

The Theatre of Memories – European Reminiscence Network Conference in Dublin, May 2019

Review by Sally Knocker

Dementia Care Matters and RYCT enthusiast

“I have been to many conferences, but this was just the best! I loved the variety of presentations, singing, dancing, theatre, art, the walks and the enthusiasm and team work with which Karen Meenan from Making Hay Theatre and Pam Schweitzer from European Reminiscence Network curated it all”

Kate White, family carer and Remembering Yesterday Caring Today participant

What an incredible two days in Sutton, Dublin, Ireland where experts in reminiscence from 15 countries came together to share what they were doing and learn from each other. It seemed particularly timely in the context of the current rather depressing ‘Brexit limbo’ and uncertainty to truly celebrate the richness of collaboration across many European countries and beyond to Canada, Australia, Japan, Singapore and the USA. The wide breadth of presentations from partners in different EU and other countries showed how much we have in common in our efforts to find creative and imaginative ways of living well with dementia and that we have much to offer to one another by way of ideas and inspiration across national and language barriers. The focus of all the projects is on restoring relationships and emotional wellbeing to the heart of positive dementia care, which is refreshingly far removed from the too dominant discourse of illness, deterioration, fear and segregation.

We heard about a hospital reminiscence project in the Czech Republic, a Catalunyan initiative to bring reminiscence into every day life, an intergenerational arts project in British Columbia in Canada, a Finnish workshop dramatizing childhood memories, Swedish and Danish reminiscence theatre projects as well as the Remembering Yesterday Caring Today (RYCT) projects bringing families together in the UK. A fascinating contribution from the USA involved the use of cartoons or ‘graphic memoirs’ to depict the experience of one woman with dementia through her daughter’s creative exploration and how comics can convey more complex themes in more accessible, less verbal formats. The Dementia Care Matters Butterfly Model working in various countries invited care workers from an Irish Butterfly home to share how they use life story and the sharing of personal memories as integral to the whole day in a care home. Two family carers from the UK reflected on the importance of sharing emotions and stories for people with dementia, their relatives and paid workers – and that reminiscence is ultimately an equalising experience we can all experience together, not a ‘therapy’ that is only for those living with dementia. Pam Schweitzer shared the story of the creation of Memory Boxes which are now being used by drama students at the University of Greenwich to create performances, which bring to life and

honour the individual stories supported by their lecturer Dr Natasha Oxley. Dr Trudy Pauluth-Penner also presented how applied theatre students were using memories and stories from participants in a drama story telling program to create "The Artist and her Daughter." There was a very atmospheric and thought provoking french film "J'existe encore" (I still exist) using still photographs and voices of those affected by dementia and a photography exhibition of large-scale portraits of older people - "Nobody photographs me anymore" by local photographer, Kate Byrne. Another interesting contribution from the Netherlands was the creation of a free app "Dementie en herinneringen" to prompt memories with visual and audio prompts. My particular highlights of the Conference were seeing the re-enactment of a sick sheep called Scooby Doo being born in the Finnish childhood memories workshop, choreographing an imaginary train journey across Sweden with each stopping point characterised by a gesture, movement or a song linked to an individual memory and the beautiful rendition of "Danny Boy" by the Forget Me Nots including a poignant solo in Gaelic. I was also inspired that one family in Singapore, a woman called Patricia Lee and her husband and son have worked tirelessly to develop a training programme in Singapore to spread the RYCT programme there. Many of the initiatives at this conference had little funding or large organisational support and remind us that from small acorns, large Oak trees grow if we have the tenacity and belief to make it happen.

But the show was really stolen by the incredible Irish contributions and unparalleled hospitality which meant the whole event felt more like an extended party. "I feel like I'm at an Irish wedding" said Karen Meenan and we all felt invited! Karen organised local scenic walks in the beautiful Howth fishing village, private viewings in the Little Museum of Dublin, Irish dancing and a music recital by young local musicians, sharing songs from all the countries represented with a Fish and Chip supper, a beautiful concert by the Forget Me Nots dementia inclusive choir and a moving poetry recital by Dermot Bolger. We also had a welcome and reception from not just one but two Mayors! – the Mayor of Fingal and the Lord Mayor of Dublin. There were two powerful Irish plays, one a two-person production telling the story of a couple affected by young onset dementia "Take Off Your Cornflakes" and the other a dementia inclusive performance "A Play with ME in it". Both demonstrated the power of theatre to tell stories which provoke tears and laughter in equal measure.

What next?

There were also some difficult realities to face. Some participants were unable to come at the last minute due to the withdrawal of support from new management. Most had to fund themselves to come to the event. The UK projects will no longer be able to draw on European funding to develop the RYCT projects further. Whilst the Network has been extraordinarily successful in bringing together a diverse range of individuals and groups with a passion for using creativity to prompt memories and forge relationships between people, there is still much more to be done to give it a solid foundation to grow further. As with many inspiring initiatives it has relied a lot on the charisma and drive of its founder Pam Schweitzer as well as those like Karen Meenan in Ireland who give hours of their own time to bring us all together.

One thing is certain – the next Conference hosts have a tough act to follow, after this stupendous Irish hospitality which will certainly be added to my memory box of unforgettable experiences!