

Time to Shine learning briefing

Artist reflections: Creative sessions with care home residents during the Covid-19 pandemic

October 2021



Kirsty Arnold is a dance artist, performer and teacher. Kirsty works with Yorkshire Dance as part of the [In Mature Company](#) project, delivering creative sessions in care homes. Her writings on this work inspired a [series of animations based on care home residents living with dementia](#).

In Mature Company takes dance and music into care homes across Leeds, addressing the social isolation of older people living in care across the city. This Time to Shine project was reimagined during COVID 19 with outdoor sessions and socially distanced, indoor sessions.

Kirsty is currently studying medicine and is interested in the link between medicine and the arts. She spent time reflecting on her experiences of delivering creative sessions with care home residents during the pandemic.

“With a pair of blue gloves, eyes peering out from behind a surgical mask, me and Mel negotiate this new dance. A layer of plastic separates our skin but a gentle squeeze still says ‘Thank you for this dance’ and this thank you is far more complex than I can put into words. This work is not charity, as an artist I learn so much from the people we encounter living in care. They have been courageous this past year within a system that is often underfunded, undervalued and struggling. I am grateful for any opportunity to enter their world, to move, to laugh and to share our experiences.

As a dance artist studying medicine I often compare the environments I’m in and try to soften the edges of the clinical world with the rich and textured physical language we might find in a dance session. In the movement sessions the dance spills out into the edges too - for a brief moment a carer joins in from behind a dividing window and a resident keeps their distance in the corner but sings along to the music.

It’s not about participant numbers but participant names. The nameless counting of the past year- numbers of residents, numbers of infection, numbers of deaths. It’s really OK to just sit on the periphery, to join in a bit or not at all and for us 7 that are in the circle that day to really focus on quality of delivery versus quantity of delivery. We can also learn things from sitting outside the circle, from observing, from watching others get on with their day to day - a kind of dance-like osmosis. In the same way that we might sit on the periphery and attempt to learn from anyone who has experienced life inside a care-home during the pandemic. Just as I might follow and listen to my partner's body as I dance with them or listen to the lyrics of the song we’re singing - the people who know what they need are those who have experienced this trauma. The distance, the fear, the failings. The most important thing I can do as an artist allowed back through the door is to listen with the entirety of my body and to hold space for dancing our way through it. Because moving is medicine and moving is feeling and movement is healing- in its own small and quiet kind of way. Unless it’s to Tina, then things tend to get a bit bigger and louder and less subtle - but that’s kind of good too. I guess we can’t really be poignant and political all the time (although Val has a few choice words for ‘Mr-effin-Johnson’).”

For more information about In Mature Company please contact [Adie Nivison](#), Older People’s Project Manager, Yorkshire Dance. Photo credit: Paula Solloway.

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Time to Shine: a Leeds Older People's Forum programme