

## Article 2

### **Art, Age & Health: A Research Journey about Developing Reminiscence Theatre in an Age-Exchange Project**

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**Abstract:** In this article, the researcher studies how it is possible to develop a reminiscence theatre production in an age-exchange project, created with life stories from pensioners, and how the audience experiences the performance. The article is based on six focus group interviews with nine pensioners, a theatre production and a “reminiscence café” between the audience and the actors, arranged after the performance. The researcher designed the study, “The aged as a resource”, based on guidelines for performance ethnography, art-based research, practice-led research and artistic research, in order to combine science and art, which could be said to represent two different epistemological traditions.

**Keywords:** Reminiscence theatre, practice-led research, art-based research, elderly, pensioners, drama/theatre, art & health

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## Prologue

*How can an artistic, performed “memory world” be investigated scientifically?  
Is it possible to unite art and science?  
Or should we instead separate art from science,  
and perhaps leave them alone,  
playing in their own universes?*

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Art and science exist as separate spheres of knowledge with different languages that build on different epistemological standpoints (Aristotle, 2013). However, the Danish philosopher Knud Ejler Christian Løgstrup encourages us to view phenomena in the world as compatible contrasts, which gently converge towards a meeting point, and it is precisely this meeting between art and science that this article addresses (Løgstrup, 1961).



*Four generations on the stage – an age-exchange journey is about to begin.*

## Research Question

In this article the researcher studies the following research question: *How it is possible to develop a reminiscence theatre production in an age-exchange project, created with life stories from pensioners, and how does the audience experience the performance?* This article is based on six focus group interviews with nine pensioners, a theatre production and a “reminiscence café” between the audience and the actors arranged after the performance, all part of the research study “The aged as a resource” (2011–13). The researcher designed the study using guidelines based on performance ethnography, art-based research, practice-led research and artistic research (Denzin, 1997, 2003; McNiff, 2009; Haseman, 2006; Haseman & Mafe, 2009). The project was carried out with 22 actors and 4 musicians in the mixed-age theatre group

Extraordinary Theatre in Northern Norway in the spring of 2013 and culminated in a theatre production called *Number Our Days*.<sup>2</sup>

## Background

The background for the project ‘The aged as a resource’ was the desire to do something about the way society views the aged today. The research project was commenced with the wish to contribute to the creation of new knowledge about pensioners’ thoughts about the lives they lived, but also to test out the use of reminiscence theatre in Norway.

The British professor of drama and theatre, Helen Nicholson, claims that applied theatre projects often aim, “to benefit individuals, communities and societies” (Nicholson, 2005, p. 2). Reminiscence theatre is a part of the so-called applied theatre sphere, the intention being to create theatre out of the bounds of mainstream theatre institutions in non-traditional settings, generally with one or another type of marginalized social group (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009). Many pensioners gradually begin to feel marginalized, standing on the periphery of society, since the demand for efficiency and earning power are so central to today’s values. This is not a uniquely Norwegian phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) has a global focus working against ageism, as they wish to contribute to a preventative public-health-focused consciousness concerning the aged as a resource in local society.<sup>4</sup> Being “aged” is often referred to negatively in the media as a burden on the economy and healthcare systems, and professor of medicine, Peder Fredrik Hjort (2010), describes this as an “outsider perspective”.<sup>5</sup> He claims that the aged are placed outside the healthy mainstream community. When the parliamentary report *Tomorrow’s care* (St.meld. 29, 2012–13) was presented in April 2013, it called more for a shift in attitude than a need for structural changes in the sector. The new tone it introduces finds resonance in humanistic psychology and an emancipated humanity as I interpret it. We can read from the report that “we cannot accept retirement, but start to expect stronger participation both in political, cultural, social and perhaps also work-life for those

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<sup>2</sup> Nine pensioners were informants in six focus group interviews. The script was written based on the informants’ life stories. Six elderly amateur actors worked with the script and took part in the theatre production. Also involved in the theatre production were six children, four teenagers and six social worker students. The students had chosen theatre as their bachelor specialization and wrote a thesis about their experiences in the group.

<sup>3</sup> [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2012/WHO\\_DCO\\_WHD\\_2012.2\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2012/WHO_DCO_WHD_2012.2_eng.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL-TJjCJPaI>

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Henny Kinn Solbjørg for collaboration on for this health-politics background part of the article.

who desire it.”<sup>6</sup> After the war, huge emphasis was placed on the creation of a *welfare society* in Norway, able to provide safe and good conditions for the entire population, regardless of social class.<sup>7</sup> Aged care can be regarded as an expression of a welfare society, and it is this aged care the elderly of the future will presumably impose demands upon – and be critical towards.

