
Curious Shoes - moving beyond memory

Independent creative collaborator **Magdalena Schamberger** talks about bespoke performances for people affected by dementia and their families and carers in theatre and community settings

I had the pleasure of delivering a Mindful Arts workshop at the People Dancing international conference, in Glasgow, as an introduction to my work, which centres on people living with dementia. Both this Mindful Arts workshop, and the more intensive Artful Minds training initiative, are experiential in nature and give an insight into aspects of ageing and dementia by exploring challenges within movement, word finding and memory. They focus on increasing awareness, confidence and skills, thereby inviting meaningful engagement and connections with people living with dementia for artists of all artforms and levels of experience. This forms the cornerstone of my approach.

Before you read on, I must confess to one thing – my background is not rooted in dance; although I did manage to survive a dance master >>



Barefoot Encounter, Curious Shoes. Photo: Kelman Greig-Kicks.

Curious Shoes is full of open invitations, allowing the audience to become co-creators of the piece.



Clockwise from top left: Suzie Ferguson and audience members; audience member; Brian Hartley and audience member; Tim Licata and audience member. All from Curious Shoes. Photos: Eoin Carey.

class at Mark Morris Dance in Brooklyn, whilst visiting their Dance for PD® programme, at least most of it. I found that I was very good at being out of sync, which did not come as a great surprise, because this is where my background and expertise lie. As I write, my tenure as Artistic Director of Hearts & Minds, a Scottish arts-in-health charity, is nearing its end and my career as an independent creative collaborator is set to begin. I co-founded the organisation twenty years ago and in 2001 created the Elderflowers programme, which uses physical theatre and clowning to create meaningful connections with people living with dementia in health settings.

Over the past three years, thanks to a Paul Hamlyn Breakthrough Fund award, I have been able to embark on a journey of research and discovery on how to translate my experience into different environments. This enquiry has had a particular focus on dance, abstract movement and music. The culmination of my research journey is Curious Shoes, a bespoke performance approach for people living with dementia, for their loved ones and those who care for them, whom we invited as audiences and participants into theatres and community venues. Curious Shoes premiered at Festival Theatre Studio in Edinburgh, in March 2017 and toured

across Scotland the following autumn. The original idea for Curious Shoes came from my observation that many people, particularly in more advanced stages of dementia, find themselves in a curled up position, not unlike ferns at dusk, and often seem to first encounter a person by seeing their shoes. The more extraordinary the shoes, the more curiosity seems to be sparked and interest awakened. I wondered what concentrating on this viewpoint might bring, particularly when combining a variety of artforms, in particular dance, music, design and song. Shoes, their rhythm and movement have been ever present in the development. They were explored



extensively in creating material with collaborator Cai Tomos, during an initial development phase in a rehearsal studio in Wales. Shoes provided the starting point in the development of the individual performance characters: Fred, Bette, Charlie and Vicky. The characters are lightly anchored on four different film characters for whom shoes play an important role: Fred Astaire in *Funny Face*; Bette Davis in *Now Voyager*; Charlie Chaplin in *Citylights*; and Vicky Page (Moira Shearer's character) in *The Red Shoes*.

From the very beginning, people living with dementia were at the centre of the research and at the heart of this approach. From the onset, we let

ourselves be guided by the curiosity and interests of our focus group of experts, those affected by dementia and those caring for them. This did not only allow us to test aspects of our process for suitability – such as music, lights, sound and set – but also to incorporate their suggestions with regard to characters, choreography, design and content into the development of the performance itself.

After a first sharing of scenes during one of the development weeks, the individuality of the performers' shoes and their movement drew particular interest from the participants. A pair of red high heel shoes, laying somewhat abandoned in the corner, attracted attention and were actively included (and danced with) during feedback time. A story about the shoes emerged – they had been worn at a wedding, together with a wedding dress of the same colour. This sparked curiosity and the wish for the red wedding dress to find a place in our story. The red dress remains and has inspired a dreamlike sequence in our performance.

Another section, entitled *Barefoot Encounter*, sparked particularly positive responses, discussion and engagement. One focus group member had many ideas on how to develop the scene and sent emails and letters with drawings of his thoughts. This helped us explore different variations in subsequent showings until finding its final form.

In the design, close attention was paid to creating a colour palette and using colour contrast, widely recognised to be easily visible by the ageing eye. The tables, costumes and props are colour coded, loosely relating to the four seasons. The audience is invited to enter on a red carpet, in stark contrast to the black dance floor performance space in the auditorium. The set consists of white sails, somewhat abstract in nature, which contain the space whilst enabling us to easily create different environments and moods with light and colour.

Curious Shoes is full of open invitations, allowing the audience to become co-creators of the piece. The characters are initially introduced outside the performance space. Performers then guide the audience into the theatre, allowing them to physically connect with the characters. Audience members are seated within

the set at cabaret style tables. Once the 'official' performance starts, each character is introduced through choreographed movement, music and rhythm – stimulating physical engagement from audience members from the outset. The finale sees everyone invited to join the cast on the 'stage' area to dance to the song, *These Boots are Made for Walking*. Almost everybody takes up the offer.

"The comments we heard on the way home were fantastic, varying from 'that was the best day I have had in years', 'that was a great day out', 'it was lovely to meet those nice people' to, probably the best, 'I didn't think I would dance again'. Mary and Sally had our two wheelchair user residents on the floor with the others which was great to watch but more so the acknowledgement to themselves that, as a care home staff member put it, "they may not be able to dance like they once did but they can still dance".

Curious Shoes is about moving beyond memory and being in the moment. It provides a mix of structured scenes and invitations to engage, with room for improvisation and participation. There is no obvious pressure to follow a storyline; however, the scenes and evocative images are loosely connected to create a thread, if you wish to find one. Choreographed movement and dance sections provide a bridge from one story vignette to the next. Small audience numbers and an intimate performance space enable us to connect with each audience member as an individual and inspire moments of enjoyment, stimulation, communication and sociability.

The wife of one gentleman with dementia put it like this: "I felt so involved that I scarcely looked round to see how others were responding, but I know that David followed the performance all the time and even contributed on occasion. You all engaged us lovingly and connected us to moments of delight!" And as one gentleman with dementia pointed out himself, when leaving the auditorium, "I feel like I'm shining inside".

Info

www.magdalenaschamberger.com
creative@magdalenaschamberger.com
+44 (0)7940 563 303
[@Artful_Minds](https://www.artfulminds.org)