'Hope Appeared Like a Flash': A Performance-Research Narrative of Passages Theatre Group

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Abstract: This article explores the work of Passages, a group of performers aged 60 and over, with whom the author researched the performance of ageing and made performance work in an experimental, intimate and participative style. The aim was to investigate if performance could disrupt or 'trouble' (Butler 1990) notions of age and ageing, as well as to acknowledge normative constructions of the figure of the old person in Western culture. It describes techniques and insights drawn from the research and shows that these were discovered by engaging – through theatre practice – with age, performance and social theory. It is hoped that practitioners may adapt the pieces and methods for use in their own work. The article evidences audience reception, demonstrates methods of performance practice-as-research and offers insight into the value of the work for Age Studies.

Keywords: practice-as-research; ageing; performance; Age Studies; Passages; participation; audience reception

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Introduction

This article explores the work of Passages, a group of performers over the age of 60, with whom I have researched the performance of age and ageing and made performance work in an experimental, intimate and participative style. Here I describe generalisable techniques and some insights drawn from the work and show how these were discovered by engaging – through theatre practice – with age, performance and social theory. I hope that interested practitioners may be able to adapt some of the pieces and methods for use in their own work. The article also demonstrates methods of performance practice-as-research and offers insight into the value of these for Age Studies.[1]

Passages began in October 2012 as part of my AHRC-funded PhD at the University of Sheffield. Through a series of experimental workshops and performances, the group explored the representation, meaning and lived experience of growing older and aimed to find new 'troubling' performances of age. I am borrowing Judith Butler's notion of 'trouble' explored in the seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), and extending this term to encompass the category of age, in an attempt to describe the ways that performance might be able to 'trouble' or disrupt both normative understandings of what it is to be and to become old, and the value ascribed to the figure of the old person. Such common understandings are associated with decline and dependency, thus representing a negative value.[2] By engaging in experimental and postdramatic theatre practices, part of this 'troubling' included challenging stylistic expectations of elder theatre, which I perceived to be aligned with amateur theatre, reminiscence theatre or naturalistic dramas.[3] The making processes had to encompass the social, familial and health needs of Passages' 24 members so the style of devising and rehearsal was necessarily improvisational, autobiographical and incorporated a loose final performance style that allowed for a shifting membership across different performances of the same material.[4] The long-term members of the project were aged

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[1] These claims, for the insights generated from the work, are explored more fully in my PhD thesis 'Effects Metaphors and Masks: Reading and Doing Age in Contemporary British Theatre' (2018), which, along with accompanying videos, can be accessed here: http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/21470.

[2] Gullette (2004); Calasanti and Zajicek (1997).

[3] At the 2012 British Society of Gerontology conference, Anne Basting, co-presenter in a symposium entitled 'Theatre, Ageing and Community Memory: Translating Research into Performance', responded to my request for advice about starting my practice-as-research group (Passages), by suggesting that old people should *not* be restricted to older dramatic forms but be formally innovative and engaged in contemporary, postdramatic theatre practices. For a discussion of the term 'postdramatic', see Lehmann (2006).

[4] For more on the creative processes and how the needs of the participants were accommodated, watch the British Society of Gerontology's Ageing Bites video (18 mins), in which Clare McManus and I explore the making, rehearsal and performance methods of the group: available at Ageing Bites.

between 60 and 90, and were recruited from the local community, particularly, though not exclusively, through the University of the Third Age Sheffield branch (SU3A), for whom the work achieved 'Special Learning Project' status.[5] The participants were of mixed ability from the absolute novice to ex-professional performer but represented – because of their age – a group of what Tehseen Noorani calls 'experts by experience'.[6] The demographic of Passages was predominantly middle-class, female, white and mostly educated to degree level.[7] While this fails to represent a diversity of experience of ageing, Passages was, at its inception, to my knowledge the only group of old people formed explicitly for the purposes of researching representations of age and ageing through performance practice-as-research.[8] Given this uniqueness, together with our focused awareness of the lack of diversity in the group, Passages could nevertheless claim its right to take a perspective and make performance about *specific* experiences of ageing.[9] The interactive work of the group has involved diverse audiences, from members of a sheltered housing community to refugees and asylum seekers at an English language learners' group. We have played to passing audiences in Sheffield's Winter Garden (2013) and academic audiences at the British Society of Gerontology's conference in Newcastle (2015). This has opened a dialogue with different communities about the performance of age and ageing. In a short article it is impossible to fully evaluate the three years of the research project, but here I offer readers a gloss of the praxis to outline methods of working and the insights I derived from these. I then focus on Passages' 2014 production *A Blueprint for Ageing*, as a case study, unpublished beyond my thesis.[10]

This practice-as-research project was inspired by Butler's notion that identity is performative, and that iterative performances of gender identity are generated not

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[5] The U3A is a national organisation for retired or semi-retired people over the age of 50. See www. u3a.org.uk

[6] Noorani (2015: 32).

[7] We spoke at length about this demographic feature of the group and apart from two members, all self-identified as middle-class. Members included former teachers of the humanities (including a head teacher), an arts commissioner, a poet, a business administrator and a voice tutor.

[8] I have chosen, with Barbara Macdonald, to embrace the word 'old' rather than 'older', which as Macdonald observes, is euphemistic; she sees the 'avoidance of "old" as the clearest sign of our shame around ageing' (2001: x). I also argue that it constructs the old person only in relation to a projected age-normative citizen.

[9] There are a large number of theatre groups for old people, many of which are documented in Organ (2016); however, this community work is markedly different from a research project in that old people are central to the creation and interrogation of representations of old age.