## Theoretical Framing

Reminiscence work is a part of aged care in Norway and often denotes a form of health-promoting work where one actively wishes to bring forth memories. The term “reminiscence” means recollections or memories.<sup>8</sup> The goal is to create a better quality of life through a meaningful and well-rooted identity in one’s senior years. The objective is linked to the strengthening of the identity of the person and the focusing on the positive memories and personal strengths they have. Reminiscence work can be initiated for various reasons, from aiding the person in dealing with difficult circumstances to reducing damage to self-image or strengthening contact with family members. Reminiscence work is often initiated by health workers or cultural facilitators in order to create an atmosphere for discussion in which one evokes concrete stories based upon vague memories or physical-emotional echoes of experiences from earlier in life.<sup>9</sup> It is particularly with dementia patients that the concept of reminiscence is used, but also in the consolidation of the identity of healthy, resourceful pensioners.<sup>10</sup> There are many aged-care centres that create reminiscence rooms. International research across different cultures shows that the use of photos, letters, music, diaries and old rituals or roles can grant access to the past, and therefore to memories that can help to give the elderly an increased quality of life (Schweitzer, 2007; Williams & Lavery, 2011; Myskja, 2012). Photos such as the photo below, “Departure from New York”, can give a person the input needed to generate an associative thought process:

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/hod/dok/regpubl/stmeld/2012-2013/meld-st-29-20122013/5.html?id=723303>.

<sup>7</sup> A welfare society is defined as: “the system of state and legal organizations which guarantee every individual in society safety in life, health and welfare” (<http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ad/dok/nouer/2004/nou-2004-13/7/2.html?id=150080>).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.snl.no>.

<sup>9</sup> According to the applied theatre worker Nina Rosenlund from Sadio Nor Teater, in an interview in autumn 2012. She told of a co-operation between cultural and health sectors in Tromsø, where they worked with hunting themes, the Sami perspective and shipping, amongst the elderly at an aged-care centre.

<sup>10</sup> [http://demensinfo.no/?page\\_id=1542](http://demensinfo.no/?page_id=1542).



*This photo shows “Departure from New York”. From a reminiscence participant’s photo album.*

Memories perhaps begin to emerge, and the life one has lived unfolds again, but only as memories – as a trail activated inside the brain. Such a reminiscing process around a photo album can initiate a discussion with those who are close to the person and can thus be a part of promotion of health. Dr. Audun Myskja (2012) shows through his research that collaboration between health workers and music therapists in the form of musical reminiscence work gives very good results over time. Music can help fight “against anxiety amongst dementia patients [...] The correct use of music can be a model for good environmental initiatives, and help staff to better understand the residents’ needs”.<sup>11</sup> Myskja’s work comes from a tradition where music as a fine art is incorporated in reminiscence work. This article discusses precisely this kind of reminiscence work, which I choose to call *art-based reminiscence work*. Reminiscence theatre is created out of “older people’s memories and uses creative drama approaches with groups of older people as a way of awakening and exploring memories” (Schweitzer, 2007, p. 14).

Reminiscence theatre can be a part of aged care, but can also be regarded as contemporary art and can thus be connected to the relational aesthetic (Bourriaud, 2007). With the relational aesthetic, the French art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud sought:

[T]o revive the radical and transformational potential of contemporary art through a focus on artworks as social and collective capacities [...] Thus, he asked: Does the artwork permit you to co-exist with it, to dialogue with it? (Christensen-Scheel, 2008, p.79–80).

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.uib.no/info/dr\\_grad/2012/Myskja\\_Audun.html](http://www.uib.no/info/dr_grad/2012/Myskja_Audun.html).

With this, Bourriaud asserts that “the artwork is played out as an event before the audience, who are *summoned* by the actors” (Bourriaud, 2007, p.40). He argues for an artistic outlook in which inter-subjectivity is of the essence. Precisely this mode of participation, which Bourriaud demands in the relational aesthetic, is a hallmark of reminiscence theatre projects. When the elderly contribute their memoirs to create reminiscence theatre, the viewer’s life world is also challenged, as theatre sets in motion associations in the life of the viewer. In reminiscence theatre, a discussion is continuously taking place regarding how the narrative will be played out, for whom, and with what purpose.<sup>12</sup> As a starting point, it takes a personally imparted story – a given storyline in a specific period of time, where context and the distribution of roles is the object of try-outs within the group and in front of an audience. The relational connections between the past, present and future in reminiscence theatre therefore create room for critical reflection on everyday life between the artists (Dewey, 1934). In the same way, Bourriaud (2007) claims that contemporary art creates free spaces, time spaces where tempo resists and is different from the pace that dictates daily life. Both process-oriented forms such as reminiscence workshops as well as more product-orientated projects where a theatre production is the goal are a part of the reminiscence tradition, which is now developing, particularly in Great Britain.<sup>13</sup> In contemporary art, one reflects on the present time, preferably with an engaged relationship towards the sociological and political problems at hand; for example, regarding the health and care politics and the cultural policies that this study is connected to: “Contemporary art quite simply develops into a political project when it penetrates into the relational sphere and problematizes it” (Bourriaud 2007, p.21).

