



# The promise of documentary theatre to counter ageism in age-friendly communities<sup>☆</sup>



Kathy Black<sup>a,\*</sup>, Valerie Barnes Lipscomb<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Social Sciences, University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, 8350 N. Tamiami Trail, C263, Sarasota, FL 34243, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Liberal Arts, University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, 8350 N. Tamiami Trail, C263, Sarasota, FL 34243, United States

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an innovative theatre-arts collaboration that was created to provoke public discourse about aging in a community located in the Southeastern United States in which more than one-half of residents are age 50 or older. The development and execution of the documentary theatre production are explicated and the post-performance talk-backs with the audience are shared to illustrate how it facilitated insight and dialogue among its largely older audiences. Experience with this production suggests that academics can collaborate with professional artists to promote the subjective experience of aging as a positive appreciation of self. Consequently, the play holds promise to counter deeply ingrained negative self-beliefs about aging and foster greater acceptance about the experience of others. In addition, the play represents a unique community-based effort to enhance respect and social inclusion, a core domain of livability in the age-friendly community movement.

## Introduction

Across America, communities are contending with unprecedented growth among their aging demographic and seeking ways to enhance the experience of aging in community. There are more than 40 million adults age 65 and older throughout the nation and more than 70 million Baby Boomers (i.e., persons born between 1946 and 1964) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Although the experience of aging is inherently individual and subjective, and dependent on a multitude of factors such as physical health as well as current and previous life circumstances, it is also influenced by the broader context of community – including the ecological and socio-cultural milieu (Miche, Brothers, Diehl, & Wahl, 2015). Individually and collectively, negative views of aging pervade the American psyche and society, serving to inculcate ageism and its consequences – self-disregard, discrimination, and exclusion (Miche et al., 2015). In 2005, the World Health Organization's Age-friendly Cities initiative began a notable community movement which aims to counter ageism via its antidote – the promotion of respect and social inclusion (2007). Parallel interest in the arts and aging over the past decade has also fueled interest in a myriad creative ways to benefit aging persons, both individually and collectively (Hanna, Noelker, & Bienvenu, 2015) This paper discusses an innovative documentary theatre program that was created to promote public discourse

about aging, and holds promise for engaging aging communities throughout the nation to partake in similar dialogue.

## Aging and ageism in American society

Aging is a multidimensional construct that is commonly viewed from the context of the life course. This perspective acknowledges the prominence of the individual aging experience vis-a-vis the age-related and socially structured transitions throughout life stages such as family, work, retirement, and widowhood. Though the transitions are normative and occur nearly universally across cultures, the personal interpretations and collective attributions regarding the changes are largely viewed as negative in Western culture (Settersten & Hagerstad, 2015). Age-related transitions are commonly viewed as losses: multiple, cumulative, and irreplaceable. Consequently, older age is defined largely as a “negative identity” by which many people do not wish to be classified. Research suggests that personally held negative attributions of one's age are associated with a variety of untoward effects on one's sense of self and overall wellbeing (Dionigi, 2015). Moreover, many older persons may be unaware of their own biases, which can also be projected onto others (Dionigi, 2015). Societal influences further compound internalized ageist attitudes. The portrayals of older adults throughout the mass media create reference points for our future selves,

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\* Corresponding author at: 8350 N. Tamiami Trail, SMC 263, Sarasota, FL 34243, United States.

E-mail addresses: [kblack@sar.usf.edu](mailto:kblack@sar.usf.edu) (K. Black), [lipscomb@sar.usf.edu](mailto:lipscomb@sar.usf.edu) (V.B. Lipscomb).

which are reinforced over the life course and feed negative self-evaluation (Vasil & Wass, 1993). Consequently, interventions are needed at both the micro and macro level of ecologies (i.e., both individual and societal efforts within a given geo-environmental area) (Miche et al., 2015). The desire to counter internalized ageist cultural attitudes informed a community-engaged documentary theatre arts portrayal of aging. Basing a play on the authentic voices of older adult experiences across a range of life transitions (e.g., caregiving and widowhood) would seemingly resonate with people by recognizing their own stories as well as the common or shared experiences with others.

### Promoting respect and social inclusion within age-friendly communities

The WHO's age-friendly community initiative represents a broader social movement to enhance the experience of aging in community via the promotion of active, healthy, and engaged living (2007). The WHO global model of age-friendly communities addresses eight community features associated with the quality of community life (a.k.a. "domains of livability") that can be described as follows: Communication and Information (i.e., how people find out about what they want or need to know), Community Supports and Health Services (i.e., how we care for each other in the community and optimal medical care for our changing needs), Housing (i.e., where and how we live our lives), Transportation (i.e., how we get around for things we need and want to do), Outdoor Spaces and Buildings (i.e., the places and spaces where we live, work and play), Civic Participation and Employment (i.e., volunteering and work to make a difference and a living), Social Participation (i.e., activities with others that promote our health in multiple ways), and Respect and Social Inclusion (i.e., how we all want to be treated). Respect and social inclusion represent a core domain, as community attitudes that demonstrate regard of aging persons and recognize the important role that older adults play in society are critical factors for an age-friendly community. Age-friendly communities foster positive images of aging and intergenerational understanding to challenge negative attitudes (WHO, 2007). Fostering respect and social inclusion is particularly important for Western cultures, which have stigmatized aging and consequently shaped negative perceptions of self and others (Dionigi, 2015). Among the innovative possibilities to enhance respect in age-friendly communities, the stories of neighborhood residents shared via the creative arts hold particular appeal (Hanna et al., 2015). Although the global age-friendly model does not address the arts directly, partnering with a performing-arts project builds upon the community's existing arts assets and advances innovative programming that directly relates to the domain of respect and social inclusion.