[10] More extensive analysis of the practice-as-research can be found in my 2018 PhD thesis: Moore (2018). The very early work was discussed in Moore (2012). The analysis of the one-to-one performances in *The Mirror Stage* can be found in Moore (2019). The article published here covers practice not extensively covered in the two articles named above.

only by individuals but also by cultural apparatus.[11] Butler's ideas have been extended by others such as Anne Basting to apply to the category of age as well as to gender.[12] Seeing theatre as part of the apparatus of culture, I looked for ways that new and 'troubling' performances of age and ageing might be generated by performance-research. I read widely in age and age-identity theory and, as discussed below, researched age performance and representation, norms of age-identity, narratives, images and conceptual metaphors of ageing. I looked for common narratives about ageing and being old, asking what the figure of the old person represents in cultural productions, especially performance, and how this figure might possibly be made to subvert or 'trouble' common perceptions of age through practice-as-research. Social scientists Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, discussing how the visual impact of the aged body and face acts as a barrier to understanding the old person as fully human, propose that 'the mask of ageing is a mask that is hard to remove'.[13] The mask of ageing and the artefact of the mirror in psychoanalytical theorist Kathleen Woodward's notion of the 'mirror stage of old age' emerged as potent experimental starting points.[14] Other, more spatial, and dynamic notions, such as the metaphorical concept of life as an up-over-and-downhill journey also emerged from research. I experimented with the ideas of writers such as Anca Cristofovici – who describes the old female body in Jeff Wall's 1992 photomontage *The Giant* as displaying 'accomplished shape' and 'significant form' – and played with the concept of *iconic* images of the body, developed out of Cristofovici's photographic theory.[15] Gullette's work helped me challenge the normative narrative of decline, obsolescence and disappearance, both within the making of the work – guiding the age-aware interpersonal relations within the group – and with respect to the contemporary performance forms created.

I applied a practice-as-research method formulated with reference to theory from Robin Nelson (2013), Anna Fenemore (2012) and Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (2009), combining this with David Kolb's work on the Experiential Learning Cycle (1984). I selected possible actions, ideas or images from my reading and, using performance facilitation skills, put these elements to the test of practice. The work that emerged generated an age praxis, which is the main contribution of this article. Below I describe and analyse some of this, with a view to offering the practitioner ways in

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[11] Butler (1988, 2006 [1990]).

[12] Basting (1998: 6–10); the European Network in Aging Studies inaugural conference literature notes 'Theories of performativity claim that age identities are formed and perpetuated through the repetition of behavioural scripts connected to chronological ages and life stages. Since these repetitions can never be identical to the original scripts, there is room for subversion and change' (Maastricht, 2011).

[13] Featherstone and Hepworth (1991: 382).

[14] Woodward (1991: 53–71).

[15] Cristofovici (1999: 275); Moore (2014).

which they might approach similar work with elders. I also explore how this experimentation was perceived by the audience, firstly in the description of 'The Mask & Mirror' performance piece and then exploring Passages' performance *A Blueprint for Ageing*.

A Glossary of Praxis

Cultural Inscription

Beverley Skeggs, drawing from Marxist philosophy and developing Bourdieu's notion of a symbolic economy, proposes that bodies are culturally inscribed with value, 'one that is always a moral categorization an assertion of worth'.[16] These ideas inspired our experiments with ways that the old body might be reinscribed; we aimed to unsettle the meaning of the markers of age and disrupt the value inscribed upon the figure of the old person. We linked Skeggs's ideas about value and the aged body to the image of the mask and notions of masquerade and this drove the dramaturgy of our performance *The Mirror Stage*, which I return to below, where performers were masked in various ways, for most of the piece.[17] We also played with the ways that different costumes, movement and body styles created an impression of age or confused age assumptions, thus – as audience members' comments show (see below) – both revealing and disrupting the notions of value associated with the markers of age.

'The Mask & Mirror'

The combination of images, movement, and words that I call 'The Mask & Mirror' performance became one of the most powerful pieces in our repertoire, revealing the multiple experiences and common representations of age and ageing, and opening these for consideration by the audience. The mask and the mirror are potent images in age theory; Woodward proposes that at the end of life there is an equivalent stage to Lacan's mirror stage of infancy, in which – unlike the Lacanian infant who understands and accepts the image in the mirror as a representation of his or her own body – the old person *rejects* their mirror image as not a true representation of self.[18] This rejection brings on a psychic crisis, as the true location of the aged subject comes into doubt. Passages' work brought Woodward's notion of 'the mirror stage of old

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[16] Skeggs (2004: 14).
[17] Woodward (1991: 147–65).
[18] Woodward (1991: 53–71).

Figure 1. The Mask & Mirror. © Andy Brown.

age' together with Featherstone and Hepworth's analysis of ageing as 'a mask that is hard to remove' (quoted above). The mask of ageing refers to the sags, wrinkles and other signs of ageing on the face and body which, in a society that devalues old people, obscures the legitimacy of the old person as a fully functioning citizen. This mask contributes to what Robert Butler and Myrna Lewis identify as allowing younger people to 'cease to identify with their elders as human beings'.[19] Passages' performances *Life Acts* (2013) and *The Mirror Stage* (2015) developed these ideas into a piece in which the performers danced with their masked reflections. In *Life Acts* the performers waltzed, each holding a hand-mirror as if it were a dance partner. When the music faded and the dancing stopped, in a unison gesture, performers fully revealed their faces. One by one, each performer looked at their reflection and spoke directly to the audience about what they saw, now unmasked in the mirror.