Through contemporary art one has the possibility to assume a critical point of view towards sociological patterns, institutions, political ordinances and forms of government, and can thus try to improve the society we live in using art as a vehicle for acknowledgement. Research projects such as the one this article is based upon can therefore be viewed in the perspective of contemporary art, since the project was set up as an attempt to readjust society’s one-sided negative focus on the elderly as a problem. In this research project I was curious as to whether the participants experienced a type of involuntary marginalization because of their new pensioner existence without direct links to school or work life. This is referred to in scientific literature as a form of “lost fellowship”, as described by the Polish-Jewish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2001) in his analysis of the modern day. He describes a world that is in an ever-decreasing state to accommodate shared responsibilities, but is rather characterized as a society “where

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with the artistic director for Age Exchange, David Savill, London, January 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with the artistic director for Age Exchange, David Savill, London, January 2013.

if individuals cannot demonstrate special abilities it is considered reason enough to leave them to an inferior life” (Bauman 2001, p. 97). The elderly, in the perspective of Bauman, can be viewed by some as a group that does not contribute to society and who therefore must stand outside the so-called “productive fellowship”. The goal of the hermeneutic process in this research study was to bind together the memories from the story tellers, the artwork and the reception of the public in an art-productive fellowship. In the essay “The Relevance of the Beautiful”, Gadamer (1986) describes how we create art upon the background of our social lives. He points out that the artwork plays the players and transforms the actors who are involved through their active reception of the work. This argumentation can be connected to the American philosopher John Dewey’s term “the aesthetic experience” in this way:

We may create art from our social life and we may regenerate our lives by artistic/aesthetic experiences. Even when we create art from an intertextual play of other artistic elements and borrowings, we nevertheless take in and bring out impulses that are part of our lives, our social and cultural understanding. In this way the aesthetic experience belongs to a hermeneutical cycle including life and art work (Rasmussen & Gürgens, 2006, p.237).

This multifaceted connection between the social and aesthetic drama in life and art is a well-documented process in the theatre anthropology and performance theories of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner (Schechner, 1985; Brodzinski, 2010).

## **The Methodical Journey**

This article is based on three different types of data from the project “The aged as a resource”: 1. focus group interviews, 2. a theatre production and 3. a reminiscence café between the audience and the actors. The research project as a whole is designed as a performance ethnographical study (Denzin, 1997, 2003), which is formulated within the tradition of “art-based research” where theatre itself becomes the research tool (McNiff, 2007). As dramaturge, stage director and researcher, I have specifically utilized the research paradigm “practice-led research” in my work, the primary hallmarks of which, according to Haseman and Mafe (2009), are that the research question is in a state of evolution and practical methods are used as research methods. This means that one uses aesthetic creative work to carry out research and that exponential linguistic work(s) follow on from this. This article is a part of the written material, which follows the production work behind the theatre piece *Number Our Days*. The research process has a performative character since I researched using the poetic language and the aesthetic form of the theatre. The theatre production can thereby: “[B]e viewed as a research result or a material and media-specific

reflection, formed in its own language (Borgdorff, 2009). The artistic language carries in itself its own form of reflection” (Hovik, 2012, p. 97).

The main aim in the whole research project was to create an applied theatre production that communicates to the public what a group of elderly people think about the lives they have lived and how they perceive the youth’s views of the aged today. In addition to the performative research paradigm, in the research project I have used qualitative research since I have chosen to utilize focus group interviews as a method. The Australian creative industry researcher Brad Haseman claims in “A Manifesto for Performative Research” that one can differentiate between three main paradigms within research: quantitative research, qualitative research and performative research (Haseman, 2006). He points out that quantitative research is often called “the scientific method”, whilst qualitative research is, as a rule, referred to as “multi-method”. Haseman chooses to call performative research “multi-method led by practice”. Haseman describes performative research as “expressed in nonnumeric data [...] forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code” (Haseman, 2006, p.6). This research project thereby represents a triangulation between data in the form of words and data in the form of a theatre production.

