

'Happy Returns' Performance Tour

Summary Report

July 2013



The Ages and Stages Company

Introduction

In March 2013, the Ages and Stages Theatre Company toured a new production, directed by Jill Rezzano, Head of Education at the New Vic Theatre in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire. 'Happy Returns' is an interactive performance piece exploring intergenerational relationships, set at a birthday party for three friends of different ages.

It was developed as part of a one-year follow on project to *Ages and Stages*, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Performers and facilitators were aged between 18 and 93. They included community members, New Vic Youth Theatre members and professional actors.

'Happy Returns' was performed at the following venues:

- *Mon 18th March* : The Old Library, Keele Hall, Keele University, Staffordshire
- *Tues 19th March*: Manchester Metropolitan University, Cheshire Campus, Crewe
- *Mon 25th March*: Beacon Park Village, Lichfield, Staffordshire
- *Tues 26th March*: Hanford Court Care Home, Stoke-on-Trent
- *Tues 26th March*: Hempstalls Hall Care Home, Newcastle under Lyme
- *Thurs 28th March*: Chase Terrace High School, Burntwood, Staffordshire

Detailed ethnographic notes were taken throughout the tour. Group discussions between actors and audience also followed each performance. Following the tour, on Monday 22nd April, an audio-recorded group discussion took place involving the performers and facilitators in order to collectively reflect on the experience of being involved in the production. This report highlights the key points from all of the documentation of these activities.



Venue	Numbers attending	Profile of attendees	What worked well?	What were the challenges?
The Old Library, Keele Hall	34	Keele students (English and Drama); Keele staff; training course participants; advisory group members; New Vic staff; visitors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audience interaction (in parts): included laughter, singing, contributing anecdotes. - The post show discussion was lively and inclusive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some audience interactions during the performance were a bit rushed – actors worried about putting people on the spot?
Manchester Metropolitan University	26	Primary PGCE students; training course participants; a couple of family members of performers; one advisory group member.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lots of interaction between performers and audience members. - Students had taken part in a workshop with Jill Rezzano before the performance so they were well prepared and seemed ‘relaxed and engaged’. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Whilst students engaged enthusiastically, some of the other audience members appeared quieter and more inhibited.
Beacon Park Village	Approx 30	Village residents; 1 training course participant.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some performers enjoyed the large performance space (though some felt it lacked the intimacy of other venues). - Enthusiastic response to party activities at the beginning. - Confident and insightful audience responses to other parts of the performance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lots of discussion during the performance; though this demonstrated thoughtful engagement, it was also a bit challenging for some performers.
Hanford Court Care Home	18	Care home residents; 1 training course participant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lots of laughter and participation in the opening party activities. - Actors responded well to the audience’s needs, repeating lines when things had been missed, speaking loudly and explaining what was 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The opening section lasted for a longer time as it took residents more time to get seated and ready for the performance. - There was some confusion from

			happening when audience members asked questions.	residents about whether it was a real party and about when the performance had started. As a result, more detailed explanations were offered at the following performance.
Hempstalls Hall Care Home	20	Care home residents; 2 training course participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Although there were more audience members with dementia and with mobility/motor difficulties than at Hanford Court, there was still much interaction. - Most smiled, made eye contact or chatted with the actors as they entered. - There was laughter, pointing, singing, calling out of comments, discussion. - A woman with dementia who appeared distressed on arrival and was comforted by a carer, later joined in with the discussions. - Actors allowed a good amount of time for discussion with small groups and responded well to the residents – repeating information and questions and allowing people time to respond. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There were more audience members with dementia and with mobility/motor difficulties than at Hanford Court. - One of the interactive elements of the performance requires audience members to write labels for birthday gifts. Not all audience members were able to do this, so actors and company members acted as scribes.
Chase Terrace High School	30+	Older students (Year 11/12) doing drama; two members of staff; two training course participants; and an Ages and Stages Advisory Group member and her daughter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jill met with the group of students the week before, and this may have helped them to contribute to discussions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very cold weather conditions on the day and performance space was cold too.

Key Issues in Discussions with Audience

In this section, we review responses to those scenes in the play that were designed for deliberate audience interaction. For each of these scenes, the scenario is described and then a table follows summarising the audience responses

Bingo

Bingo is introduced as a party game, but the bingo cards are blank and participants fill in their own responses to questions such as ‘how old do you feel today?’; ‘how old do people *think* you are?’; ‘how old would you *like* to be?’ and ‘at what age do you start being old?’