  Some performers described changes that had been wrought on their faces and bodies by time; others noted aspects of their appearance that remained constant such as 'Irish red hair'. In the second iteration in *The Mirror Stage* the audience had to wait until the end of the show to see the faces of most of the company, so the masking

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[19] Quoted in Bytheway (1995: 30).

of the face had thrown a kind of neutrality or anonymity over the old performing body prior to this moment. Once the masks were removed and the audience got a clearer sense of the performers' ages, the cast claimed – through their speeches – some agency over the meaning and value inscribed upon their bodies. Casting off the mask revealed a secondary mask, the aged face, one that, as Hepworth and Featherstone argue, is constructed by the marks of ageing, rendering the old person illegible as a fully admissible subject. While the male performers did claim some agency here, it was most pertinent for the women. Women – as Susan Sontag has claimed in her seminal 1972 essay 'The Double Standard of Ageing' – suffer a double jeopardy of sexism/ageism. As she says, 'for the normal changes that age inscribes upon every human face, women are much more heavily penalized than men'.[20] Interestingly, though aged women often report suffering invisibility, Woodward argues that paradoxically this can also become a sort of '*hypervisibility*' in which the face is scrutinised for signs of ageing.[21] Gullette argues, when critiquing what she calls the 'uglification industry' that 'the face receives the most minute critique'.[22] In 'The Mask & Mirror' the descriptions written and spoken by each individual – by explicitly naming the marks of ageing and holding up the face (and body) that bears them to staged scrutiny – disrupted the illegibility and hypervisibility to which the aged body is subject. Facial lines, thickening torsos and the quality of old flesh, were all brought into focus, owned and positioned as characteristics in the possession of the individual who claimed them. One audience member, in answer to a question about what was most powerful or resonant, wrote: 'The mask/mirror performance. Accepting who we are and the age we are'.[23] Another found that the performance presented 'Older people taking ownership of how they are viewed'.[24] Here we see that it is possible, when performers insist on the legitimacy of their aged faces and bodies, they claim what Dwight Conquergood calls 'the privilege of explicitness'.[25]

One member of the audience commented verbally that during the section where the ensemble was still masked, he kept having to remind himself that these were old people. His email feedback added: 'It did get rid of that automatic "these people are old people" thing in my brain – they could have been any age while they were anonymised with the costumes and masks'.[26] This response demonstrates what literature and age theory show, that the face is the corporeal site where age is primarily

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[20] Sontag (1997: 23).
[21] Woodward (1991: 66, emphasis in original).
[22] Gullette (2004: 34).
[23] Audience questionnaire response, 18 April 2013.
[24] Audience questionnaire response, 18 April 2013.
[25] Conquergood (2002: 146).
[26] Email to author, 30 September 2015.

detected. The comment also confirmed that for at least one person the choice to use masks and only to reveal the faces of the whole company at the very end of the piece, had the potential to allow the audience to perceive beyond the 'thing in [the] brain' that limits the capacity of the old body to produce a wide variety of meanings.[27] It also reveals that this audience member at least is holding in tension the act of forgetting the age of the bodies on stage with the act of remembering what is 'really' the case.[28] Feeling this tension between forgetting and remembering brings into focus and unsettles the meanings that attach to age. Jacques Lecoq argues that 'the neutral mask in the end unmasks'.[29] Following this contention the mask can bring about these two states of knowing and forgetting, allowing a dual state of perception in the audience member, both of identification with and distance from the body on stage. This oscillation amounts to more than a suspension of disbelief, having the potential to simultaneously disrupt and reveal meanings that attach to old age. Masks can reveal doubleness, blending and merging identities and meanings. Richard Schechner, describing the Elema, New Guinea *Hevehe* mask ritual claims that 'neither the performed (masks)

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[27] In their influential 1991 chapter 'The Mask of Ageing', Featherstone and Hepworth draw attention to the use of clothes as a method by which age-related messages are transmitted. However, in their discussion they draw on Lurie (1981) who cites elderly character The Hon. Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son* whom Dickens describes at her toilet deconstructing her youthful masquerade: 'the painted object shrivelled under her hand; the form collapsed, the hair dropped off, the arched dark eyebrows changed to scanty tufts of grey; the lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose; an old, worn, yellow nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained in Cleopatra's place' (1991: 380). Here the prosthetics and cosmetics applied to the face and head appear to be the most potent in building the illusion. Woodward, discussing masquerade as that which 'both conceals and reveals *and* tells a certain truth of its own' (1991: 150 emphasis in the original) looks at Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, drawing attention to an early episode where the hero Aschenbach, standing at a distance mistakes a man in the crowd of young men as similarly youthful. Realising his mistake as he gets closer, Aschenbach is shocked 'to see that [he] was an old man, beyond a doubt, with wrinkles and crows' feet round eyes and mouth; the dull carmine of the cheeks was rouge, the brown hair a wig. His neck was shrunken and sinewy, […] and the unbroken row of double teeth he showed when he laughed was too obviously a cheapish false set' (1991: 150). These two examples from literature along with the propensity for age-denying cosmetic surgery to focus mainly on reconfiguring the face, confirm that age on the human body is primarily read from the neck upwards.

[28] It is important here to note that my aim was not to obscure the age of the bodies (the hands were shown, and one-to-one, face-to-face encounters were experienced in the first part of the performance) but to discover techniques that would temporarily shift the perception of what the old body can mean in performance, and therefore, by extension, in everyday life.