I combined *symbolic data* such as photos from the audience, drama, playing, masked improvisations, use of historical props and costumes, and movement and music, with *verbal data* such as transcripts from the focus interviews and notes from the dialogue and the memory sharing at the reminiscence café we arranged immediately after the performances. The reminiscence theatre research project began for me as a researcher with the collection of data in 2011–12. Together with two colleagues I invited a local steering committee that took responsibility for the recruiting of informants for a focus group.<sup>14</sup> The steering committee gathered together a reminiscence group of nine elderly informants who related memoirs from their lives during six focus group interviews (Wibeck, 2010) in order to provide input to create a script. Their stories became the raw material that the script was built upon. During the course of the project I also interviewed artistic director David Savill in London at the Age Exchange<sup>15</sup> and the actor Nina Rosenlund from Sadio Nor Teater in Tromsø. Both are reminiscence theatre workers who I interviewed in order to discuss the various forms of art-based reminiscence work, script development and

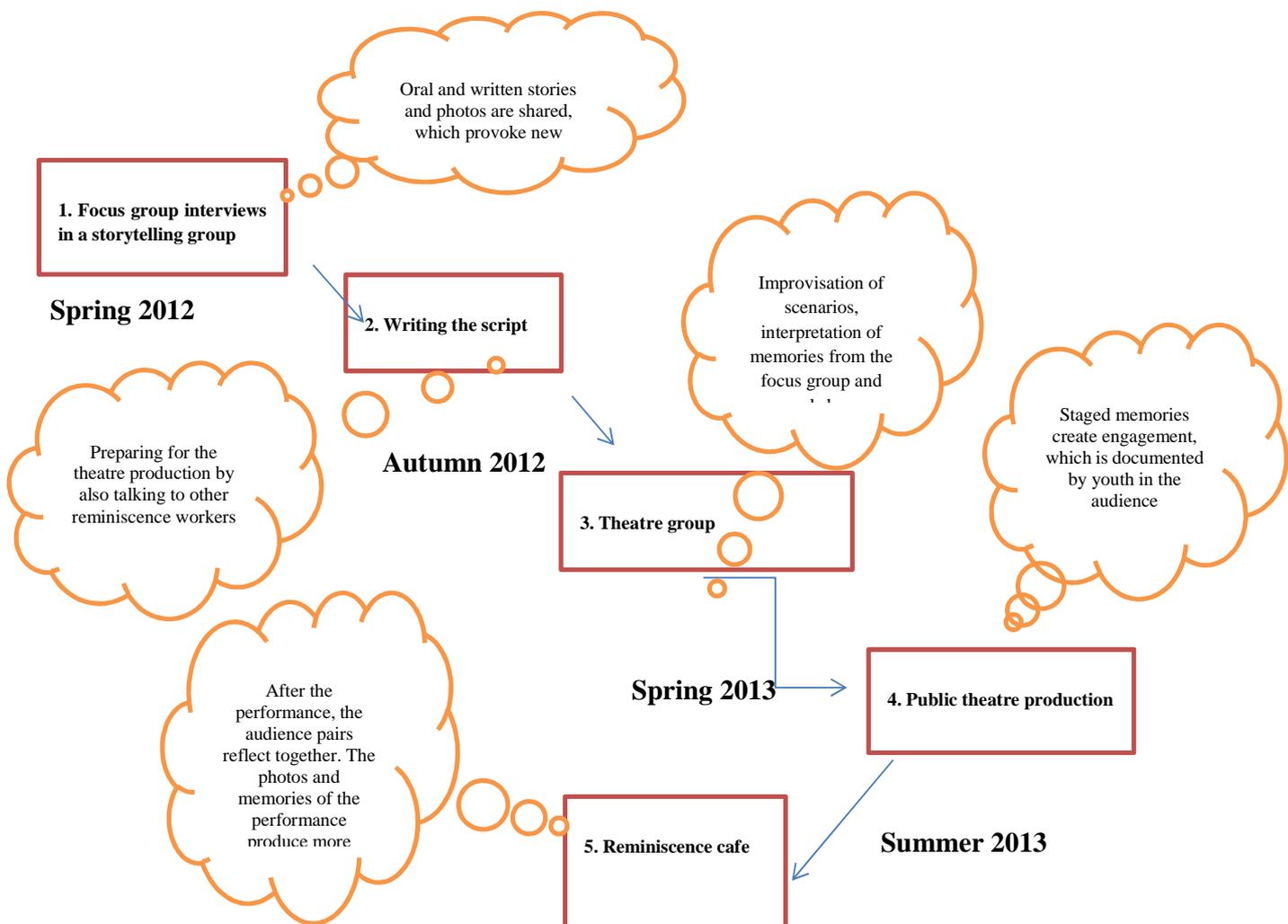
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<sup>14</sup> Steering committee: From the University College: Rikke Gürgens Gjørum (leader), Gro Ramsdal, Henny Solbjørg. From the Age Council: Ivar Østberg, Johanne Pedersen and Ruth Haugland. From the local government: Solveig Rostøl Bakken.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.age-exchange.org.uk/>

possible solutions for the rehearsal period. When the rehearsals began in March 2013, two months before the premiere, six elderly participants,<sup>16</sup> six children, four teenagers and six social worker students were involved in the group. The model below shows the research design and the chronology of the process, from the start with the focus group interviews, to the theatre production and in the end the reminiscence café with audience and actors:

## THEATRE PRODUCTION INVESTIGATION DESIGN



<sup>16</sup> Four of these had also taken part in the reminiscence group and their stories contributed to the production of the script. For a while there were seven elderly participants involved in the production, but halfway during the rehearsals Magnar Horsevik was forced to pull out due to ill-health.