### Research-based performance and community discourse on aging

There is growing interest in the epistemological role that the performing arts can play in aging studies (Kivnick & Pruchno, 2011). According to Kivnick and Pruchno, the arts provide "ways of knowing that transcend the verbal, linear, and measurable by focusing on the interpretation and expression of multiple, elusive, awe inspiring, disturbing and ineffable aspects of growing older" (p. 143). The sharing of narratives, regardless of medium, provides an opportunity to make sense of one's own experience as well as consider the experiences of others, evoking emotional resonance and empathy (Ray, 2007). Theatre can be an effective didactic tool because it conveys information vividly while entertaining; consequently, key messages are retained longer by participants because the learning experience is associated with pleasure (Levy, 1996). Therefore, social scientists have increasingly turned to performance as an effective method for disseminating narrative-related research results (Dupuis, Kontos, Mitchell, Jonas-Simpson, & Gray, 2016; Feldman, Radermacher, Lorains, & Haines, 2011; Finley, 2011; Gray & Sinding, 2002; Jonas-Simpson et al., 2012; Kontos, Mitchell, Mistry, & Ballon, 2010), especially regarding health issues

(Kontos & Naglie, 2006; Mienczakowski, 2001). Kontos (2004, 2005) has argued specifically for the value of using performance to design and share research related to aging, as the concerns of aging are inextricably linked to embodiment, and the corporeal nature of theatre offers a unique mode of exploring those issues. Dupuis et al. (2015) note that "the claims with arts-based research are not simply about recall of information. The change evoked or inspired with arts-based research is more transformative, critical, gestalt-like" (pp. 8–9).

"Ethnodrama" is a broadly used academic term for a performance script based on ethnographic research, while theatre professionals often categorize their productions that are based on events, interviews, and other primary sources as "documentary theatre." Documentary theatre may take more artistic license with the source materials, but the benefits and aims of these approaches are similar. Leavy (2015, p. 182) describes the unique polyvocality afforded by this type of theatre: "the ability of dramatic performance to get at and present rich, textured, descriptive, situated, contextual experiences and multiple meanings from the perspectives of those studied in the field". Documentary and community-engaged theatre artists share a commitment to present the multiple perspectives of any group being represented on stage (Nagel, 2007). Moreover, theatre has been shown to be particularly effective in changing social attitudes when the exact words of marginalized populations have been performed on stage (Dupuis et al., 2011).

However, few researchers have focused on the aesthetic considerations of the intersection of research and performance (Gray & Kontos, 2015). They tend to see theatre primarily as a vehicle for educating the public, rather than an aesthetic experience. Art always has incorporated both didactic and entertainment purposes; the debate about the balance of those intentions dates back at least to ancient Greece. Playwright/theatre artist Julia Gray and her co-authors argue that foregrounding the aesthetic element of research-based performance is essential: "Similar to the writing process for other qualitative researchers, we argue that an aesthetic interpretation occurs throughout the development of the research-informed theatre project. Attention to aesthetic interpretation is often overlooked due to the dominance of an aesthetic of objectivity" (Gray, Baer, and Goldstein, 2015, p. 8). Considerations in research-informed performance must include the sometimes-competing responsibilities to accurately represent interviewees, to reflect current theory, and to create captivating theatre (Goldstein, Gray, Salisbury, & Snell, 2014). The emphasis on research objectivity in research-based performance can result in a theatre event that does not value high aesthetic standards. Saldaña (2008) advocates for strong performance standards, but also acknowledges that even the basic terminology used for the intersection of arts and research can be problematic, as "research-based art" reflects a different set of priorities from "arts-based research." The adoption of arts-related techniques as a conduit for relaying research results can, in effect, erase artistic merit in the service of rigorous research (O'Donoghue, 2014).

That lack of focus on aesthetics can prevent arts groups, especially professional organizations, from collaborating with academic researchers, even though many professional companies stage ethnographic drama. Professionals may fear that an academic purpose will dominate or overshadow the dramatic creative process. Thus, dramatic performances about age-related issues, such as dementia and caregiving, tend to be separated from professional arts organizations and even from professional performance spaces, taking place instead in institutional settings such as assisted living facilities. For example, Anne Davis Basting (Basting, Towey, & Rose, 2016) headed an ambitious project bringing together academic researchers, students, theatre professionals, and the staff and residents of a nursing home to create a play about Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey*. The production welcomed the audience to move throughout the nursing home as a unique performance space. Basting's team successfully aimed to transform the culture of the nursing home and improve the quality of life for everyone connected with it, resulting not only in the performances but also in a

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