[29] Lecoq (2002: 39). Claiming that the masks we chose were 'neutral' (Lecoq's term) could be problematic, as the sort of masks we used may be perceived as reproducing a Caucasian and Western notion of youth and beauty. Though any mask will convey meaning of one sort or another, these plain, white masks, some petite, sculpted and approximating an ideal of feminine beauty and some larger, flatter and less conventionally beautiful, are employed specifically to challenge the meanings that attach to the aged face, rather than to project a specific meaning or identity. Further research to experiment with masks that might produce more subversive age effects would be beneficial.

nor the performers (villagers) is absorbed into each other […]. It is not that one reality reflects, represents, or distils the other: Both move freely through the same time/space. The realities confront, overlap, interpenetrate each other in a relationship that is, extraordinarily dynamic and fluid'.[30] Bruce McConachie focuses on such a blending phenomenon when – drawing on Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's 'conceptual integration' or 'conceptual blending' theory – he explains the neurological process of 'blending' or 'conceptual integration' with respect to performance. He argues that both actors and spectators are able to hold the understanding of the actor/character duality in their minds by blending seamlessly between the actor and character facets of the body on stage.[31] He comments that: '[t]he activities of the theatre encourage its participants to think about the inherent doubleness of all theatricality'.[32] The audience member, reported above, evidently noted this doubleness as they moved between multiple understandings of the old bodies on stage, confirming that this performance was able to challenge, trouble and subvert normative conceptions of the figure of the old person.

The Aged Body in Temporal Depth

Basting's theories of age in performance, particularly the concept of the aged body in its 'temporal depth' prompted and informed dramatisations of the layering and accretion of identities that happens with age.[33] Basting proposes this model of reading age in performance, reporting that when watching the then 87-year-old Kazuo Ohno's 1989 piece *Water Lilies* she perceived Ohno's aged body in 'temporal depth'. For Basting, Ohno's performance exemplified the 'powers of embodiment at all stages of age' which 'layers the selves created throughout one's life, making it impossible to isolate a single sign of one's age'.[34] In Passages' show *A Blueprint for Ageing* (discussed below) the group focused extensively on performing – and thus exposing – a layered identity, composed archaeologically of a series of successive selves, in order to test if their performance could reproduce for the audience Basting's perception of the performer in their temporal depth.

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[30] Schechner (2003: 44).
[31] McConachie (2007: 18).
[32] McConachie (2013: 25).
[33] Basting (1998: 22).
[34] Basting (1998: 146, 141).

The Narrative of Decline

Gullette's critique of Western culture's attitude to ageing – which she describes as a 'decline narrative'– inspired a holistic approach to Passages' work.[35] I challenged the normative narrative of decline, obsolescence and disappearance in various ways: through the meaning of the work, the creation and touring of the three full-length performances, the age-aware interpersonal relations within the group, and the exploration of experimental performance forms. The performances were new, episodic, intimate, fragmented, participative, one-to-one, promenade and interactive, thus countering the decline-orientated adage that you can't teach old dogs new tricks.

Accomplished Shape and Significant Form

Anca Cristofovici's insightful analysis of the image of the old person in photography was central to our work. Developing the concept of the 'poetic body', Cristofovici proposes that the photographic representation of the old person can evince a sense of 'accomplished shape' and 'significant form'.[36] Embodying this notion of significance and accomplishment in performance became a regular point of reference in Passages' creative process and provided a governing philosophy that empowered the bodies of the performers in a general sense. For example, a warm-up that aimed to imbue the performers with a sense of inner and outer illumination required performers to imagine a light within that could be turned up or down; performers also imagined a spotlight tracking them wherever they went. As readers may be able to detect in Figure 2, when 'turned up', this evoked a sense of significance and accomplishment, resulting from a sense of inner inspiration and outer illumination. This practice, engaged in either on or off stage, has the potential to counter the sense of invisibility that ageing people endure.

Combining Cristofovici's and Woodward's ideas of the photographic and psychic representation of age, I proposed the notion of an 'iconic self' which inspired the live feed filming in our first performance *Life Acts*. Here the image of the aged performer is elevated to iconic status. The notion of an 'iconic self' identifies the presence of a fixed sense of self in the imagination and helps explore how that might or might not shift over time. Passages' work proposes ways an iconic status might be created for the aged person's internal image of themselves, through external (magnifying) techniques such as live feed (see Figure 3).

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[35] Gullette (2004: 13).
[36] Cristofovici (1999: 275).

Figure 2. Studio work exploring 'significant form' and 'accomplished shape.' © The Author.

Figure 3. Live feed, and the iconic self. © Andy Brown.

Metaphor

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's 1980 work *Metaphors We Live By* was influential. Metaphors such as 'life is a race', 'the journey of life' or 'the stages of life' structure human understanding. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are not confined to linguistic devices but can encompass visual or gestural signals, which construct our thinking about emotions, complex and abstract concepts, and experiences. *A Blueprint for Ageing* explored the metaphors and narratives present in culture, which prescribe ways to conceptualise ageing, and consequently tend to fix understandings and expectations of the lifecourse and ageing processes. We exposed the shape these notions give to our experience of ageing and, while we challenged such notions and offered new metaphors, we also acknowledged the way lives are shaped by these metaphorical conceptualisations. *Blueprint*, discussed next, explored how metaphor can construct and challenge conceptualisations of age and ageing.