Venue	Audience Response
The Old Library, Keele Hall	Audience members filled in their responses, but there was no discussion about their answers.
Manchester Metropolitan University	Students in particular took part enthusiastically and discussed answers with each other. The group returned to the activity in the post-performance discussion. There were varying responses to when one is old – someone said 100, another said 30, another that ‘old people are those older than yourself’. There was also discussion about primary school children and whether they seemed old or young for their age.
Beacon Park Village	No comments recorded.
Hanford Court Care Home	There was enthusiastic participation in the bingo game, with audience members calling out comments; they continued to talk and to call out comments during the post-bingo dialogue – all in response to the opinions expressed by actors.
Hempstalls Hall Care Home	Most residents participated in the bingo and continued chatting about it with each other afterwards.
Chase Terrace High School	On this occasion, the bingo scene was discussed in the post-show discussion. Audience members were asked the question ‘when are you old?’ Responses included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There’s no real answer: you don’t really change you just grow more mature. Many old people still feel young inside. • Only when you start acting old – it’s more of a mental thing. • If you see old people, you don’t really imagine them as doing/having done things that young people do but that’s not true. • Appearance dictates what you expect.

Road Sign Scene

This scene centres on a busy road outside a care home. The standard road traffic sign indicating that older people are crossing is in position, but drivers ignore the sign and residents are unable to cross. They have been writing to the council for many years to campaign for better safety there, but to no avail. In desperation, they decide to 'take the law into their own hands' and they deface the sign so that it shows a more intimidating older person waving a walking stick – much to the annoyance of a car driver who passes that way on his regular journey the next day. The Council complains to the care home owner, claiming that a member of the public was put in danger, and discussions ensue about who is responsible and who should therefore pay to replace the sign. The audience are asked for their views about who is responsible, and questions are raised about whether people view the incident differently because it involves older adults compared to if young people had defaced the sign.



Venue	Audience Response
The Old Library, Keele Hall	The audience decided that the council were responsible by a small majority (18/16).
Manchester Metropolitan University	Some audience support for older people, as well as a comment that younger people would probably be prosecuted. The audience decided that the council were responsible by a small majority (14/12).
Beacon Park Village	Group voted by a large majority that the council were responsible.
Hanford Court Care Home	There was initially some confusion from participants about the scene. On further clarification, the audience voted by an overwhelming majority that the council should take responsibility. They called out comments and suggestions, some humorous!
Hempstalls Hall Care Home	A number of comments were called out by the audience, including 'you can't blame it all on the council'. The audience decided that the council should pay by a majority of 13/8
Chase Terrace High School	Limited interactions; the young audience, whilst understanding why the older people had done what they did, also felt that they should be held responsible. For the first time in the tour, a large majority - 20/10 - felt that the older people were responsible.



Teenagers on the Street Corner

This scene focuses on one of the older character's fear when passing a small group of teenagers on the street at night. The fears and assumptions of both the older character and the group of young people are voiced by the actors. They did not actually communicate directly with each other. The actors then ask audience members for their response to the scene.

Venue	Audience Response
The Old Library, Keele Hall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Young people were probably harmless. - Groups of people can be intimidating whatever your age, especially in an unfamiliar area. - Either side saying 'hello' may have helped.
Manchester Metropolitan University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It's easy to feel intimidated by groups of people. - Fear is usually unfounded – best advice is to keep going and keep head down. - Extent of anxiety can be influenced by locality, night-time and if people have been drinking. - Can feel worse to people who do not have regular contact with teenagers.
Beacon Park Village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There was lots of sympathy for the teenagers and discussion of false impressions, stereotypes and miscommunication. - Some discussion about [lack of] facilities for young people. - Some comments about people's pride in their own grandchildren.
Hanford Court Care Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There was understanding of the fear (especially after dark) but also recognition that it is usually unfounded. - Some comments about the power of smiling/saying 'hello'. - Recognition that groups of older people can be intimidating too.
Hempstalls Hall Care Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audience members talked in small groups with actors. - Again, understanding of the fear, especially after dark, but also recognition that it is usually unfounded and that 'young people are fine'. - Sympathy for young people needing somewhere to go and comments about changing circumstances of young people – they would at one time have been at work at 15.
Chase Terrace High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Small group interactions worked well. - Main points were not to judge by clothing/appearances; the fact that we can all get intimidated by groups of people; advice to smile and say hello, and a comment about the impact of negative media portrayals of teenagers.

Birthday Present Selections

In this scene, a range of birthday presents are distributed, but they are missing their labels. The actors therefore ask the audience to open the gifts and to decide who the presents should be given to – the 21 year old, the 40 year old, or the 60 year old. Audience members were also asked to identify their own best present and what they would like for a future present.

