one of the group member's sitting rooms. Many of this group were friends and the bonds intensified during their time together, culminating in most of the group being involved in setting up a new medical clinic.

## COMMON STRANDS IN THE THREE GROUPS

The first factor was age. The first two groups were advertised as being for the over-50s while the third group were nearly all over 40s. People now live in a world where they live longer and have many postretirement years to find a way of living positively. Yet ageism exists structurally in many societies, highlighted most recently in the excess deaths in care homes from the corona virus disease. In many parts of the world, austerity has limited the support available to older people. So, at one basic level, the drama groups provided social capital for the members, a place to meet and support each other through loneliness, illness and death. For the audiences, they provided entertainment, education on occasions and an opportunity to meet.

The second factor was to keep the actors' faculties flourishing as they aged. As Blatner and Blatner (2019) wrote, the benefits of such activity include: "role flexibility, spontaneity, imaginativeness and recreation [...] recapture the magic of childhood [...] allow access to the joyful essence of drama" (p. 215). This was helped by the fact that all the plays were unscripted, assisting ageing memories as there were no lines to learn. This is part of the tradition of community theatre which is "united I think by its emphasis on local and/or personal stories (rather than pre-written scripts) that are first processed through improvisation and then collectively shaped into theatre" (Van Erven, 2001, p. 2).

Thirdly, where possible the group members looked for ways of involving the audience. As Moreno (2010) wrote, one of the tasks of the Viennese Theatre of Spontaneity was "the actors and the audience are now the only creators. Everything is improvised, the play, the action, the motive, the words, the encounter and the resolution of conflicts" (p. 10). Though this was rarely possible in this context, it was an aim that was easier to achieve when directing sociodramas (Wiener, 2011).

## IN A PANDEMIC WORLD, WHERE ARE THE GROUPS NOW?

Just before the destiny of the groups is told, it is important to say a bit about how the pandemic has affected the United Kingdom. The U.K. have had the most deaths in Europe and now (October 2020) the second wave is engulfing the country. It is spreading rapidly; there are no effective test and trace systems, and there is an utterly incompetent ruling group of politicians in cahoots with the private sector. In West Yorkshire, most of the county is in a form of lockdown, where people are not allowed to meet anyone from other households in their houses or gardens, but ironically can meet in pubs and restaurants, though they are advised not to. Further nationwide lockdowns are expected shortly. So, how does this impact on the theatre groups is presented below.

The first group moved online onto Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>). There are ten regular members, two-thirds of the original group. The members meet weekly for an hour to continue with their improvisations, which range from solo spots through to using breakout rooms to create small scenes and then all back on screen, creating a story that everyone can join in. →

While most would like to revert back to face to face meetings, this will not happen in the immediate future due to the age profile of the group: it would mean meeting indoors and the danger of a second wave this coming winter.

The second group is in hibernation. The rehearsal space is closed and it is unlikely to reopen soon. The group consists of older people who are more vulnerable to the virus and need to shield. More importantly, the group had been losing members for some months and, if it was going to flourish once more, it needed a new director with fresh energy. So even though a new potential director had been found, they could not start work until group members felt safe enough to congregate together again. In the meantime, two of the group (who had also been members of the first group) joined the Zoom drama sessions.

The third group was also in lockdown. The two main reasons here were, firstly, that the group members were all senior hospital workers and were fully engaged with dealing with the pandemic. Secondly, the group were all from a South Asian background and performed to South Asian audiences, who were all at a higher risk of death from the pandemic.

## THE FUTURE

Who knows what the post pandemic – if that will ever come – world will look like and what will be possible? There will be no shortage of stories that need to be told and heard but in what form and in what place is the big unknown.

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