A Blueprint for Ageing

In Passages' show *A Blueprint for Ageing* (the title ironically suggests an instructional or foundational plan for the processes of living to old age) much of the praxis discussed briefly above was employed to expose and question the 'wholeness' (or universality) of certain framing structures – including ways in which particular lives do actually adhere to such essentialised constructions.[37] We explored narratives, plans, schemes, images and maps, which employ metaphors such as the journey, the race or the calendar year. These constructions, originally presented in dramatic, poetic, prose and song form, were offered up and then cut across, variously by dramaturgy, dissenting comments from the cast, audio interviews and, on occasion, contributions from audience participants. Below I focus on how the piece explored metaphor, particularly the 'age is a series of stages' metaphor.

We began with an exploration of 'The Seven Ages of Man', a speech given by the character Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599). Opening with the line 'All the world's a stage',[38] each new age-stage is exemplified by a character or identity: 'The Infant', 'The Schoolboy', 'The Lover', and so forth, so constructing a universal narrative. This corresponds to Gullette's narrative of decline, presenting a fixed account of the lifecourse that proceeds by steps up and then down, where the

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[37] To verify (or dispute) some of the claims made in this section a video of this performance can be seen at A Blueprint for Ageing (a private link, please use for research purposes only).
[38] (II. vii. l.137).

individual (male in this case) achieves agency and maturity in the fourth and fifth stages and declines through the sixth and seventh. In *Blueprint* the gestural and verbal content of each player's response to playing each 'stage' often contradicted or undermined the prescription of the speech. For instance, when 'The Soldier' was introduced, performer Clare McManus – who had just played 'The Lover' – protested: 'That's rubbish! It's not honour you'll get in the cannon's mouth, it's death'. Shirley Simpson in the role of 'The Soldier' replied: 'but in the corporate world, females have to have sharp elbows to get on'. Our alternative performance debated and dramatised a gender shift, away from Shakespeare's male-orientated version. The old women played against type, both by critiquing that which is prescribed by the text and through their naughtiness, which runs counter to the normative behaviour of old women. Eventually, after performer Romola Guiton's provocative question: 'where are all the women in this?' and after the whole scene had broken down, Jasmine Warwick, who had recited the 'Seven Ages' speech, stormed off, insisting that she was 'only reading the script'.

This concept of a 'script' that constrains and generates a particular identity is explored by Butler in terms of the behavioural script of gender, an entity that

> survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. […] Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.[39]

Applying this understanding to age meant the performance focused on the ways in which cultural apparatus – texts, songs, poems and novels – might constitute such 'already existing directives'. Through performance we wanted to find out how the script of age that such works dictate might be interpreted differently and if performance could afford the actors agency to move beyond such 'culturally restricted corporeal space' and challenge age-normative prescriptions.

The 'stages of age' metaphor was also represented visually. Images of the uphill and downhill progress of life (with midlife at the apex) popular in art from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries were projected within the space. The group challenged these and Shakespeare's prescription, through a number of actions in addition to the reinterpretation of the 'Seven Ages' speech. For example, in one part of the space a team of white-coated performers, presented as researchers, wrote lists of every 'stage' they had been through in their lives, every 'identity' they had been assigned or claimed. These lists were projected, via OHPs, onto the rear wall. Other researchers encouraged the audience to talk to those writing on the OHPs and to write their own

[39] Butler (1988: 526).

Figure 4. Performers record all the identities they have ever held. © The Author.

lists on clipboards, indicating that these lists should be added to at convenient points in the performance (see Figure 4). So, audience members became fellow researchers, investigating how identity changes through time and problematising the notion of fixed stages through which people universally pass as they age.

This work expressed Basting's 'depth model of aging' one that 'encompasses a *lifetime* of changes and possibilities at the dense point of overlap between theatrical performance and theoretical performativity'.[40] At one point the cast lined up, facing the wall and these 'identities' were projected onto their backs and above their heads, inscribing or labelling these bodies as, for instance, 'tennis player' or 'Sunday school girl' (see Figure 5). These now partly anonymous bodies played a solo game of 'gentleman's excuse me', performers replacing one another after a tap on the shoulder. At this moment each new body was anonymised as the performer turned to face the wall, inscribed, as Skeggs might put it, with any number of identity values. Over this action the voices of people from outside the space were admitted as an audio montage: interviewees discussed the proposition that life is split up into different stages. This audio interjection, heard both here and later in the 'leaf-fall' section (see below),

