

**The Death, Dinner and Performance: A Study of the Efficacy of Performance to Enhance
Conversations Around Death and Dying project
Complementary Writing: Exposition of Research**

Introduction p.2

About the Research: Overview p.3-12

- Origins and initial Research
- Performance Review
- Critical Context
- Objectives

Death Dinner Performance: Developing a Research Strategy p.12-22

- Atmosphere and Prompting Discussion
- Commensal Practice
- Use of Autobiographical Material
- Setting
- Ending the dinner

Outcomes: New Insights p.22-

- Analysis of the Pre-Dinner Questionnaires
- Post-Dinner Questionnaires
- Themes that arose over the Death Dinners
- What was learned in relation to practice

Life Beyond the Death Dinners: Death in Performance Symposium p

- Performance and Death Symposium co-produced by the New Adelphi theatre and Sick!
Festival

Bibliography p.22

The Death, Dinner and Performance: A Study of the Efficacy of Performance to Enhance Conversations Around Death and Dying project

Introduction

The Death, Dinner and Performance Practice as Research project took place in the Autumn of 2018 in the New Adelphi Studio at the University of Salford. It brought together commensal practices and autobiographical performance to explore the use of both to develop a performance/ participation method that might encourage reflection and dialogue around the difficult and somewhat taboo subjects of death and dying.

The project developed from earlier research on ageing and creative applied practice that culminated in the publication of my monograph *Applied Theatre: Creative Ageing* (Bloomsbury, 2017). The Death, Dinner and Performance project was also informed by my previous professional experience as a Registered General Nurse working in palliative and end of life care.

Within the project, the following areas were considered:

- The development of practice strategy that would allow the research to be interrogated
- Similar practice in area and its relationship to the project and research
- The ethical responsibility to participants of the project
- Logistical and dramaturgical considerations
- How to best capture, document and evaluate the outcomes of the project
- Plans for future practice/ research

All of this was considered with the following research objectives in mind; that the death, dinners and performance project would

- Interrogate the potential for commensal practice and performance to work together to enhance communal engagement and conversation on death and dying.
- Explore the ability of autobiographical performance strategies to be adopted and used as stimuli for such conversations.

The following document outlines the project, its development and outcomes. It should be read alongside other material in the portfolio (research time line, script, pre and post dinner questionnaires, video and photographic documentation).

About the Research: Overview

Creating a performance strategy and ritualised encounter, the Performance, Death and Dinner project interrogated both as tools to encourage discussions on death and dying with invited participants/dinner guests. Adapting already existing commensal methodologies including Death Over Dinner (<https://deathoverdinner.org/>) and the Death Café (<https://deathcafe.com/>) movements, the Practice as Research examined the potential of intimate autobiographical performance in a communal, commensal setting to transgress taboo and enable access to the often-difficult subjects of death and dying.

Situating the developed theatrical and dramaturgical practice within a performance studies framework and using Practice as Research methods to interrogate that practice, the project investigated commensality and its potential as a performative act. The intention behind the project was thus to embrace the performativity associated with commensality and, to develop a methodology that heightened that performativity using autobiographical performance as a means to explore the potential therein for debate, discussion and future learning.

Three death dinners in total were held in the New Adelphi Studio Theatre in October/ November of 2018. These followed a period of initial research into death and dying and artistic development out of that research which supported the creation of the three extended autobiographical monologues subsequently used in Death Dinner events. The dinners and monologues were staged using dramaturgical, theatrical, and proxemic interventions.

During that meal, participants witnessed three moments of performance developed using auto-ethnographic creative writing techniques. These moments were based on my own lived experience and concerns around death and dying, both personally and from my previous experience as a palliative care nurse. Aligning the performance to a traditional three-act structure, each monologue punctuated a course of the meal. This allowed a moment of pause and reflection on the themes of each monologue, themes that were discussed subsequently over the following course.

The opening monologue explored my first experience of death and its impact on my understanding both of death and of its consequences; the next examined my current feelings about death as an adult and the last; the notion of a 'good' death and what that might mean for me. Engaging with the

themes of each monologue allowed a natural progression of the subject matter across the meal from the first to last topic.

While I acted as host, prompting and encouraging the conversation, I also observed how that conversation unfolded. Footage and audio material recorded during the events were later examined in conjunction with the pre and post dinner questionnaires, allowing insights to be gleaned from the practice as research. The recorded materials also provided documentation for the project, a visual, aural and written record of responses to the stimuli presented through the performance and staging of the event. Together, documentation, anecdotal material and the observation of affect during the dinners allowed an analysis of the impact of the performance on the participants' attitude to death, along with their ability/ wish to discuss death openly with others, to occur.

To address ethical concerns and to provide a range in participants in terms of age, gender and experience, each dinner guest was selected and invited to the event. Members of the group were chosen because they professed one of the following:

- An interest in performance practice
- An interest in the subject matter
- Experience/ understanding of death and dying (professional or personal)

Prior to attending their dinner, participants completed a questionnaire that probed their attitude to death and dying and ability to discuss the subject. Following the event, a similar questionnaire was completed, this time exploring the impact of the event on those two factors. Read together, the questionnaires provided insight into the experience of the event for the participants and its possible efficacy for encouraging conversation around death and dying. Although this method provided only anecdotal evidence, a comparison between the two questionnaires was still helpful in allowing any changes in attitude to be considered. Participants were also asked to reflect on the performative/ theatrical elements of the event and the impact of these elements on experience. The rationale behind both questionnaires was to assess if the experience of the event, the meal and performance as well as the conversation it prompted, had any effect on participants' future ability to discuss and consider death and dying both personally and more broadly, as an inevitable part of life.

As well as addressing the questions above, the research thus allowed the following to be explored:

- The efficacy of the performance material to prompt conversation around death and dying
- The efficacy of the theatrical strategies to encourage those conversations to develop

- The efficacy of the event in its entirety to encourage ongoing reflection on death and dying for the participants of the project.

