

Glitz and glamour: a care home cabaret experience

Last month, we discussed how bringing the circus to the care home offered a wide range of benefits to the residents who live there. In this article, Aysha Mendes reports on a similar project where part of the home was transformed into the residents' cabaret party room

In last month's issue of *Nursing and Residential Care*, we saw the intergenerational arts company, Magic Me, bring the circus to the residents of Silk Court Care Home in Bethnal Green London by working together with the contemporary circus and aerial theatre company, Upswing (Mendes, 2017).

This month, we look at how Magic Me teamed up with Duckie, an arts enterprise that creates club nights for diverse populations, to bring the glitz and glamour of the cabaret to Waterside Care Home in Peckham London. Kanyi Tanda, Manager of Waterside, said:

'We are loving having Duckie in residence. It's so exciting seeing what our residents and artists come up with each week.' (Magic Me, 2016).

Night out at the home

Duckie, well known for its 21-year weekly club night at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, also hosts The Posh Club, which is a glamorous weekly cabaret for older people. However, there is an entire population of older people who are limited by their condition and may not be able to go out to enjoy the cabaret at The Posh Club—those living with dementia. Waterside Care Home is home to 26 residents, aged 69–95, with varying levels of the disease.

Duckie wanted to bring this experience to older people living in the care-home setting, including those with dementia. The company's producer Simon Casson said:

'Duckie is into making the arts accessible and relevant to people that often don't access them, and we have a particular

passion for working with glamorous golden girls, senior citizens and elegant elders, so this project was right up our street' (Magic Me, 2016).

Robin Whitmore, the artistic director, who led the residency at Waterside Care Home, said the challenge was:

'To understand how to interact meaningfully with someone whose memory has fragmented, who may seem to inhabit a parallel reality. And yet people really wanted to engage with us, to connect with life outside of themselves. Dementia makes that difficult—but the impulse is still there.'

The Palace of Varieties

Duckie's artists spent time with the individual residents of the care home during the initial training in order to get to know them better, learn about their interests, and work out the best ways to communicate and engage with them. Interestingly, several residents who had lived in the Camberwell and Peckham areas of London mentioned the Palace of Varieties, which ran from 1899–1956 on Denmark Hill. At different points, it was a celebrated music hall, cinema, theatre, and even a house of burlesque—and its festivities and community spirit were remembered fondly by the residents. So this was used as the theme of the project.

Every Thursday was a 'making day', where people would create decorations and art for the walls. Every Friday afternoon, the 'Palace of Varieties' was open with a weekly theme, such as 'The Palace of Varieties goes to the countryside' or 'The Palace of Varieties goes to the seaside'.

The care home gave a drab underused room at the front of the building over to the project; it was quickly transformed by Whitmore's design of painted blue sky and white clouds, along with space to put up the residents' artwork for each week's theme. The Waterside Palace of Varieties' theme song was Frank Sinatra's version of Irving Berlin's 'Let's Face the Music and Dance'. A soundtrack was crafted by a volunteer DJ, handwritten invitations were distributed to staff and residents (who were encouraged to dress up in their finest clothes, makeup and jewelry), and the home was ready for a party—or 10 to be precise.



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Duckie at Waterside Care Home

Susan Langford, CEO of Magic Me, describes the Friday afternoon parties in an interview with the author:

'Duckie brought in professional performers from their roll call of people that they used in their clubs—so we had an opera singer, we had tap dancers, we had a fire eater on bonfire night, we had all kinds of different wonderful performers, and different things appeal to different residents or staff.'

'It was an hour and half or so of party, with a bit of cabaret show in the middle, and then refreshments, and dancing that was all themed depending on what the story was that week.'

Enjoying the here and now

The making days allowed the residents to be more active participants. According to the report by Magic Me (2017) about the residency programme, Whitmore wanted the residents to be 'active participants rather than passive consumers'. This, Whitmore felt, would help 'breathe life and a sense of magic into their home, and to leave a legacy at the end of the ten weeks'.