## Data Basis in the Project

The data basis in the research project is the digital sound recording of 6 focus group interviews with 9 elderly participants ranging between 65 to 95 years old (Wibeck, 2000).<sup>17</sup> The participants in the reminiscence group were active, articulate, reflective and therefore maybe also relatively representative of the so-called “new elderly”. They took part in a reminiscence group over a period of six months when we had two hour-long meetings in the college’s reminiscence room, as this photo shows:



*Memories, coffee and cake during conversations at the centre.*<sup>18</sup>

The meetings were conducted as focus group interviews, with the researcher as moderator.<sup>19</sup> The aim was to generate memories amongst the participants.

At the initiation of the first focus group interview, I was amazed as to how the participants viewed their own lives as they looked back on them, but also how they viewed the outlook of Norwegian society

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<sup>17</sup> 10 hours recording.

<sup>18</sup> Photo by HIH's Kjetil Nilsen.

<sup>19</sup> A moderator is one who leads a focus group (Wibeck, 2010).

regarding the elderly today, generally represented through negative terms such as “the wave of elderly” or “old and sick”.<sup>20</sup> The questions in the interviews were based on the background of new research concerning the elderly and aging, the government’s new senior policies, but also on the background of my earlier research experience within the field of applied theatre, both with youth who have dropped out of school, and youth with a disability. (Gjørum & Ramsdal, 2011; Gjørum, 2010; Gürgens, 2004). The informants’ stories were of course influenced by the questions that I as a moderator asked during the focus group interviews. The questions revolved around the following axes:

*What was your childhood characterized by, which kind of education did you get, which choices were important in your life, how did your family life develop, what do you remember from the war, what do you think about love and falling in love, what do you think about the rights of women and the development of equal opportunities. Which longings do you have, which regrets do you feel, what would you do differently if you could begin your life again, how does it feel to become old, what do you think when you hear how the aged are portrayed by the government in Norway today. How well off are the aged in other countries in comparison to Norway, which advantages are there in aging, how is everyday life when many friends start to die and what would you like to impart to the government about the lived lives of the aged in a theatre production, who would you like the theatre production to be for?*<sup>21</sup>

I used these themes as a moderator in order to induce memories which could be weaved into a theatre production. During the focus group interviews, I therefore initiated something one can call “hermeneutic memory-association circles”. These circles functioned as the moderator’s wonder or remarks gave rise to a story from one of the informants, which then in turn created a new association for another informant who then also shared their story with the group. Rising out of association circles, new stories about lived lives were shared in the group across the boundaries of geography, gender, religion, social class and education. This can be viewed as a hermeneutic process in the reasoning of the German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, 1989).

The participants have themselves chosen not to be anonymous in this project and will therefore be mentioned by their full names since they wish to be active and visible collaborators and participants in society through this project. The nine storytellers were: Ivar Østberg, Ruth Haugland, Elin Kjellman, Riet Maria Cornelia Andreassen, Jakob Jakobsen, Johanne Pedersen, Solveig Marie Losnegaard Nilsen and Ørjan Johansen. The photo below was taken in spring 2012 and shows one of the informants who went by the nickname Post-Jakob.

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<sup>20</sup> In Norwegian: “eldrebølgen”. A Google search I did returned 103,000 hits just on the term “the wave of elderly” and 1,710,000 hits for “old and sick”.

<sup>21</sup> From the moderator’s notebook.



*Jakob - a man with a story to tell.<sup>22</sup>*

Jakob Jakobsen was an enthusiastic storyteller in the reminiscence group, but unfortunately died before the production was finished.<sup>23</sup> All the same, the story of his wedding was the origin of scene 7, “Falling in love”. Jakob died of cancer at 95 years old, still passionately preoccupied with his wife and lively in spirit. Five of the nine informants chose to act out the life stories on stage themselves, and participated in the performance, and one new actor (Jan Karoliussen) joined the pensioners when we started the rehearsal process. The storytellers brought with them written memoirs from their lives as well as photos and props, in addition to their oral stories. These objects are also considered as data connected to the focus group interviews in the ethnographic research project. The table below gives an overview of the research project’s data:

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<sup>22</sup> Photo taken by HIH’s Kjetil Nilsen.

<sup>23</sup> Photo taken by HIH’s Kjetil Nilsen.