Origins and Initial Research

During a two-year research project on performance and ageing that culminated in the publication of my monograph *Applied Theatre: Creative Ageing* (Bloomsbury, 2017) I was struck by the lack of open conversation around death and dying and the negative effect this appeared to have on the experience of both ageing and death (Abdel-Lambert South and Elton, Khalek, The Economist Intelligence Unit). A practice review of Applied Theatre projects found little work (particularly in terms of didactical performance) in this area. While research on performance in relation to ageing exists, most of this material explores the experience of ageing alone rather than its relationship to death and dying. One of the aims of the Death, Dinner and Performance project was to consider whether a performance methodology could be developed that would address this gap.

While this deficit peaked my interest, it was not the initial impetus for the project. Having previously trained as a Registered General Nurse and working extensively in palliative and end of life care, I have long since wanted to use performance to explore attitudes to death and dying. I have witnessed first-hand the importance of open and honest conversations around the subject and the positive impact such conversations can have on the experience of loss and bereavement, as well as the experience of death itself. Similarly, from a personal perspective, I have been exposed to the impact of death and dying in an acute setting where open conversation did not occur and where the support of palliative care was not available. Both these experiences (professional and personal) provided the drive behind the project and indeed the inspiration for the creative autobiographical practice so vital to this PaR project.

Finally, I come from a country where the hegemonic culture is based, in large part, on the rituals and practices associated with the Catholic faith. These practices and rituals are imbedded in all parts of Irish society although their influence is felt somewhat less as the population becomes increasingly secularised. As part of the Irish diaspora living in the UK, I have been struck by the differences in cultural and social practices in relation to death and dying, in the practice of rituals and the understanding of the accepted cultural and social norms that inform those rituals. The project can be read as an attempt to consider the development of new rituals, ones created with an understanding of and reference to death rites and rituals from other cultures. In doing so, it provides a basis for future research on performance, death rituals and the contemporary experience of death and dying.

Performance Review

Researching/ experiencing the works below allowed me to understand the contemporary performance landscape that addresses death and dying. I was able to pick out recurring themes (e.g. fear and death, questions around what we leave behind, concerns about how death impacts the living) which correlated to some of the themes in the monologues. Engaging with contemporary practice in the area, I also became aware of new areas for consideration (what will death look like in the future for example). Studying commensality and its use in contemporary practice gave me ideas for my own performance practice which I was then able to test and evidence in the changes I subsequently made in terms of theatrical and dramaturgical interventions.

- Am I Dead Yet?, Unlimited

Accompanied by Death Cafes open to the public, Unlimited theatre company's Am I Dead Yet is a piece of performance that explores death and dying now and in the future. It is inspired by research and developments in resuscitation science and was made in collaboration with Emergency Care professionals. This performance was particularly useful as it adopted strategies to encourage a dialectical experience between theatre makers and audience members which, in turn, encouraged me to strategise ways to enhance similar potential in my own work.

- Mad Gyms and Kitchens, Bobby Baker
- No Such Thing, Autumn, Table Manners, Kitchen Project, Quarantine
- The Last Supper, Reckless Sleepers
- The Midnight Soup

Bobby Baker's body of work includes several pieces that explore feminism, care and illness Baker using food as visual materials and as a theatrical mode to produce sensory experiences in her live art practice. Similarly, Quarantine often use food in their interventions with audience members. Autumn, for example, encourages social interaction between audience members and the company using food as a means to provide a moment of pause and communality in their Quartet: Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring. Examining both Quarantine and Baker's work encouraged me to consider how I might similarly use the sensorial elements of food and the communal experience of eating together to enhance the affect produced through the event.

Reckless Sleepers explore the relationship between food and experience using the last meals requested by a number of death row inmates as a narrative device and food as a theatrical

intervention in their production *The Last Supper*. In Burtin's *The Last Supper* commensal practices and elements of participation and inclusion are used to engage an audience in the autobiographical story of his Grandmother's death through suicide thus opening conversations around choice with his audience/ participants. These two performances use food not just as a sensory catalyse but also as a means to engage participants in conversation. Examining how this was done effectively in performance encouraged me to consider my own strategy for developing prompts through commensality for discussion.

- That Grief Thing, Fevered Sleep
- Future bodies
- Wit
- Afterlife
- Lippy

Having explored ageing in their production, *On Ageing, Fevered Sleep* tackle another difficult subject in their latest production/installation *This Grief Thing*. Providing a space in their popup shop for discussions around grief, the company aim to provide opportunities to make grief visible and open for discussion.

A collaboration between Unlimited Theatre Company and RashDash created *Future Bodies*, a production that explores our relationship with death and dying, now and in the future. It considers technological advancement and whether, at some point, even death itself might become obsolete.

In *Wit*, Margaret Edson explores one woman's relationship with her own impending death as she journeys through a terminal illness. Here notions of control, empathy and medical models of care are all challenged.

Afterlife, by French and Mottershed provides an immersive digital artwork where audience members can listen to a series of twenty-minute pieces, each of which connect the listener to stories of the body's decomposition after death. The pieces outlines the decay of the human body after death and the influence of environments on its final transformation.

Dead Centre Ireland and Bush Moukarzel production Lippy explores the real event of the deaths of our women in 2000 in Leixlip, Co Kildare through a suicide pact that lasted forty days. No-one knows why they entered into the pact and Lippy grapples with that lack of knowledge

The five productions listed above explore the difficult current themes and/or debates that surround death, dying, grief and loss. From terminal illness to the future of death as we know these pieces tackle the issues pertinent to a contemporary audience. Experiencing them exposed my to themes vital to both my monologues and the conversations that occurred over the course of the dinners.

- Before I Die I Want To

Artist Candy Chang developed the first Before I Die wall in New Orleans following the death of a friend who had left many things undone. Now an international phenomenon, over 4,000 walls have been produced in seventy-one countries in thirty-five languages. Chang's work was most helpful when I began to think about an evaluation and exiting exercise for the end of the dinner. The ethos of her arts practice in the Before I Die project is inclusive and immersive. Adapting the practice as a final communal moment for contemplation at the end of the meal, provided support for the participants as the atmosphere shifted from internal safe space of the theatre back into the real world beyond.

The key themes or areas for discussion that emerged through the performance review included acceptance and death, fear and death, rituals and death and the future of death as we know it. In relation to commensal practice, significant considerations and preoccupations in this area related to its use to encourage communality, conversation and connection, all of which were relevant to my research questions in the Death, Dinner and Performance project.