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[40] Basting (1998: 145, emphasis in original).
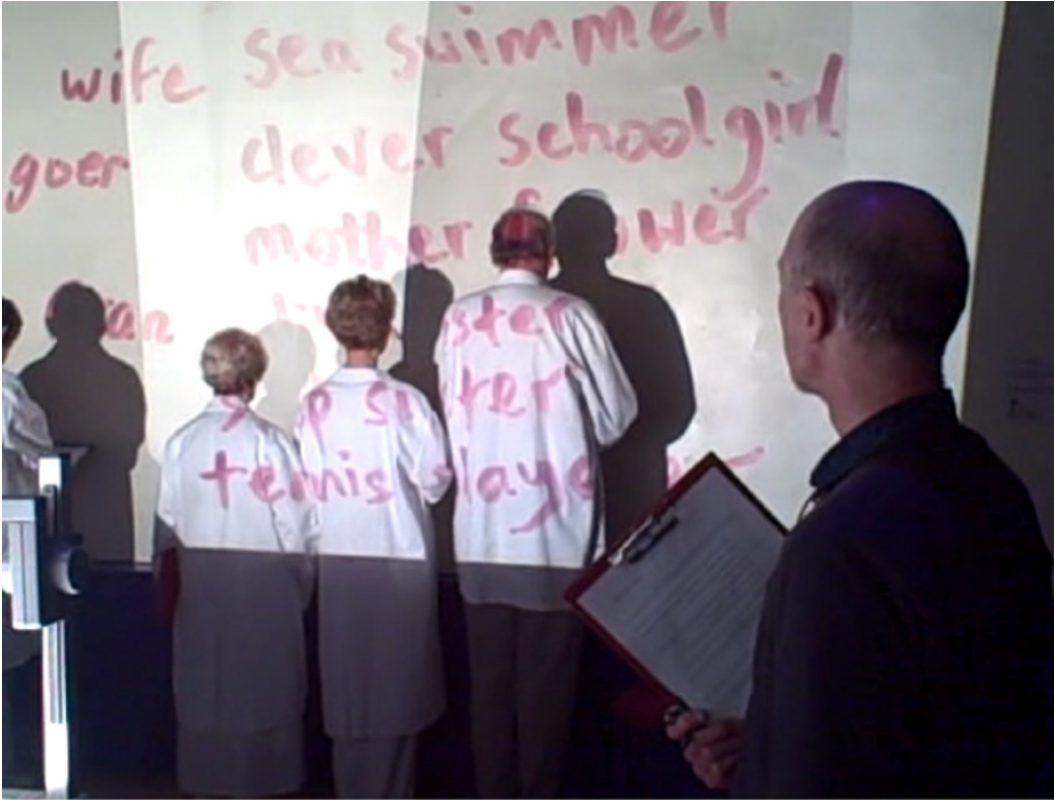
Figure 5.   Identities projected above and onto the backs of the researchers. © The Author.

acknowledged lives outside the theatre, lives subject to similar questions about trajec-tories and popular conceptualisations of the ageing process.

   The performance also enlisted Basting's depth model to dramatise and challenge the metaphor of 'life is a year' in which each season represents a stage through which human beings pass. With Ervin Drake's nostalgic ballad 'A Very Good Year' (1961), sung by Frank Sinatra playing in the background each performer stood alone, enact-ing their life's emotional journey. The performers employed the early Stanislavskian technique of accessing emotion memory.[41] In what might be termed a micro-enactment, performers were directed to think through the emotionally significant moments in their life and to allow their facial expressions and bodily attitude to change only as little as is stimulated by the actual memory.[42] In this way the complexity of the emotional journey as it registered in micro-movements on the faces and bodies of the performers compelled the audience's attention. The room became suffused with an atmosphere

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[41] Stanislavski (1980): 163–92).

[42] This technique is also called 'affective memory'; for a short explanation see Gordon (2006: 47–8).

of concentration as the song underscored the performers' micro-enactments. These performances contradicted the simplicity of Drake's lyrics in which the male singer is framed as a consumer of a number of varieties of 'girls' at various stages in life: spring at 17, summer at 21 and again at 35, as if they are bottles of wine. Ultimately, looking back from 'the autumn' of his years (at some unspecified age after 35) the singer sees his whole life in simple terms as a 'very good year' – a vintage wine – which he has drunk 'from the brim to the dregs'. In contrast, the intensity of these women's micro-performances hinted at complex, secret lives of desire, loss and love, hints that might confirm that – as Basting proposes – 'the body itself *performs* time through practice'.[43]

Passages also enacted a comical version of the 'life is a journey' metaphor, presenting a spatial and verbal précis of the life of some performers (and also volunteer audience members), who tracked and enacted their lives as a geographical/spatial timeline. Each performer called out the names of various places they had lived in chronological order, moving to corresponding points on their imaginary 'stage map' as they did so, adding details about why they relocated there, explaining their feelings or experiences. A 'reporter' followed each performer and finally asked a question about one element of the journey: for example, why a particular relocation had happened. This piece enacted a variety of life trajectories showing lives in 'temporal depth'. In addition, the entertaining, energetic, and comic style of the performance revealed the old performers as vital, still positively engaged in their journey. One audience member enjoyed that 'things came alive when participants whizzed around the stage in their life travels'.[44] Another commented that, 'when the performers played out the places they had lived in I realised that places = times in my life but these could all be arranged spatially, all rich resources, not chronologically. I am not a story, lost happiness, remembered failure, inevitable decline'.[45] The statement 'I am not a story' shows that this neat, short, comic piece disrupted a normative narrative of ageing and challenged at least this audience member to think about their life trajectory in a more positive light than popular metaphors and narratives of ageing might prescribe.

The most potent section of the performance, one in which we created a new metaphor of ageing, was the 'Leaf Fall of Identities' piece. Across the empty playing space, as the second *vox pop* audio-montage played, Liz Seneveratne, Jen Creaghan and Romola Guiton dropped small white pieces of paper, a 'Hansel and Gretel' trail. On each piece of paper was written a word or phrase denoting a specific label,

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43 Basting (1998: 145, emphasis in the original).
44 Audience response questionnaire, 11 June 2014.
45 Audience response received as an email attachment, 13 June 2014.

identity or phase of their life. These linked back to the list of identities written by the white-coated researchers and the audience-participants. Slowly, as the last cast member left the space, similar pieces of white paper began to flutter down from the ceiling. Whichever way they fell the audience could read these short phrases or words and, as the papers mingled with each other, the audio piece played, discussing the idea of fixed stages of life, revealing differing views about what these stages consist of, the order they follow, how long they last and even if they exist at all.

