

The poems of Vivian Usherwood, a twelve year old boy in a 'remedial class' whose poetry collection was published by Centerprise in 1972. It sold nearly 20,000 copies, making him one of the best selling poets of his day.

Festival. This created 'a menu of food and conversation topics designed to elicit memories after interviewing local people. "Memory's Kitchen" explored the way flavours and smells evoke what surrounds them in memory, elaborating on other senses as well as evoking cultural worlds.

'We wanted to describe exactly what the ingredients were in order to tap into diners' autobiographical memories rather than their "semantic" (recognition of phenomena) memories. For instance, smoky wild mushroom soup (inspired by an interview with a Galloway forager and his "fungi fever") was the spur for discussing memories of childhood. A younger diner shared her elaborate food avoidance strategy, the imaginary "Ministry of Peas", while an older man recalled stealing peas off other children's plates as a hungry youth. So "Memory's Kitchen" became a safe and humorous way for complete strangers to discuss the politics of food and scarcity, and how we define "the other" ...'

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UNFINISHED HISTORIES

'Unfinished Histories' is recording the history of alternative theatre, 1968-1988, through interviews and the collection of archive material.

'The companies involved were among some of the first black, Asian, lesbian, gay, women's, disabled, political experimental, Theatre in Education (TIE) and community-based theatre groups in Britain. Work ranged from experiments in physical and visual theatre or performance art, to vernacular drama, agit-prop and satire, championing a generation of artists whose work has influenced and shaped present day theatre.'

The 'Unfinished Histories' website contains material from interviews with practitioners active in the alternative theatre movement.

● Further details: website www.unfinishedhistories.com

UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH

Christine Wall sends this report of the Reminiscence Theatre and Oral History Day at the University of Greenwich in October 2015:

'From the moment the actors got up from their seats, strode forward and addressed the audience it was clear this was going to be a powerful piece of theatre: "I'm May Wellard and I was twenty-two years old when war broke out... I'm Ann Webb. I was about five years old when war broke out." The play was the first in a day of performance and workshops held at the University of Greenwich and based on reminiscence workshop and archive material deposited by Pam Schweitzer in the Reminiscence Theatre Archive (see *Oral History*, vol 43, no 2).

'The process and background to the play is, in many ways, just as important as the performance itself. May Wellard and Ann Webb first met Pam Schweitzer at the Greenwich Pensioners' Forum, where she invited anyone who would like to share memories of the Second World War to take part

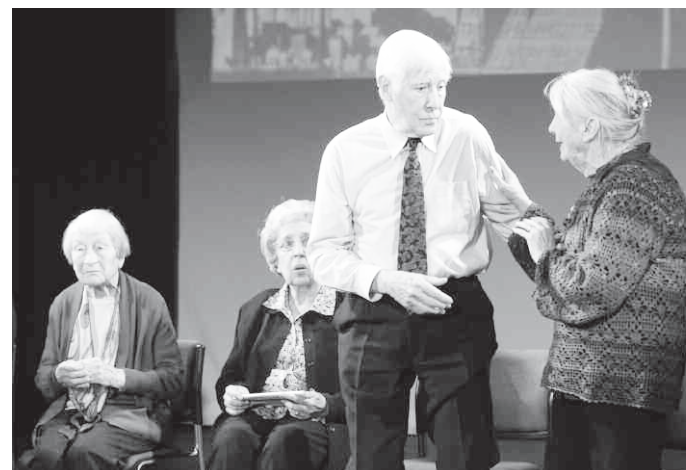
in an international project based at the University of Greenwich Drama department. The resulting group of six women and one man were interviewed as a group about their wartime memories, taking turns to speak of their individual experiences, and then contributing to a general discussion which was all recorded. There were four such meetings lasting about two hours, and on one occasion the group watched the reminiscence theatre work of the second year drama students and then discussed the stories with them.