Critical Context

Death is an inevitable stage in the any life cycle and yet conversations around death remain taboo (Lambert South and Elton). The stigmatisation of death has a negative impact with studies showing the most death adverse-countries (and thus those least likely to discuss openly end of life) remain the lowest ranked in terms of end of life care quality (Economist Intelligence Unit). Out of this understanding have come several projects (Death Cafes, The Conversation Project, Before I Die Festivals) developed to encourage engagement with the difficult subject. One such project (and resource) is the open access website called Let's Get Together and Talk about Death, or Death over Dinner (<http://deathoverdinner.org/>). It provides a framework for initiating end-of-life conversations with loved ones by taking the often-frightening subject of death and transforming it into something

familiar, a conversation over the dinner table. Developed by Michael Hebb (Lambert South and Elton, 2017) Death Over Dinner (DOD) is similar to its counterpart, Death Cafes (<http://deathcafe.com/>) with both movements offering a social space where individuals are encouraged to discuss death and dying openly. Both socially engaged practices have grown in popularity since their incarnation with over 2700 Death Cafés taking place since 2011 (Flegal, 2016).

According to Kellehear and O'Connor, 'dying, death and bereavement are subject to a range of misconceptions and ignorance' (2008). Because of this, as Patterson and Hazelwood explain, there is a growing consensus that palliative care needs to encompass a 'health promoting' element so as to encourage openness about death which in turn inspires people to develop ways to live and support each other with death, dying and bereavement (2014, 77). Research shows a lack of communication about end-of-life preferences is one of the main reasons people do not receive the care they would prefer, which is often palliative rather than interventional (Economist Intelligence Unit). Thus, avoiding end-of-life communication results in greater health care spending and more unwanted hospital admissions (National Audit Office, Office for National Statistics). Most importantly, it prevents people from dying in the way they wish. According to Lambert South and Elton, avoiding communication about death has a negative impact while engaging in the subject with others has many benefits. They explain:

Talking about death may help people work through their fears and better understand what they want during the end of life and also makes one's care preferences known to others. It might also make people aware of end-of-life services, like palliative care and hospice, of which they previously had little to no knowledge, and sharing positive stories about end of life may change people's attitudes toward death and dying, thus making it easier for people to prepare for the end of life. Communication about the end of life also results in better care for the patient and offers stress relief and support for families and friends (Lambert South and Elton, 2017).

The Performance, Death and Dinner project considered this health promotion deficit and the taboo that surrounds death and dying. With aspirations to achieve the positive impact Lambert South and Elton discuss above, the project engaged the discipline of performance and health, embracing intimate performance strategies as a means to open up discussion around the subject.

Unlike Death Cafes or Death Over Dinner, the Death, Dinners and Performance Project used performance-based stimuli to encourage engagement and conversation. Performance methods

engaged as methodology initiated, framed and supported a communal exploration of the topic by participants. The live and ephemeral performance, experienced communally by all guests, offered a prompt for subsequent conversation. This, in turn, allowed the impact and effect of the collective experience on participants' attitudes to be explored, while the performativity of the Death Dinner event and the potential for performance to provide the ultimate prompt (played live within the three-act structure of the dinner: starter, main course and dessert) was simultaneously examined.

As I mentioned above, the responses to the material as stimuli for conversation were documented using video recording. Six hours of video material was later examined in relation to the following:

- The recurring themes around death and dying.
- The differences and similarities between dinners in relation to performance strategies.
- The effects of these on the outcomes of each dinner.
- The implications of all of the above on the initial outcome and future of the project on the whole.

In conjunction with questionnaires and anecdotal feedback from the guests gathered after the event, certain recurring themes both in relation to the subject matter and the performance strategies used began to emerge. These are detailed later in this document.

Objectives

The research and development period took six months and began with initial research into commensal practices, particularly the Death Over Dinner and the Death Café movements. As well as seeing a number of performances on the subject of death and dying (The Midnight Soup, Unlimited's Am I Dead Yet and Future Bodies for example) I attended several Death Cafes and these experiences, along with those gained as a nurse working in palliative care, informed the development of my performance practice.

As well as working practically, I also undertook research in palliative care (Abdel-Khalek, A.M. (2002) Ariès, Philippe (1974) Barry, Vincent (2007) Kellehear, A. and O'Connor, D. (2008) Flegal, K. (2016), Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth (1975) Lambert South, A and J. Elton (2017) and Patterson, R. and Hazelwood, M (2014)); attitudes to death and dying (Barry, Vincent (2007), Choron, Jacques (1973), Critchley, Simon (2004), Dollimore, Jonathan (2001), Metcalf, P and Huntington (1991)) and death rites, rituals and cultural practices (Hallam, E.M, Hockey, J.L and Howarth, G (1999) Schnechner, R (1977) Bronfen, Elisabeth & Sarah Webster Goodwin). Key ideas that arose from this reading echoed the

performance review findings above with much being considered in relation to the fear of death and its implications, contemporary society and the medicalisation of death, the position of rites and rituals and the future of death and dying. These theoretical areas informed the subject matter explored within the death dinners, the ethical approval application and subsequently, decisions made within the project to ensure ethical responsibility and the wellbeing of the participants.

Both the literary and performance review provided an understanding of critical debates that exist in relation to death and dying. Undertaking both allowed me to consider where the Death, Dinner and Performance project lay within that landscape of those debate. Out of the reviews, a knowledge of commensal performance practice and creative practice that explore cultural attitudes to death and dying including rites and rituals developed. Also evident were the following themes: that there is a general lack of understanding around palliative care; that there exists a lack of experience around death (i.e. that it is removed from the community and positioned behind closed doors in a hospital setting) and that this lack of experience creates mystery around the subject; that this mystery in turn creates fear; that conversation and discussion can alleviate fear and finally, that there can be pleasure felt in communal discussion on the topics of death, dying, bereavement and grief.

By its nature, the research embraced a Practice as Research (PaR) methodology in that, new knowledge and understanding around the research questions could only be gleamed through the practice of hosting/ staging each death dinner. The interrogation took place through the development of the practice and upon its reflection afterwards. The research questions could not be asked and answered if the practice did not occur.