Creaghan returned to the littered stage. She swept up the papers, then stopped and recited an excerpt from her list: 'Baby Girl, Brown-Eyed Girl, Girl with Pony-Tail, Tomboy, Bossy Boots, Grammar School Girl'. She continued sweeping and was joined by a second performer who eventually stopped. Obeying the rules of the game Creaghan stopped, and the new performer recited from her list. Having finished, the two performers began sweeping again, to be joined by a third. Following the same pattern, eventually all the cast were participating in this game. Once all cast members were present, Tricia Sweeney asked the audience if they would like to join in, using the same rules and the list they had been compiling throughout the performance. Some audience members voiced short extracts from their own catalogue of identities, and then Sweeney instructed all the audience to read out their identities simultaneously, starting from the earliest and vocally projecting any that they particularly wished to be heard.[46] Taken as a whole this last performance piece created a potent new metaphor that challenged the linear sense of progress and decline that the cultural artefacts previously explored had endorsed. In an effort to challenge the prescription of life as a set of stages we had created a new visual, gestural and spatial metaphor for communal, intergenerational and deep ageing.

Lakoff and Johnson examine the function of metaphor in prescribing human understanding arguing that,

> Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.[47]

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[46] In later iterations of this piece – used in a wide variety of group settings – all participants write on individual pieces of paper (each single 'identity' inscribed on both sides), then, each person in turn, reads ten of these 'identities' in the stop-start section of the exercise, casting those pieces to the floor. When all have had their solo moment, everyone simultaneously voices their 'identities' as they move around the space, casting each small, inscribed piece of paper to the floor as they do so. At the end of the piece the floor is littered with mingled paper pieces.

[47] Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 3).

They go on to argue that '[t]he most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture'.[48] Ageing is what they define as a '*basic domain of experience*', one of a group of 'structured wholes within recurrent human experiences', which is organised by language as an '*experiential gestalt*' the type of experience which, as a consequence of such organising language, will 'seem to us to be *natural kinds of experience*'.[49] They elaborate: 'Such gestalts […] represent coherent organizations of our experiences in terms of natural dimensions (parts, *stages*, causes, etc.)'.[50] The types of metaphors that structure thinking about ageing and being old are internalised by subjects and therefore seen as a 'natural dimension' of existence. Consequently, a metaphor such as 'over the hill' sanctions the disappearance of old people from the visual landscape so that it becomes 'natural' not to see images of old people, or actual old people, in the public sphere. The mere presence of Passages' performers on stage directly challenged the controlling metaphor of 'life is an up, over and *down*hill journey'. The aged performers lifted their heads, evinced a sense of significance and accomplishment, 'whizzed around the stage' on their journeys and thereby challenged the body stylistics of the normative, bowed and crippled dowager who is commonly represented as lowered and stooping, nearing the grave well before she gets there.

Lakoff and Johnson also argue that

> [m]etaphor is not merely a matter of language. It is a matter of conceptual structure. And conceptual structure is not merely a matter of the intellect – it involves all the natural dimensions of our experience, including aspects of our sense experiences: color, shape, texture, sound, etc. […] Artworks provide new ways of structuring our experience in terms of these natural dimensions. Works of art provide new experiential gestalts and, therefore, new coherences.[51]

The trail of paper pieces, each inscribed with a stage of the performer's life, followed by a delicate fall of similar pieces of paper from above, created a new 'experiential gestalt'. Over this scene played the audio-montage, in which interviewees discussed their idiosyncratic notions of the specific stages of life. This combination of sound and action reinforced Vern Bengtson, Glen Elder and Norella Putney's assessment that 'within pluralistic contemporary societies, lifecourse trajectories and transitions display considerable variability.'[52] While the *vox pop* debated the notion of the

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[48] Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 22).
[49] Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 117, emphasis in original).
[50] Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 117, emphasis added).
[51] Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 235).
[52] Bengston *et al.* (2012: 9).

'stages of age', the paper pieces, denoting a multitudinous intersection of individual identities, roles, labels and 'stages', fell to the ground and mingled across the stage, providing a visual representation of the myriad and relational nature of aged identity. This presents a metaphorical proposition of age as a layering of identities, which fall and mingle like leaves in the autumn to become humus and to fuel the fecundity of following seasons.

The 'leaf fall' performance piece enacts the sort of layering that Basting notes in the aged performing body; in addition, this action could propose an archaeology of interpersonal, layered identity; as Basting says, 'a performative model of aging carves out a way to speak of both youth and the aged [who] exist relationally, both generationally and within their own bodies'.[53] The paper tokens were swept centre-stage and performers voiced short extracts from their lists in which normative choices such as Hilary Taylor-Firth's 'teacher, mother (twice), grandmother now' sat alongside the idiosyncratic or historically located. For example, Liz Coatman concentrated on her educational and artistic identities: 'Philosophy Student, Girlfriend, Waitress, Graduate Student, Trainee Teacher, English Teacher, Play Producer, RSC Groupie', while McManus focused on her membership of the baby boomer generation by announcing herself as 'Dope Smoker, Acid Dropper, Hippy Chick, Biba Shopper, Stones in the Park Goer'.[54] Here was a visual and spatial representation of the proliferation and relational nature of identity in and across time, that in one audience member's eyes was 'a reminder that we are always a mixture of everything we've ever been'.[55] For at least this member of the audience it restructured understanding from the notion that our lifecourse is only a single trajectory (represented by either a normative up and down journey or a fixed series of stages) into an understanding that collectively our lives are pathways that will intertwine and collide with those of others. One audience member, acknowledging that our identities are constructed in inter-relational terms throughout our lives, observed: 'The scattering and fluttering of the pieces of paper representing identities; when they started to fall it was very powerful and then the sweeping up into the middle altogether – we are not separate in our needs'.[56]