<b>DATA FOR THE RESEARCH PROJECT</b>	
Raw data:	In the form of:
Oral narratives	Focus group interviews, digital sound recordings.
Written narratives	Texts from the informants delivered to the researcher (memories from life, old letters).
Old photos	One pensioner delivered a photo and letter to the researcher via his son, since he himself could not linguistically take part in the focus group.
Props	Old games, furniture, clothes, etc.
Newspapers, cuttings from magazines	About old traditions on special days in the year, celebrations on 17 <sup>th</sup> May, etc.
Producer-researcher's logbook	A continual process of reflection and ideas from the project period.
Photographic documentation from the audience	Photos of the scenes that the youth in the audience found most interesting and that they wanted to discuss with the pensioners after the performance.

Tickets for the performance were sold in pairs; one youthful and one elderly person could go and watch the performance together since the last part of the research project's data was created during the performance by the *audience pairs* themselves. The couples received a commission from the producer-researcher to capture the scenic moments they experienced as particularly interesting recollections through the use of the camera on their mobile phones. The photos were actively used in the reminiscence theatre café dialogues in the foyer, which the audience was invited to at the end of the performance. The photographic documentation that the audience created during the performance was thereby a central database in the research study, since the hermeneutic association circles in this project were not brought to conclusion until the memoirs that have been transformed into drama reach their audience.

In my view as an art-researcher, only when the audience has experienced the theatre and discussed their impressions has the cycle reached its conclusion. In the dialogues in the cafe, the actors, audience and producer-researcher sat together in order to reflect upon the various associations the performance provoked in the audience. This dialogue session was initiated as a processing period for those who had been involved in the applied theatre production – a tradition that is often found within the sphere of “applied theatre” (Nicholson, 2005; Thompson, 2003; Taylor, 2003; Taylor, 2006):

Applied theatre projects in which participants are permitted to dialogue, to argue, to press a point, to interrogate the logic in any given action. Divergence should be welcomed (Taylor, 2003, p. 57).

### **Meeting with the Reminiscence Audience**

We organized two “reminiscence theatre cafes” on 26<sup>th</sup> May directly after the performances, where we encouraged dialogues around small tables. A “reminiscence theatre café”, as I define it, is an arena for collective dialogue where the audience and the actors meet in a memory universe where individual memories and associations are shared. This process of dialogue aims to contribute to an expanded understanding of the themes of the performance. I wished to create a cozy atmosphere in the reminiscence theatre cafe, with room for reflection and the sharing of new memories that the audience associated with the visual journey they had just taken part in. Coffee and homemade cakes and biscuits were served. After the first performance, one third of the audience of 97 took part in the cafe, whilst after the second performance, two thirds of the 102 member audience joined in. I encouraged the audience to sit together across generational boundaries so that old and young could meet. The audience sat primarily together with people they knew, but also established contact with strangers around the tables. On each table there was a sheet of paper, which was to be filled out together in the groups. The following three questions were on the sheet of paper:

1. **Image associations:** Which scenes did you take photos of? Show the photos you took to the person beside you and explain why this scene touched you. (Send the photos as an MMS to xxxxx phone number).
2. **The aged as a resource:** Do the aged have value in our society? What do you think about this after having seen the performance?

3. **Across generations:** In this theatre production, children, youth, adults and the elderly together act out theatre based on real-life experiences. What value does this have for you?

After the two performances, I received back 27 filled-in questionnaires and 24 photos by MMS which partly summarized some of the reflections and discussions that took place during these two reminiscence theatre cafe meetings. I walked around during both meetings and observed the audience in close dialogue and also took part in the discussions when the audience encouraged me to. As an interpretation of the audience's contribution, I have picked out the themes which came forward and will present the reflections of the audience.