Developing a Research Strategy

This section is divided up into six areas of inquiry. It explores how the Death, Dinner and Performance methodology emerged, the development of moments of theatricality and performance and their capacity to provoke and engage participants in conversation.

The six areas are:

- Characterisation and Dramaturgy;
- Atmosphere and Prompting Discussion;
- The Development and Use of Commensal Practice;
- The Development and Use of Autobiographical Practice;
- Setting;
- Ending the Dinner .

Characterisation and Dramaturgy

When developing the project, I first thought of hosting the dinners in my own home and later, in a local restaurant. However, upon consideration, I realised neither would allow for a full exploration of the potential of performance/ theatrical strategies and devices; a performance space was needed for that. The challenge then became to produce a commensal event conducive to conversations of a personal and intimate nature in a traditional theatre space.

As well as consideration of the appropriate space for discussion, thought had to be given to the means by which I would encourage/ prompt that discussion. Initially, I created a character who would propel the action and thus facilitate conversation; a disgruntled waitress who was hired for the event at late notice with little understanding of what was going on. She would be inept, confused and a little short tempered but in a way that created amusement rather than offence. Her irritation would be compounded by the fact that the actual host (death) would never materialise but would send intermittent messages expressing his/ her excuses/ apologies. The confused pronoun would add to the vagueness around the host and his/ her impending presence. Of course, he or she would never materialise but his or her presence (even in absence) would loom large over the event.

While I enjoyed the creation of the character and the 'host' as a metaphor for death, I quickly realised both would become laboured and add an unnecessary layer of theatricality that could potentially distance rather than engage participants. In rehearsal, it became clear the conceit would

produce a situation where participants would have to play along and I felt this was not appropriate as it may then make them feel uncomfortable sharing personal thoughts and insights.

The characterisation tested and disregarded quickly led to a definitive decision. I would remove all within the event. I would greet, introduce and interact throughout the dinner with the participants as myself and never behave as if the event was anything other than what it was, a research event seeking to ask questions about death, conversation and performance. As such, over the course of the event, at different times I inhabited three roles (host/ performer/ researcher) sometimes simultaneously. This, in turn, created another dilemma. Without inhibiting the conversation, how would I move from moments of performance to moments of conversation and how would I prompt participants sufficiently so that they might engage actively in the conversations that followed each moment of performance?

Three dramaturgical questions soon came to the fore:

- How should the event be staged/ set?
- How should the monologues be delivered?
- What appropriate and effective prompts could be developed?

Decisions made in relation to these always considered the subject matter and my ethical responsibility to the participants' wellbeing. It was important that every opportunity to encourage discussion was taken but only if these opportunities were considered in relation to the participants' emotional welfare. This consideration impacted heavily on the following areas:

- The choice of participants
- How I introduced participants to the space and each other
- How I encouraged participants to engage in emotional selfcare
- How I set the space
- What food I served and indeed, how I served it
- What form the prompts took and how I introduced them into the action, ensuring their effectiveness
- How I captured the differences/ similarities between each Death Dinner and how I analysed those in terms of common themes

Atmosphere and Prompting Discussion

The chosen performance and hosting strategy emphasised my role in making my dinner guests as comfortable as possible. This strategy informed all interactions with participants over the course of the event. Upon their arrival, I met participants in the foyer of the studio. This allowed me a moment to put them at ease, to introduce them to each other and to explain what the space looked like before moving them into that space. This interaction appeared to have the desired effect with one participant commenting, 'Being greeted at the door, introduced to the other guests, your relaxed, cheerful manner, Sheila all put me at ease'. Upon entering the space, participants were offered an area to leave their belongings safely, thus encouraging them to approach the table without any distraction.

The structure of the piece was as follows; introductions; welcome toast; first monologue; first course; second monologue; second course; third monologue; dessert; final toast, cool down exercise. Once at the table, I engaged the participants in small talk while pouring drinks. This enhanced the relaxed atmosphere, creating a space that allowed me to outline the intentions behind the event and to reiterate the importance of emotional self-care. In this moment, I was also able to explain that each participant's interaction was completely voluntary throughout the meal and should be dictated by his or her comfort level. Most importantly, this moment also allowed me the opportunity to thank guests for participating in the event. Introducing the event in this way seemed to work well with one participant stating, 'The space was well set up and you provided reassuring introductions and information at the beginning - I think helped us to relax a little and prompted an openness from the outset'.

The chosen structure was vital as it impacted on each participant's ability to engage and without the participants' engagement, the research could not happen. In this regard the structure appeared successful with one participant noting, 'The structure worked very well, the framing text gave pause and stimulated further discussion for the next course/question'.

Saying that, moments of silence were also interesting in and of themselves, providing material for later analysis. These moments allowed me to explore what it was about the conversation at that particular point that created either the silence of an individual or the silence of the group. It also allowed me to consider different types of silence (i.e. emotional, awkward, contemplative) (see Outcomes: What was Learned section).

Careful consideration of the type of prompts used to engage the participants (both in the dinner conversation and in the pre and post dinner questionnaires) was needed. When developing the piece, I first thought about using audio cues or projecting the questions onto a large screen near front of the table. I later considered having envelopes containing the questions on each of the place settings and letting participants come upon them themselves. As I developed the autobiographical material however, I realised both strategies were contrived and, as such, inappropriate. If I was to deliver the monologues and host the event as myself and if, by being there, participants were being asked to potentially expose personal thoughts and feelings, then the questions asked needed to be done so directly, as they would in a normal conversation. However, by also placing them on the menu, I was able to provide some preparation for each participant particularly in relation to the planned trajectory for the conversation.

Originally, I planned to refer to the questions as each monologue began but realised after the first dinner that by doing so, I created a situation where participants could potentially become pre-occupied with question and thereby miss the monologues and the themes therein. For the second and third dinner, I instead ask the questions at the end of each monologue, allowing the conversation to develop naturally as a result.

After the first dinner, I became aware that after each monologue, participants needed several moments for quiet contemplation without my interjection. This was difficult at first as I feared these silences might go on forever. However, I quickly realised creating space for the material to be digested allowed a richer conversation to develop (see Outcomes: What was Learned section). In the second dinner and third dinner, I left the mic stand and returned to the table in silence after each monologue. Although probably less than twenty seconds at their longest, these silences were rich with energy and possibility and were always broken by a response from one of the participants.