Venue	Whose present?	Best present	Future present
The Old Library, Keele Hall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presents were mostly allocated along gendered lines; gardening tools and golf lessons for the 60 year old man; beauty voucher for the 21 year old woman. - The young person was given the cash. - Hot water bottle given to the older man. - Others were randomly allocated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time to myself (Mum of small children). - Craft book – student (mid-20's). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Colin Firth in a ribbon. - A dinner date with Judi Dench. - Money. - Spa Break. - A car.
Manchester Metropolitan University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This audience recognised and challenged stereotypical assumptions – e.g. by giving golf lessons and the hot water bottle to the 21 year old woman, and the beauty voucher to the 60 year old man. They did, however, give cash to the young person and the camera to the 40 year old woman 'to take her mind off being 40'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Birth of child. - Car for 21st 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A winning lottery ticket. - A holiday. - A city break. - A white baby grand piano. - A trip to Peru.
Beacon Park Village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Almost all presents were given to the 21 year old, based on the view that life can be tough for young people and that many struggle for money/ resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engagement ring. 	
Hanford Court Care Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lots of enthusiastic discussion. - Money was again given to young person, hot water bottle to older person. - Young person was also given the theatre tickets, again on 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family friend coming to visit after years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Return of deceased husband. - A new hip. - A surprise holiday.

	the assumption that she may not have much money.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Great health. - A surprise. - Two tickets to the New Vic.
Hempstalls Hall Care Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The opening of the birthday presents worked well. - Audience members were enthusiastic about opening the presents and smiled and laughed a lot. - This part of the show lasted longer in both care homes than in the other venues. - Most gifts were given to the 21-year old – camera, cash, record voucher, beauty voucher, even the hot water bottle as ‘we need to look after the children’. - Gardening tools and theatre token give to the 60-year old. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A Cruise - Lots of discussion between audience members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Everyone to be happy (lots of people murmured in agreement at this) - A watch from my sister - Tickets to see Les Miserables - A trip to Egypt - A cruise
Chase Terrace High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Most of the gifts were allocated to Brenda, the 40-year old (even the cash!). - The 60 year old had the beauty voucher, the record voucher and also the hot water bottle ‘because he’s vulnerable’. - The 21 year old was given nothing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An X Box Connect - A holiday 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Glastonbury tickets - To meet Olly Murs - A 3 week holiday to Germany - A car - A cruise somewhere warm - To meet One Direction



Post-Show Discussions

At the end of each performance, there was a general discussion in which performers and facilitators asked audience members about their responses to the play. The following table summarises the key points that were discussed at each performance.

Venue	Summary of Key Points
The Old Library, Keele Hall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reflection on own experiences of previously being in groups that may have seemed intimidating to others. - Changing relationships between generations – whether there is more understanding within families and whether the gap lessens when young people enter the workplace. - Discussions about people giving up seats on public transport for older people – whether it often happens and how it makes people feel. - Role of media in contributing to negative perceptions of younger people.
Manchester Metropolitan University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One audience member commented on the directive tone taken by the granddaughter in the play towards her grandfather and reflected on how this also happened in her own family relationships. - Further discussion, prompted by Jill Rezzano, about people’s responses to bingo questions (see previous table). - Some reflection on how attitudes to children and young people who you know may be very different to those who you don’t know. This was linked to stereotypes, and the media’s role in contributing to this was also mentioned.
Beacon Park Village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussions took place in small groups rather than a large, more formal group discussion. - People talked more generally about life in Beacon Park and the reasons for moving there. - Some performers went on a tour of the village and were impressed by facilities there for activities such as pottery making.
Hanford Court Care Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lots of smiling and chatting at the end. Audience members said goodbye to the actors as they left the room. - People chatted amongst themselves for a while at the end and the group dispersed naturally as residents started to leave.
Hempstalls Hall Care Home	<p>One of the carers sat through the performance and said that she was ‘amazed’ by the ‘unexpected’ and ‘surprising’ interactions between residents and actors. Though not everyone had responded verbally, she felt that people’s body language had been very positive, showing that they had enjoyed the performance. In particular, she mentioned a resident who had sometimes seemed confused/distressed and was comforted regularly, but had participated in a small group conversation about young people and made her opinions known – the implication was that this was very unusual for this particular resident.</p>

<p>Chase Terrace High School</p>	<p>Further discussion of the situations/dilemmas portrayed in the play, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative perceptions of groups of young people. - Dilemmas over deciding whether to give up a seat on public transport. - Ageist road signs. - Perceptions of ageing and ageist assumptions in relation to the bingo game activity. <p>Jill asked what drama students had liked about the performance/drama techniques they had seen. Responses included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging the fact that everyone in a given age group gets tarred with the same brush. • Liked the echoes/thoughts expressed in the scene with Steve and the young people. • Liked being involved. • Liked looking for the mobile phone. • One particular student (with apparent learning difficulties) liked the audience involvement and had enjoyed chatting to everyone.
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Feedback from Performers