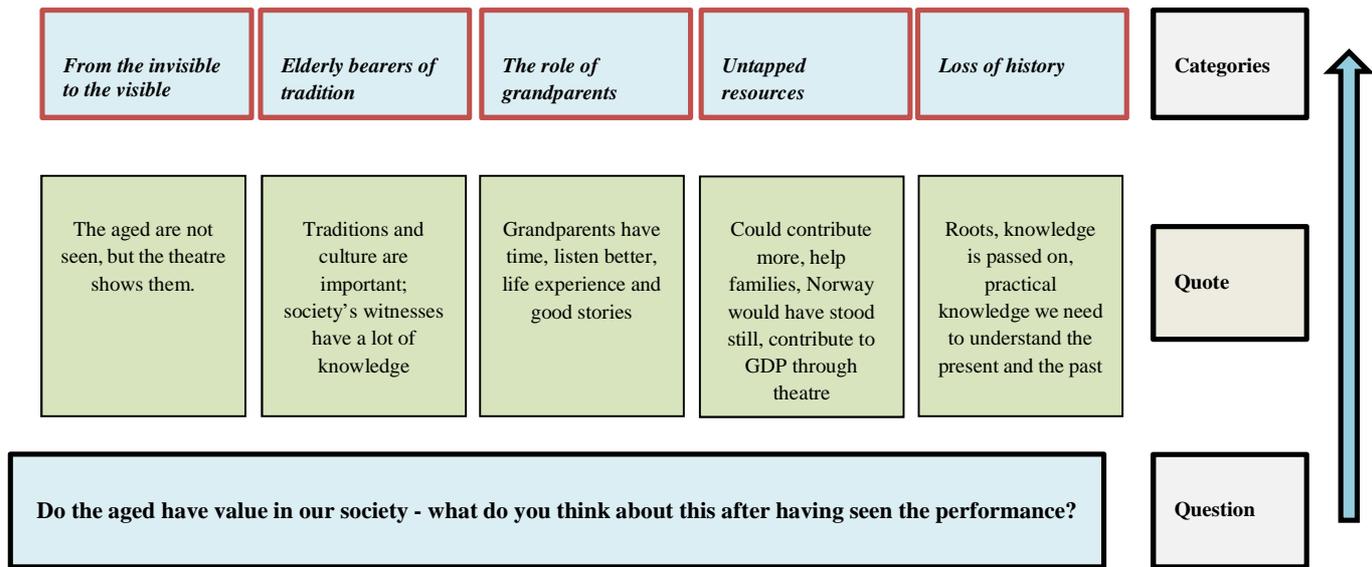
The groups around the discussion tables contributed comprehensive answers in response to the question about *whether the elderly have a value in our society* and what the audience thought about this after having seen the performance. The audience was surprised that “/.../real life can produce thought-provoking theatre – and we are amazed how much power amateurs have to touch one”.<sup>24</sup> But ‘amateur’ indeed means ‘one who loves what he does’, and precisely this passion and enthusiasm in the play was infectious, the audience reported. One member of the public got hold of me after the performance and said, ‘Why does everything come to a sudden stop when we become pensioners? It is completely wrong; all experience disappears from the companies!’ During the reminiscence theatre café, the discussions were extremely enthusiastic and the answers varied. We can read in many of the questionnaires that, “The performance woke memories in me”. The hermeneutic association circles I wished to create revolved in their own way already on the way out of the theatre before the reminiscence theatre cafe started up. The audience talked, laughed, reminisced and reflected, both together and alone with their mobile phone cameras. I have chosen to sum up the answers I received on the questionnaires by pulling out some quotes which cover the themes which came up during the café discussions: “This performance gave me roots”. “We must not be without history, think of the Vietnam war – all we have to learn from history. The elderly indeed give us a perspective on life!” “Practical knowledge can be passed on. The elderly are society’s witnesses”. “The performance made the invisible elderly more visible. The aged today are sidelined too much!” “One listens to grandparents, more than to parents”. “Their values become our values”. “The voluntary work of the elderly, actually keeps Norway on the move!”

In the process of interpreting the answers about what value the aged have in our society, the

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<sup>24</sup> Quotation from the audience questionnaires, 26.05.13.

responses seemed to divide themselves into the following categories: *From the invisible to the visible*, *Elderly bearers of traditions*, *The role of grandparents*, *Untapped resources* and *Loss of history*. The model below shows how I have worked with research methodology to pull out direct quotes from the audience and categorize them into independent categories. In the model, I have only chosen key quotes in order to illustrate the process of categorization:



The generation-bridging element of the play was an object of intense debate in the cafe. And in answer to the question about *what it meant for the audience to see children, youth, adults and elderly act together in the theatre*, it was stated, amongst other things, that it is: “A reminder that life goes in phases, that the elderly were once children”.<sup>25</sup> The audience was preoccupied with various aspects associated with work across the generations. Here is a selection of the answers the audience wrote down during the group discussions: “We have much to learn from each other”. Having something in common created an expression – created an impression”. “Exciting to have such an age range”. “It is seen that not everything has changed, but much is the same”. ”Great to play together, across the generation gap”. “We need to contrive arenas where old and young can meet, the question is where can we create new meeting places?”<sup>26</sup> In categorizing the interpretation of the answers on the questionnaires, I realized that the answers were primarily concerned with *solidarity*, *belonging* and *the need for mutual meeting places*.

<sup>25</sup> Quotation from the audience questionnaires, 26.05.13.

<sup>26</sup> Answers from the audience questionnaires after the performance 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2013.