Commensal Practice

Almost all participants commented positively on the commensal element of the event. Their feedback included statements such as 'Eating, drinking wine and talking about our demise at the same time was a comfort and a funny little contradiction', 'The experience for me was very heartening. I 'enjoyed' talking and listening', 'The conversations around eating worked better than I had expected – I thought people would feel too awkward to eat in a performance context, particularly given the subject' and 'Eating and chatting with wine felt like an excellent formula!'.

Commensality is defined as the practice of eating together. Kerner et al note, its root comes from the word mensa which literally means eating at the same table (2015, 1). They argue commensality is a fundamental social activity that both creates and cements relationships. Fischler agrees and suggests in all cultures eating is a social activity and that commensality as an act, is itself an articulation of human society in (2011, 529). Commensal acts are an essential part of any society, essential to the integration of that society. However, commensality does rely on social and cultural homogeneity. Indeed, as Simmell argues, 'persons who in no way share any special interest can get together over a common meal [...] There lies the immeasurable social significance of the meal' (1997, 130)

In contemporary performance practice, commensality or the act of coming together to commune over food has long since been used, particularly in socially engaged practice that aims to involve an audience dialectically. Bringing people together to consider specific themes around death and dying in the familiar and secure setting of a shared meal can be seen in such recent works as Burtin's *The Midnight Soup* and Reckless Sleepers' *The Last Supper* (see the performance review above). In the *Death, Dinner and Performance* project the required communality and level of participation was high. In some ways, the commensality worked to negate this, as can be read from one participant who commented, 'Having something else to do (i.e. eating) is always a really great way of conversation flowing in a more organic way than I think it does when the focus is entirely on having to make that conversation' (see images document in portfolio, Image 1: The Dinner Table below).

Just as if it were a normal dinner party, participants shared equal status (perhaps not with the host but certainly with each other). Their opinions on the subject were not only valid, they were vital. Without their input the discussion could not and would not have occurred. The project required much of the participants both in terms of the subject matter and levels of participation.

Use of autobiographical material

Over the course of the dinner, several sections of autobiographical performance were introduced in between moments dedicated to conversation (see images document in portfolio, Images Monologue 1, 2 and 3). These impacted in a positive way provided a device to frame the evening, providing prompts for contemplation and discussion. As one participant noted the interventions 'were very effective in giving the event a structure and in bringing one into the evening'. The autobiographical material'.

Presented this way, the autobiographical material provided a chronological and thematic framework that encouraged participants to consider their individual relationship to death and how that has changed/ developed over the course of their lives. The monologues also allowed larger themes to be explored such as community and society in relation to death and dying; ritual and death and dying; types of deaths in relation to impact and the taboo that surrounds violent or childhood deaths. These themes recurred in each of the dinners.

Between 2005 and 2011, I worked as a general nurse in palliative care, first in a hospice setting and later, delivering respite and/or end of life care to individuals dying at home. This experience allowed me to witness the benefits of palliative care which contradicted personal and professional experience of death and dying in acute settings. To develop the monologues for the dinners, this experience was mined and used in such a way as to frame an open question to prompt the discussions that ensued.

It might be useful to direct us to the script that you include, particularly to discuss any particular strategies you used in the writing of the monologues and why

The monologues (see script included in portfolio) explore my relationship to death and dying at different moments of my life. The first reflected on my first experience of death and of seeing a dead body as a child. Here, I relayed my realisation of the impact of death as witnessed in my mother's response to her sister's sudden death. I explored how my early life experience informed my relationship to death and dying throughout the rest of my life. Positioned at the beginning of the meal, after introductions and the opening toast, the monologue encouraged a conversation around first experiences of death to unfold naturally between participants and for those experiences to be examined in relation to participant's individual attitudes to death that developed out of those experiences.

The second monologue is based on my experience as a nurse caring for person dying at home when a specific moment pulled my own mortality sharply into focus. My anxiety about my own death, what I will leave behind, my fears around dying alone, these themes were all embedded within the performance. Framed in such a way, the monologue encouraged participants to consider their own fears around death and dying in the conversation that followed. Out of these personal reflections, conversations developed more broadly about social responses to death and dying and the importance of ritual and community.

The third monologue explored the notion of a 'good death'. Outlining what I consider to be a good death for me, the final moment of performance positioned towards the end of the meal encouraged participants to consider what a good death might be for them. This monologue encouraged a conversation to develop around the practical elements of death and dying and what participants might need to consider and perhaps put in place for their 'good death' to happen in the future.

Sharing my own experiences through the monologues allowed me to structure the conversation in such a way as to encourage engagement and interactions. The outcome was a positive one with several participant commenting favourably, for example, 'the performances were thought provoking and sparked conversation' and 'the moments of performance provided worked very well structurally to move conversation into different areas, while also offering a hook for us to attach our responses to, to link back to and to reference in the course of the conversation'.

Creating monologues from autobiographical material also allowed me to hold the participants in a safe place. Exposing my fears meant participants could remain in the conversation without having to expose their own. Using my experiences, I could prompt a discussion and hold that discussion and the participants safely, returning to those experiences if at any point the conversation became too upsetting for any one individual. For example, one participant found these moments 'allowed some time for quiet reflection [...] which was welcome, given the weight of the subject matter'. If participants did not wish to be exposed themselves emotionally, they could instead refer to my experiences in the conversation. Positioning the material in this way seemed to elicit the desired response with one participant stating, 'I thought the level of 'hosting' was spot on. It was important to feel held, and that someone was leading the conversation, even if you didn't actually need to add a lot. It allowed us to relax and not feel responsible for anything other than thinking, reflecting and sharing our experiences'

Setting

The decision to hold the events in the theatre quickly lead to my acknowledging and embracing its theatricality capabilities. It also informed all creative and logistical dramaturgical decisions from then on. How the materials on stage were set (see script in portfolio), how the lighting changed between moments of performance and moments of conversation and how the music was used to set the scene, these and many more decisions were all informed by the fact that, during the events, the space would incorporate several things at once. Simultaneously, it would act as a performance space and one for communal interaction, a dining space and one for quiet contemplation, a theatrical

space renowned for pretence yet in this instance, one used or honest and intimate communal expression (see images document in portfolio, Image 5: Setting 1 below).