People also had the chance to dance at the party and sing along with song sheets, says Langford.

'There were people like the opera singers who, although they had amazing voices and could hold the room, would also go up to people and, you know, hold their hand, sing to that one person, and really go around and work the room and

relate to the people. With that audience, you're always going to get people who might call out because they're enjoying it—so you can't just stay on the stage area and do your thing, you need to be able to interact.'

The project also involved young people; the activities coordinator at the home, who had links in the community, invited a group of students aged about 12–13 years to come and spend some time with the residents on a Thursday. They sang to the residents so they were performing on one side, with the passive audience on the other. This was completely different, as they worked together with residents in pairs.

Whitmore discussed this in the report published about the residencies project (Magic Me, 2017), describing how a 13-year-old boy and a woman of 90 years painted together for two hours, simply enjoying each other's company. He added: 'The boy couldn't wait to come back and see his friend the next week'.

Making an impact

Langford notes that the activities made an especially heartwarming impact on some residents. For example, there was one lady with severe dementia who loved painting. 'She just loved mixing the colours, and even dropping paint drops into the water,' recalls Langford.

'She was just captivated by watching the colours fall down through the clear water in the jar, and she would say, "Oh that one there, that's two people walking along the road,"

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According to Langford, one of the challenges was that the staff wanted people to follow the instructions and ‘colour within the line’

Key points

- Artistic activities and time spent with children and animals can help people to enjoy living in the present moment
- Quality social interaction and collaborative creative activity have the potential to be highly beneficial for care-home residents, particularly if they are socially isolated and/or living with dementia
- It is beneficial to talk to the care home residents when organising events such as these, as it can help identify themes and shared memories that activities, or even the whole event, can be based on
- When undertaking a creative project, the most important factor is for residents to playfully enjoy the activity in their own way, rather than adhering to any prescriptive regimen set by staff or project leaders

and if you looked with your eyes a bit, you could see it—she was imagining seeing these different shapes in the colours.’

Another man who usually kept to himself in the home came alive when the music came on, Langford said.

‘He didn’t get enough opportunity to just get up and dance in a room with other people dancing, he loved dancing with people, and as soon as the music came up, he would just get up and dance.’

‘He almost danced for an hour and a half, and some staff had to tell him to sit down and take a break, because they were worried about him.’

Involving animals

One of the artists brought in a dog as part of the countryside scene, early on in the project. This had a beautiful impact on some of the residents, Langford explained.

‘One lady who was quite restless, and often pacing up and down the corridor and quite anxious about where she was, had grown up in a rural part of the country. When she saw the dog, she just sat down and talked [to it]—for hours if you let her.’

‘It really helped her to settle, to feel at home, and to be happy about where she was, rather than worry about where she ought to be.’

Being playful with art

According to Langford, one of the challenges was that the staff wanted people to follow the instructions and do what Whitmore suggested—‘colour within the lines, sort of thing’. She added, however, that Whitmore was happy to let people simply enjoy experimenting and playing with what was provided, as art is more about experimentation and expression than following a set list of instructions.

Conclusion

Langford says that the thing she would point out to staff who want to try out similar activities within their care homes would be to take it seriously, ‘but not be serious about it’. There are many ways that these activities can be done, and there is no single right way. As Langford told the author, ‘it’s not about coming up with a perfect image’—it is about enjoying what you’re doing, living in the moment and trying something different. **NRC**

Magic Me (2016) Glitz! Glamour! Showgirls! Duckie creates cabaret for care homes. <http://bit.ly/2ttaSeg> (accessed 6 July 2017)

Magic Me (2017) Projects: artists residencies. <http://bit.ly/2qZZ7d2> (accessed 6 July 2017)

Mendes A (2017) Running away with the circus: a care home residency project. *Nursing & Residential Care* **19**(7): 394–6. <https://doi.org/10.12968/nrec.2017.19.7.394>

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