

THEATRE AS A PATHWAY TO HEALTHY AGING is a collaborative Canadian project between the GeriActors and Friends, an intergenerational theatre company in Edmonton AB, and researchers at the University of Alberta and Trent University. With funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (2010-1014), the project explored older adults' participation in theatre and research and its effects on health and wellness.



This project has an explicit partnership with the Ages and Stages program based at Keele University that is exploring how age and aging have been constructed, represented and understood in the New Vic Theatre's social documentaries from the 1960s to the 1990s. Over the past 4 years we have had team meetings in both Canada and the UK, shared ideas and resources, and made numerous joint presentations at national and international conferences.

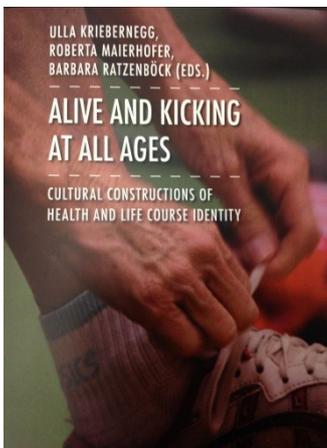
Introducing the GeriActors and Friends

The GeriActors and Friends (G&F) is a community-based intergenerational theatre company in Edmonton AB. Led by Artistic Director David Barnet, a Professor of Drama at the University of Alberta, older adults and university students are creatively stimulated and supported as they express themselves through play, storytelling, and improvisation. Humor and music are central to their work. To enable older adults and students to create together, they must evolve new ways of playing together — which allow them to interact, to share a common energy, to develop shared stories, and ultimately to bridge the generational divide between older adults and today's youth.



"It's like a tapestry, we're always making collages of our ideas and stories; somehow we are all one." [GeriActor]

"There's a reason we're here"



Led by Sally Chivers, an Associate Professor of English Literature at Trent University, we examined G&F's archives to document the historic and cultural context of intergenerational participatory theatre and healthy aging. An excerpt from the 2014 book chapter, "There's a reason we're here", summarizes the G&F's body of work as reflecting "an engaging combination of humour, reminiscence, and serious commentary that depict the experiences of aging through self-images that challenge pervasive stereotypes of late life" [taken from *Alive and Kicking at all Ages: Cultural constructions of health and life course identity*, page 153].



Canadian Institutes
of Health Research

Instituts de recherche
en santé du Canada



Intergenerational theatre adds 'SPICE' to older adults ' lives

Led by Janet Fast, a Professor in the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta, we interviewed 33 theatre company members, both past and present, to increase our understanding of how older adults' participation in G&F enhances individual health outcomes. Involvement in G&F added 'SPICE' to participants' lives, having a positive impact on both older adults' and university students' overall health and well-being: Socially, Physically, Intellectually, Creatively and Emotionally.

"It contributes so much to my life that it's written in pen and a focal point of my week." [GeriActor]



Social benefits: The inclusive nature of G&F enhances the social connectedness of both older and younger participants, providing opportunities to meet new people, develop friendships, and give and receive social support. They describe the company as "very close-knit", "like a family", "a very tight knit community", and "a little community that you can rely on."

"It's a richer social environment to be mixing with younger people." [GeriActor]

Physical benefits: Many of the theatre games played and approaches used in G&F' performance storytelling involve physical activity. Older adults benefit physically from "being able to get the blood flowing" and "moving around and laughing a lot." They "feel younger" and "energized" by the intergenerational nature of the company.

"Sometimes you have to be a wheel on a bus, and you're down on the floor, so it's exercise as well." [GeriActor]

Intellectual benefits: Many theatre games require word and concept associations, "instant thinking on your feet," and "using your brain to rethink up memories." Memory is also stimulated through remembering lines, songs, and the timing of and positions on and off stage. All of these activities keep older adults' minds active and focused on the moment—"you can't be distracted."



"It calls for an instant thinking on your feet and trying to work with the other people in the group to come up with something in a very short period of time...you can't sit around and discuss it forever." [GeriActor]



Creative benefits: According to one GeriActor: “Creativity is the secret to aging well.” Part of theatre is to constantly stimulate your imagination, through games, working with other people or responding to more dramaturgical questions like: how can I structure this scene to convey something with the greatest impact possible? Activities “take a lot of creative problem solving” and “give you great permission to let your inner child come out and play.” [GeriActor]

“We get staid and think that you shouldn't be silly as we get older, so I think the invitation to be silly is playful and helps me get back to being more open to the joy of the moment.” [GeriActor]

Emotional benefits: Performance storytelling is based on very memorable incidents in participants' lives and often there is a lot of emotion connected with such memories. Sharing personal stories in a safe and accepting environment is affirming and has therapeutic benefits, however, G&F agree that it is “not therapy”. Rather, the way the group works adds new perspectives to sometimes difficult situations.

“I think empathy comes in when you try to act out a part that you're playing because you can feel for that person whose story you're acting out. [GeriActor]



A community-based approach to research that involves older adults

Research on older adults' social participation and health must be inclusive. Led by Jacquie Eales, a Research Associate in the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta, we asked older adults to reflect on the process of how we worked together to conduct the research project. Since September 2010, G&F have:

- Helped develop interview questions
- Interviewed current and former G&F
- Provided feedback on preliminary findings
- Been photographed for and contributed to a public exhibit
- Contributed to a tool-kit for practitioners
- Been filmed for a DVD
- Hosted visiting scholars from the UK
- Evaluated the research process



Older adults became involved in the research process because of two beliefs: (1) that theatre participation is beneficial to seniors, and (2) that research has the ability to provide evidence to support their beliefs and positive experiences.

We learned that several factors facilitated older adults' participation in the research. We established trust, made it logistically easy for them to participate, and made participants feel comfortable. Possibly the most important thing we did though was play with them—and participate in their practice.



“When you came and worked with us and played with us, that was a big step to making people feel comfortable. You took part so willingly and with joy.” [GeriActor]

In reflecting on their research involvement, older adults spoke of how they benefited from opportunities to learn, meet new people, hear others' opinions, and reflect critically on their experiences, contribute to knowledge about arts and aging, and be valued.

Moving research findings into practical applications

G&F were really invested in seeing the research findings “get in the hands of the people who need to see this” and “used to good advantage.” Over and above traditional conference presentations, we transformed research findings into two creative formats:



- A public exhibit showcased as part of the Creative Age Festival in Edmonton. *From Invisible to Invincible* was a visual representation of research on the G&F' creative path to healthy aging. G&F attended the opening reception of the exhibit and one GeriActor was among the dignitaries who welcomed guests.

“I thought it [exhibit] was beautifully done.” [GeriActor]

- A DVD for theatre practitioners that is still being produced. We have finished four days of professional filming. The storyboard has been planned. We will be editing and compiling the footage during the fall of 2015.



For more information contact Janet Fast about the research at jfast@ualberta.ca or David Barnet about intergenerational theatre practice at dbarnet@ualberta.ca.