The discussion that was held with performers on Monday 22nd April was recorded and transcribed. The discussion focused on the following aspects of taking part in the production:

- **Members' reflections on taking part in the production e.g. expectations and challenges.**

Throughout the discussion, various comments were made about the challenging aspects of taking part in the performances; these included adapting to different venues, learning lines, doing silent improvisation, and also coping with nerves. Acting to an audience, especially as a relatively inexperienced actor, can be daunting; one member of the group referred to this, but also commented that the support of the other group members had been valuable:

"I was absolutely terrified a couple of days before and when we went to the first venue. I remembered I could stand up in front of a room for work before, giving conferences lectures as a midwife – but this was completely different – I was so frightened. I couldn't remember anything at first, but then you do. I thoroughly enjoyed it, it was brilliant... On that first morning, afternoon, I thought, what am I doing? But everyone was lovely and everyone remembers for you – that's so important."

The same person commented that not having to learn lines completely word-for-word, and being able to improvise to an extent, made the experience a little less daunting. A further comment about the supportive nature of the group was also made by the young professional actor who took part in the production:

"When I turned up, I felt like, what would people expect from me as a professional? I've only been out of drama school however long – I felt pressure until I met everyone – everyone was brilliant and really welcoming."

There were further comments later in the discussion about the supportive and non-competitive nature of the group, which contrasted with some of the group's experiences of professional theatre companies. The fact that there were non-acting members of the theatre group in the audience also gave the actors a greater sense of support.

- Comparisons with doing previous *Ages & Stages* performance.

Some of the group had taken part in the first Ages and Stages production, and there was some discussion about the similarities and differences between the two. Both productions effectively involved similar processes, and in both cases, as the young professional actor noted, that process was as important as the end product:

“It took me a couple of days to work out about the project; what you’d done in the workshops, scenes you’d worked on, it took me part of the first week to work out the process, which was just as important as the end product. So it was refreshing that the process was just as important as the product. It’s not normally like that in acting jobs – all about the product.”

The first production was longer, and there was less flexibility in terms of improvisation and interacting with the audience. One performer felt that the second production had come together more quickly due to the prior experience of the group:

“The back stories were sharper this time. I’m sure it was sharper because we’d done the project before. It felt that we were getting somewhere quicker”.

A member of the group who had effectively played his own character in the first production, had found the second one easier because he was able to play different characters:

“Our Age, Our Stage was a documentary, using other people’s words. You had to play other people – it was strange for me because I had to play myself. This time we had characters – the characters at the party. Although you were playing different things, you were playing characters. It made it much easier”.

Another person talked about the value that she perceived in taking out the performance to wider audiences, and another referred to the positive interactions with those audiences, and how that made each performance a different experience.

- Thoughts about audience reactions.

There had been a certain amount of anxiety about the extent to which the audience would be willing and able to participate in the discussions, especially in the care home settings. Involving the audience added a level of unpredictability to the performances, which was challenging to the performers. However, several people talked about the value of this, and the fact that audiences at each performance had been willing to interact. There were also some comments about the sense of satisfaction that resulted from a positive audience

reaction, for example as reflected in the positive feedback from a member of staff in a care home:

“When she said how much people had enjoyed it, she could tell from their body language. She was really surprised at that. What better satisfaction can you get than that? What better way to spend your morning?”

There was some discussion about the power of theatre and the relationship between the performer and the audience:

“Something can happen that’s above craft, learning lines - something between you and an audience, and it’s incredible”.

- What had been learned and the impact on individuals.

Members of the group identified a range of different things that they had learnt, or reflected upon, as a result of having taken part in this production: individuals talked about learning new acting skills through interacting with the audience, or from observing the processes of other actors; one person spoke of gaining a new understanding of what ‘incredibly hard work’ and how ‘physically and emotionally difficult’ acting is.

There was also some discussion about how people’s family and friends had responded to their involvement in the production. For one group member, there was a sense of pride that resulted from being recognised as a performer:

“I saw two people in the audience who had come to the (Happy Returns) dress rehearsals. I saw them in the bar afterwards and they asked if I was still on tour and what we were doing next. I thought, (looks proud) ‘oh!’”

Another member of the group spoke after the meeting about how much she values her involvement. She referred to the importance of rising to challenges as one gets older, and expressed her desire to remain involved.

- Next steps.

The discussion concluded with the highlighting of some potential future opportunities for people’s continued involvement in the Ages and Stages Theatre Company.