On the basis of both the photos that were sent in and the written answers, it appeared that the scene that made the biggest impact on the audience was scene 11, “The obituary”, where a grandfather and a grandchild come onto the stage as paperboys on an old-fashioned bicycle, as seen in this photo of a young, enthusiastic paperboy.<sup>27</sup> The grandfather reads from a real obituary for Eva Haddeland from February 2013 in the newspaper *Aftenposten*. After this reading, they sing Nordstoga’s “A granddad in life” together.<sup>28</sup>



*A granddad in life.*<sup>29</sup>

Also having an impact was scene 6, “The sound of peace”, which is about the 7<sup>th</sup> May celebrations and the liberation of a prisoner condemned to death and his reunion with his wife; it was picked out by some as

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<sup>27</sup> Photo taken by Inga Juul from the newspaper Harstad Tidende.

<sup>28</sup> Nordstoga: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQQOJqaX9tQ>.

<sup>29</sup> Photo, Inga Helene Juul.

important knowledge for today's children who live in a rich Norway.<sup>30</sup> Many in the audience sent in photos from scene 4, 'The letter', which was also emphasized as touching by some of the audience during the conversations in the café. They recognized the experience of having a father who sailed away and came home after several years, often with exciting, exotic presents for his wife and children.



*The letter.*

Scene 10, "No regrets", where an elderly lady with a walking frame relates her life philosophy whilst children play a "value circle" around her, inspired by a poem by Gandhi, encouraged contemplation amongst the audience. The scene was often mentioned when I walked around amongst the tables in the café as thought provoking and a reminder of mankind's playful existence and of the values in life that are really important. Culture journalist from the newspaper Harstad Tidende, Inga Helene Juul (2013), wrote in her theatre critique that:

An army of actors [...] should erase the difference between young and old [...] history repeats itself,

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<sup>30</sup> Photo taken by Inga Juul from the newspaper Harstad Tidende.

and even though today's youth live in a time of material abundance, which the elderly could hardly have imagined in their own childhoods, the universal themes in a person's life are timeless [...] Stories of love and loss, life and death, are always to be found, although in a different wrapping paper today than fifty years ago (Juil, 2013).



## Summary

The informants' lives involve a timespan and an abundance of stories from the lives they have lived. In an age-exchange project, children, youth, adults and pensioners act together in the theatre through aesthetic communication in order to discuss life itself. This article is a scientific answer to the questions: *how it is possible to develop a reminiscence theatre production?*; and *how did the audience experience the performance?* This research study shows that one can create a reminiscence theatre production created with life stories from pensioners through focus group interviews, as an intergenerational art work in a local community. The project also shows that a practice-led research design is useful when studying a traditional applied theatre project with involvement from the audience. In this research project the reminiscence theatre production was established within the contemporary art arena understood as relational aesthetics and framed as a critical and political commentary on the position of the elderly in society. This research study shows that

the audience did experience the performance as an aesthetic experience and an art work that created hermeneutic association circles through reflections on the phenomena of solidarity, belonging and the need for mutual meeting places. The reminiscence theatre performance gave the audience new insight about the connection between the past, present and future, and was perceived as a political and critical statement on the position of the elderly in society. The audience reported that they experienced the production as a trigger to a debate on the value of the aged.

## Epilogue

*An artistic, performed "memory world" has be investigated*

*Life itself unites art and science*

*Life lived is a trail that fades away with time*

*It is only the images of human encounters that remain after we are gone*

*The trails you create in another person become memories that can be passed on to others*

Therefore, we must build bridges between generations and bring the past forward in order to create a human insight that can live on. Both art and research are spheres of knowledge that can bring generations together and contribute towards ensuring that voices do not become silent, even though life runs out into the sands of time. The future contains many challenges regarding aged care that cannot be left to health and social services, for it is our own responsibility. It is just as much about what kind of future society we want to build. An active senior policy builds bridges between generations.<sup>31</sup> The theatre is a medium that can pay homage to memories and the joy of all days, so that we learn to number our days. "Teach us to number our days carefully so that we may develop wisdom in our hearts".<sup>32</sup>

## On the contributor

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/hod/dok/nouer/2011/nou-2011-11/4.html?id=646820> downloaded 03.01.2013.

<sup>32</sup> Psalm 90:12, <http://biblehub.com/psalms/90-12.htm>.

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**Online Resources**

<http://www.age-exchange.org.uk/>

<http://biblehub.com/psalms/90-12.htm>

[http://demensinfo.no/?page\\_id=1542](http://demensinfo.no/?page_id=1542)

<http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ad/dok/nouer/2004/nou-2004-13/7/2.html?id=150080>

<http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/hod/dok/nouer/2011/nou-2011-11/4.html?id=646820>

[http://www.uib.no/info/dr\\_grad/2012/Myskja\\_Audun.html](http://www.uib.no/info/dr_grad/2012/Myskja_Audun.html)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL-TJjCJPaI>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQQOJqaX9tQ>

[http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2012/WHO\\_DCO\\_WHD\\_2012.2\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2012/WHO_DCO_WHD_2012.2_eng.pdf)