For some the impact of the space was further complicated by its situation within a work environment (i.e. the University of Salford) and for all, how they entered and left the space was important. Some consideration had to be given to the movement from the outside world (the noisy, busy atrium of the New Adelphi building) to the reimagined theatrical space and back again. This consideration was likened to the notion of 'being held' mentioned in several of the post dinner questionnaires by participants. Through the practice, I realised my role in these moments was to guide the transition, holding the participants in a safe space and offering the reassurance needed to allow the gradual movement from one space to the other and back again.

Practically, this meant keeping the participants all together outside the theatre, providing introductions and a welcome there and only moving inside once everyone was assembled. Once inside the studio, it meant allowing a moment for the participants' eyesight to adjust, offering them a space to leave their jackets and bags and leading them together to the table and their seat. Once here, lengthier introductions (both to each other and the project itself) occurred. Wine was offered and poured and a toast 'to good company and good conversation' given. Also, at this point (as mentioned above) the importance of self-care was also reiterated.

My aim for the project was always to assess the capacity of performance practice and autobiographical performance material to act as a prompt for discussions around death and dying. Once I had decided on the black box studio, I then needed to consider how that space might be configured to remove any notion of a passive spectatorship. The 'dining' space needed to be both inclusive and immersive. After some consideration, I decided upon a large central spot which participants moved into, metaphorically shedding belongings (coats, bags etc) as they went. This central spot would be large enough to encompass a dining table with seven chairs and warm enough to feel relaxed and hospitable. Yellow tones removed the harsh glare of a spot creating a sense of comfort. Using the lighting in this way appeared to create a comfortable atmosphere with one participant commenting, 'The experience of the death dinner was very welcoming, and I felt comfortable and at ease in the space and was happy to share my thoughts about death. The dinner table was very inviting and aesthetically very pleasing'. It also appeared to help participants focus more directly on the conversation at hand with one participant commenting it allowed her to 'forget about the outside world for a time'.

In the darkness around the lit central spot was a microphone and stand. To the right, a table with all the food ready to be served. Neither of these areas were lit as the participants came into the studio. The spot on the microphone came up just after the first toast marking the beginning of the first monologue. The spot on the food came up at the end of that monologue accompanied by the proclamation 'and as if by magic'. As theatrical moments, the end of each monologue punctuated with a question marked encouraged a change in atmosphere for the participants from passive to active engagement.

Supporting these changes, lighting states were chosen to elicit the participants' focus. Had everything been lit as the dinner guests entered the space or had a general wash been used, participants may have struggled to remain in the moment and not pre-empt the impending action. Upon entering the space, participants were aware only of the formally set dinner table and the menu of questions. Other elements of the event became visible when necessary.

Several participants responded to the positive impact of these choices with the following comments:

The setting worked well, with just the table where we were sat lit and darkness surrounding us. This helped us forget about the presence of the cameras/technicians and created quite an atmospheric space that was fitting for the topic.

I thought the setting was appropriate and productive and brought forth very careful attention to the art of conversation, or the difficulty of articulating ideas around religion, belief, morality and death.

I thought that the event was great. It was really important that it seemed so well planned and that there was a lot of attention to detail. That gave me a sense of trust and allowed me to relax into the event.

I had been concerned that if the event was too formal, it might be difficult for participants to relax. In actuality the formality of the dinner has the opposite effect with one participant commenting he 'found the group very respectful, and that he thought the "dinner-party" formality helped with that'. Similarly, another guest stated, 'I think the formality of the dinner table [...] provided a sense of

ritual and occasion, which suited the topic of death and helped to frame it as an important occasion in ones' life and an important conversation to have with people

Ending the Dinners

At the end of the event, a lighting change illuminated the path way out of the theatre for the participants. This subtle change along with my thanks and a final toast underlined the events conclusion, providing the non-theatrical equivalent of a curtain call and the illumination of house lights. At first, I had thought these choices would be sufficient markers for the end of the event. However, after the first dinner I realised more was needed to frame its ending and the transition from communal dining space inside the studio to world outside. To do this, I took inspiration from the artist Cindy Chang's, adopting the Before I Die project as a cool down exercise for the subsequent two dinners.

Originally envisioned for large outside spaces, Chang's project (see practice review) allows individuals to write on a public wall completing the statement 'Before I Die I Want To'. For the second and third Death Dinners, I wrote 'Before I Die I Will...' on a piece of card and asked the participants to think for a moment about the question before leaving the space. They were given the option to fill in the card there and then or to take it away with them to be filled in later (or indeed, not at all). Either way, each participant's response to the question was private and for personal contemplation. The statement pointed to the ongoing, positive potential of conversations around death and dying. In essence, they reiterated the sentiment that conversations of this nature are not purely about death. They also very much about the choices make while still alive. The 'Before I Die I Will...' question provided a final framing device, one that reiterated the life affirming nature of the conversations experienced communally during the event.

Outcomes: New Insights

The outcomes or what was learned through the Practice as Research came from three sources, the pre- and post-dinner questionnaire, the video material of each event and the my embodied experience of hosting the events and reflecting on my dramaturgical decisions and subsequent reflections.

The pre and post dinner questionnaires developed out of my understanding of the critical context that surrounds death and dying and my experience working in palliative care. They adhered to ethical requirements and were reviewed by the ethical approval panel.

While the pre-dinner questionnaires showed an almost universal reluctance to discuss death with others, the post-dinner questionnaires highlighted participants new found comfort with and interest in the topic. Several individuals who confessed to thinking about death regularly but to not discussing their thoughts openly with loved ones in the pre-dinner questionnaires shared a wish to do so following the experience of the event. Similarly, several participants who stated they had not previously considered putting in place plans regarding their death commented this was now something they would/had discuss with loved ones in the future. One participant went so far as to state the dinner had spurred her on to complete a will.

Analysis of Pre-Dinner Questionnaires

When asked to finish the sentence 'Death is...' a third of the participants referred to death as something 'inescapable'. An understanding of the inevitability of death led these participants to describe death in the following ways, 'certain', 'everyone's tragedy', 'final', 'a natural progression that happens to us all at different times' and 'something we all have in common'.