'Gradually the idea grew that the pensioners could make their own play based on their own experiences. Pam devised a draft script based on the meeting transcripts, leaving some areas free for improvisation: for example, childhood games, shopping queues and struggling with the blackout. These were gradually developed and fixed.

The play opened with a song, "Run Rabbit Run", which set the scene for the recounting of war memories, some of them intensely moving, threaded through with a spirit of resilience embodied in the performers themselves.

'There were stories of evacuation from London, ranging from children sent to a rural area where siblings were split up, the boys chosen by farmers who wanted extra hands to work on the land, leaving their sisters behind to be taken in by others; and happier cases in which one woman told of her delight at ending up in St Ives with her twin sister, where they had a very different experience of the late war years including large quantities of clotted cream, sugar and butter.

'These are familiar stories, circulated in films, novels and documentaries, but to see and hear them directly from people who lived them is very different from reading a transcript, listening to a recording or watching a screen. Contemporary photographs, some personal, projected behind the players, contextualised the performance



Reminiscence theatre group performance. Photo: Alex Schweitzer.

with some of the most harrowing testimony relating to the Blitz.

'One woman working for Siemens in Greenwich remembered the first day: "On Saturday 21 September 1940, the red light flashed. So we made our way to the shelters. As we crossed the yard we saw a line of bombers flying low and as we seated ourselves on the wooden benches, we heard the bombs begin to fall." Two hours of sheer terror followed. As the ground shook with bombing, she curled her body over onto her knees and put her arms over her head. Here, in a small theatre not far from the site of the memory actively being remembered by a ninety-eight-year-old woman, the distance between stage and audience collapsed as we witnessed a universal depiction of the lived experience of aerial bombardment.

'This was followed by a short play written and performed by University of Greenwich. Dressed in period clothing and around a minimal set consisting of a trestle table laid for a VE Day street party, the actors told the stories of individuals based on their researches into the Reminiscence Theatre Archive. Again, the uniqueness of oral history recordings enabled these young people to perform a nuanced story of victory, and communicate the

sadness and grief that co-existed alongside the joy and relief at the end of the war.

'The morning finished with a short piece of physical theatre performed by visiting schoolchildren from Dresden based on their oral history interviews with grandparents and others who had lived through the Second World War. Here the stories of heroism and resilience are complicated, and as one audience member commented, the narratives of those who experience war where there is no common, external enemy are far more complex and in many cases never voiced.

'The afternoon was spent with the history department who demonstrated their creative approach to oral history and archiving through their "Memories of War" archive. All this creative activity makes a very strong case for the proper, accessible and on-going use of oral history archives. The fact that this material is actively used in the curriculum of two departments in an HE institution seems to make a case for archiving in universities as well as libraries and museums. This is still a living – and local – open archive, as the life-stories from the reminiscence workshop will also be added.

'However, the highlight of the day remains the pensioner's play,

conceived and acted by a group aged between eighty-one and ninety-eight years old, and performed with incredible vigour and energy, without scripts and by a cast who had never before set foot on a stage. This was a truly inspirational day and one which presented an exemplary model for oral history archiving.'

● Further details: Reminiscence Theatre Archive, website www.reminiscencetheatrearchive.org.uk

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

A PhD studentship at the University of Westminster will provide new insights into the ways in which women enter and continue their careers in a traditionally male dominated industry.

'Women in the construction industry: investigating integration and diversity' will contextualise the historic and previously hidden extent of their efforts in building and maintaining the material environs. It will be based in the Centre for the Study of the Production of the Built Environment (PRoBE), which spans the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment and Westminster Business School.

The main research focus will be to pose a series of questions about gender segregation in the construction industry and the difficulties encountered during education, training and employment which hinder integration and career progression. While the exact area of study will be developed with the successful applicant, it may include the analysis of documentary evidence from various archives, statistical analysis and recording the oral histories of women who have previously worked in the industry, as well as contemporary analysis of those currently in employment.

The studentship is also timed to take account of the current adaptations in the industry in relation to climate change and the