The 'leaf fall' performance constitutes a new *performed* metaphor, which supplements and modifies the common metaphors of ageing rather than eliminating them. Yet as such it may still be said to provide 'a new experiential gestalt'. One audience member appreciated:

[53] Basting (1998: 146).
[54] In performance, 11 June 2014.
[55] Audience response questionnaire, 11 June 2014.
[56] Audience response questionnaire, 11 June 2014.

the challenge to write down the various roles we had played in the earlier part of our lives – baby, sister, classmate etc. This provided a platform from which to consider ageing as a pathway of a functioning adult instead of just a deterioration process. In this "hope" appeared like a flash – it is not going under, it is living in more minor roles but emphasis on living [sic].[57]

The respondent's report that '"hope" appeared like a flash' indicates that Passages' interactive arts practice, and particularly this new 'leaf-fall' metaphorical construction, has the power to shift understanding. However, it also illuminates the limits of such work. On the one hand this respondent was stimulated to rethink their previously negative attitude to age as 'going under', and refigure the ageing process as 'the pathway of a functioning adult', which seems to level out the metaphorical topography that proposes the rising trajectory of youth and the falling experience of age.[58] Yet at the same time the metaphor of 'life as a series of stages, acts or roles' continues to prevail in the respondent's diminutive notion of the 'minor roles' in which we continue to function. The 'emphasis on living' comment does show that the interactive process and this new visual/performative metaphor – which might be summed up as 'life is a leaf-fall of inter-relational identities' – has had an empowering effect on this respondent. Further research is needed if other new metaphors, narratives and performances are to be created that will challenge and acknowledge common representations of age.

Conclusion

I hope to have outlined here the pertinent praxis which grew out of a practice-as-research project that aimed to contest, trouble and subvert normative understandings of age and ageing both in and through performance. I have shown ways that the practice disrupted perceptions of the figure of the old person on stage and have outlined approaches taken in applying social, performance and age theory to the aim of both acknowledging and challenging normative understandings of age and ageing.

   This narrative of Passages' work has necessarily been truncated. Passages continued to work on two more performances between 2015 and 2019 and were also integral to an AHRC-funded intergenerational research project led by Jane Plastow with

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[57] Audience response questionnaire, 11 June 2014.
[58] The construction 'going under' is what Lakoff and Johnson call an 'orientational metaphor' (1980: 14–21), which corresponds to the 'physical and cultural experience' (14) of 'health and life are up; sickness and death are down' (15).

Leeds and Sheffield Universities, called INTERSECTION.[59] Passages later disbanded with the onset of the pandemic. Members of the group have gone on to work in many other arts and community performance projects such as Sheffield People's Theatre and Third Bite Dance, and some members continue to meet socially to this day. It seems appropriate, at the close of this narrative, to evidence the age-critical impact that this performance making has had on the performers themselves, by recording here some reactions from members of Passages:[60]

'The style has been very, very new for me […] quite eye opening.'[61]

'With Passages I think I feel less as if I'm being caught by old age […] it's as if it's got less of a grip on me […] as if it's loosening it. Part of it is the actual activity of doing different, experimental things.'[62]

'It can reaffirm you in who you are because a lot of difficulty about getting older is you're not doing a valuable thing at the moment, you're not contributing to society […], and people treat you like that […], almost like you're a waste of space […]. It's remembering who you are and what you've done and being confident in that.'[63]

'After the first year of retirement I had that sort of rocking-chair mentality. So I think it has changed my perspective on my own ageing.'[64]

'Being part of Passages has enabled me to tap into this creative side that I didn't know was there and also I've let it reflect in other aspects of my life […]. It's being amongst people who are so willing to think outside the box because that doesn't come easily to me […]. That's what I've got […] that's my mantra, to be willing to look at things differently.'[65]

'So yes [it has been] terrifying, challenging but in the end really sort of meaningful and very worthwhile.'[66]

'It's made me more aware and more understanding, so that maybe, hopefully, I'm more likely to reach across the generation levels than I was before.'[67]

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[59] Three different generations in Jinja (Uganda), Nanjing (China) and Sheffield (UK) were involved in a series of theatre workshops which explored 'attitudes towards environmental conservation across time and space' (see https://vimeo.com/177615603) and facilitated their responses to the theme of sustainability. Films of the project can be found, both at the link above and at https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/intersection/theatre/films.

[60] This testimony taken from audio interviews conducted at two points during the process (July 2013 and July 2015); not all members were interviewed due to availability.

[61] Shirley Fox, 28 July 2015.

[62] Ruth Carter, 8 July 2013.

[63] Tricia Sweeney, 29 July 2015.

[64] Ruth Carter, 29 July 2015.

[65] Shirley Fox, 28 July 2015.

[66] John Evans, 30 July 2015.

[67] Tricia Sweeney, 29 July 2015.

'It's made me slightly braver to challenge people when they start stereotyping older people. So that's been really helpful and got me in a few states [arguments] as well.'[68]

'It's like looking in a mirror and seeing who you are. In the studio where we've been working there's been that big mirror on the wall. You can sometimes get lost in who you are, and how you're perceived, and I think I've never really been one to look at myself in the mirror before, and it's almost like a search to find who you are, and then stand on who you are.'[69]

Acknowledgements

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[68] Shirley Fox, 28 July 2015.
[69] Tricia Sweeney, 29 July 2015.

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