A fear of death and its associated loss was explored with several participants alluding to death as something 'scary', 'final', 'inevitable but scary and sometimes very sad', 'overwhelming, 'frightening' and 'difficult to face personally'. This led participants to comment on the difficulties attached to talking about death as it is 'sad to think about people missing/mourning someone who has died'. Some participants spoke in a matter of fact manner describing death as 'the end of life' and 'when life ceases to exist' while others spoke of its otherworldly qualities suggesting death is 'final and mysterious' and provides 'the ultimate challenge, 'the ultimate mystery'

In their comments, participants noted that deaths can differ and that some are more peaceful than others. Several openly acknowledged a wish for a peaceful death with one participant in particular commenting death can be a 'potentially a long, drawn-out, painful process' or 'potentially easy, drifting into death in sleep, with effective pain-management'.

Out of the fifteen participants, nine stated thought about death 'occasionally', five stated that they think about death 'often' (with two prefacing this is because they work in a professionally related area) and only one confessed to thinking about death 'rarely'. Interestingly, the next question, 'I discuss death with others' garnered very different responses with only four participants stating they did so 'often'. Many more stated this happened 'rarely' (seven); while three suggested 'occasionally' and one 'never'.

The reasons for differences between thinking and talking about death were complex. One participant who stated she talked about death occasionally suggested she actually talks 'around' death. She noted in these conversations,

We know that's what we're talking about, but we rarely say, "what's going to happen when X dies"? Instead we might say something like, "let's make the most of X... that kind of thing. But it really does depend. If emotions are high I change the subject of death, I'd literally say, "I can't talk about it, I don't want to talk about it or think about it anymore"... But I still come back to it, death I mean. It's like a bad penny!.

From responses, it appears one's experience of death or lack thereof directly correlated to the feelings associated with it, particularly anxiety. Several participants who had not experienced death commented on being acutely aware of their lack of preparation for it. One participant for example explained, 'At the age of 43, I have still not lost anyone who is very close to me. I know that moment will come and have no idea how I will cope'. Those participants interested in discussing death noted that was often due to a professional interest. These individuals noted, 'I teach, research around death, dying and grieving practices', 'My work brings me into contact with many people who work in situations where death is always present, and with people who are personally affected', 'I have developed a number of professional projects which seek to encourage participants to engage in conversations about death. Curiosity was also a factor with one participant noting, 'I'm very curious and interested in death as part of life, as an influence on my life'.

Religion and/ or faith was almost totally absent from participants' responses with only one participant noting she thinks about death, 'because I'm a Buddhist and we think about death and impermanence a lot!'. Other factors such as age or the age of loved ones seemed more relevant to peoples' consciousness of death and dying. For example, 'I'm 54 and people around me are dying' and 'because I wonder how the next 10 - 15 years will be, as my parents are 80 now'.

The fear of ageing and its association with death was noted as an element that both enhanced anxiety around death and the reluctance to discuss it openly as seen in the following response, 'As I get older I get closer to death. I worry about dying more. I am aware that the time I have left is getting much smaller than the time I have lived'. So too was the view that death is a depressing subject and as such, not something to dwell on, for example, 'it is not something I want to talk about often as I don't want to dwell on it or depress others'. In this regard participants noted they rarely talked about death as they wished to 'live in the moment' and 'immerse' themselves 'in life and the experience of the present'. One participant joyously commented they didn't discuss death because 'it is inevitable and there is little to do about it from the perspective of the dead'. The participant described death as 'a dull subject prone to lamentation about how we have got the way we mark death wrong'.

Fear was noted as the main reason for not discussing death and dying with others ('too scared', 'too hard to think about never mind discuss' and 'often untimely') yet all participants confessed to thinking about death privately. These private meditations were often seen as a means to mentally prepare for death (either of one's self or of others). As one participant explained her thoughts about death,

My thoughts about death mostly occur in private moments of reflection when the mind wanders. Often it occurs in the form of imagining a scenario in which someone close to me dies (child, husband mostly), or I die, and my thoughts are about the impact of my death on my family. This feels emotionally precautionary in that the reflections encourage me to think about strategies for preventing death, to remind me not to be complacent with everyday life, to take care, to laugh more, and pay heed to moments of danger or where death might threaten. These rehearsals about death or the aftermath of death feel quite private.

The emotions associated with death recurred in all the participants' responses. Universally, these emotions differed depending on whether participants were discussing their own or a loved one's death. As one participant noted, 'death in the abstract can be intriguing but death close to home is terrifying'. Another commented that he felt either 'fearful or fascinated' depending on whose death he was thinking about, 'It depends whose. About my own?: Philosophical as long as it doesn't come along too soon'. Words like 'sad', 'frightened', 'terrifying' and 'depressing' were prevalent in the responses but so too was the sense that the death of a loved one was almost too difficult to think about. Despite being 'enthusiastic about the subject' one participant commented she 'sometimes worry about the death of a loved one' while another participant noted that he thought very little about his own death but,

Much more about losing people close to me. When I think about the death of others that I love, the feeling shifts qualitatively, depending on how distant the death is. Deaths that are closer in time evoke feelings of great loss, emptiness, anger, frustration and a wish that things could have been different. More distant deaths, by their nature, create feelings that are more muted, melancholic and that have settled somewhat'.

This philosophical view of death and time was explored further by another participant who stated,

Thinking about death more generally does not make me feel very much – death is a condition of life and something that defines life and I think I understand in more general times that it is therefore a natural part of a greater and continuing life cycle. In recent times, I have been thinking a little more widely, beyond the human, about the life of the planet and other growing things that also have a life. I wonder about the value we place on their lives in relation to our own.

The mystery that surrounds death was also explored with one participant commenting 'Images of death are circulated to confirm our reality and yet it is impossible to witness the instant of death. In that sense it is sublime: overwhelming, frightening and transcendent'. But overall, the sadness at the loss of a loved one and fear of the potential loss of children or parents was recurring. Also present was the fear that death might bring with it the reality of life continuing on without us. As one participant noted she feared the idea of unbearable pain in my own death but also the idea that she might die soon. Another stated she felt 'sad at the thought of missing loved ones' but also the idea

that she 'may die early and unfulfilled'. Strikingly, one participant touched on his own fear associated with death as one linked to the notion of non-existence stating,

I experience 2 ways of thinking about death, I think. One 'rational' one, which is unpleasant, but which I feel fairly cold-headed about – I feel about death as another fact of life beyond my control. When thinking about my one death, however, I feel profoundly anxious, and feel cold and somewhat empty. The idea of 'lack of being' is something I picture in a very particular way... and it turns my stomach inside out!

There was also some positivity around the subject however, with the understanding that death can be peaceful explored by several participants. Twelve, for example, stated they had considered what their own death would be like and several discussed what a good death would look like for them:

- 'At home ideally with loved ones. I want a calm atmosphere and more than anything, I want to be as okay as I can be with it for my loved ones. I do want it to be pain free.'
- 'Painless, with those I love, surrounded by beautiful nature.'
- 'In my sleep, with no awareness in it.'
- 'When I'm very old. At home in my own bed with loved ones nearby and no long illness.'
- 'Quick and painless of course! 'Woops, was that it? OK. Gone now.'
- 'Pain free, with peace of mind about the happiness and safety of the people I would be leaving behind.'
- 'Surrounded by loved ones who are still alive, warm in a bed with lots of books and drifting off to my final sleep.'
- 'A peaceful and tired one surrounded by people I love.'
- 'In late life with plenty of warning to allow time for everyone to be prepared and my loved ones near me.'
- 'Pain-free, a few months after becoming terminally ill, in my sleep, surrounded by my close family and friends.'

Many mentioned the wish to be pain free while almost all suggested a 'good' death would be one that happened in the presence of loved ones. Some participants felt the notion of a good death was null and void ('There is no value attributable to death. Death is zero-sum') whilst others suggested the impact of the death dictated whether it was good or bad. In this instance, one participant described a good death as one that,

Happened quickly and that I wasn't aware of in advance. I don't feel currently that I would necessarily want the time to prepare, though I know others do. The only thing that I think makes this not a 'good death' is the effect that this type of shock has on others, though equally a more lingering death is certainly not easy either.

Similarly, acceptance of death was discussed as having an impact on the experience of that death with one participant recalling,

I've seen a good death: aged in the late 70's 80's. It wasn't the reason for the death that was good, that was lung cancer, but the way this person embraced death inspired me. It was almost euphoric. It was my friend's mum; she was at home and she was able to ask for the priest and her family and they were with her. It was good because she accepted it and that allowed her loved ones to accept it too. I've seen a bad death, without too many details, this was long, painful, in a hospital on a shared ward and death was fought to the bitter end, until it could be fought no more. I'd prefer the first one, if that's not to be then let it be dramatic, extravagant, meaningful! and everlasting!

Responses to the question 'Before I die I would like...' became the most poignant with the following themes emerging, a wish to feel one had lived as full a life as possible, a wish to see children and grandchildren grow up healthy and happy, a wish to have made peace with the idea of dying and a wish to resolve any issues with family members and loved ones.

Before I die I would like:

- 'To live.'
- 'To feel truly alive.'
- 'To see my children settled in life and occupation.'
- 'To see my son grow up happy and healthy, have fun and give love to those around me, do something meaningful and find some stillness and peace.'
- 'To see my son grow up. To have a grandchild.'
- 'To have children. To have made a positive mark on others.'
- 'To have another child, and to see my children grow up'.

The notion of a full life and making the best of one's life could be seen throughout all the responses with statements such as:

- 'To live to 100.'
- 'To travel the world.'
- 'To see a cure for cancer and Alzheimer's.'
- 'To see the first intelligent & empathetic machine/robot.'
- 'To live a little bit longer.'
- 'To travel the world and make lots of different types of art and music.'
- 'To have a full life.'
- 'To live! Settle any unspoken conversations; answer any questions from my loved ones. Tell and be told that I love and am loved.'

Probably the one that aligned most with my own thoughts on the subject related to concern about legacy and what one would leaving behind. One participant stated before she dies she would like 'To make peace with the idea'. She confessed to having the most extreme form of FOMO (fear of missing out) and imagined coming back as a ghost just to check she wasn't missing out on anything. Interestingly she also expressed her discomfort with the subject of death stating, 'I'm doing this to push myself – it'll be hard I imagine'.

Analysis: Post Dinner Questionnaires

All participants commented that the experience of the death dinner was a positive one as can be seen in the following statements:

- 'I really enjoyed the experience.'
- 'I absolutely loved the death dinner!'
- 'Really enjoyed the death dinner experience.'
- 'I thought the Death Dinner was a brilliant experience.'
- 'The experience was very rich, I think. Overall, despite thinking that I wouldn't (or wouldn't be able) to engage with discussions on the topic of death, I felt that the event and experience really opened up a space where I could contribute, share and learn from others' experiences too. Thank you.'

While those who work in death related areas did not claim to have discussed death more as a result of the experience, other participants, not regularly exposed to the subject provided clear anecdotal

evidence of engaging with it more as a result of attending one of the dinners. They articulated the reasons for this better than I can in the following statements:

- ‘The death dinner discussions, by their nature, led to some reflection after the event about some specific experiences of death, as well as wider thoughts about how I engage with death on a day to day basis. I discussed these thoughts with my partner, and we reflected on how we, as a couple, discuss and engage with death.’
- ‘The event had a big impact on me and made me want to share it with others. I suppose that it has made me want to talk about death a bit more even though it’s too soon to see if I will really follow through with this.’
- ‘I’ve talked to people about the Death Dinner event I attended, and this has sparked conversation – What is a Death Dinner? What did you learn? Were people open to talk about death in that situation? Some of the questions asked.’
- ‘I don’t tend to discuss death in general but only broach the topic when it is in reference to specific deaths and then, mostly, only with people who also knew and remember that person who has died. The dinner coincided with the anniversary of someone close who had passed and I talked about this with my partner who knew the late person concerned.’
- ‘I spoke to some of my friends about the experience as I’d told them I was attending the death dinner and they were interested in the topic.’
- ‘I wanted to share the experience of the death dinner and to discuss it with my colleagues.’
- ‘I thought about death in a more practical way and thought about the reality of family passing, my loved ones passing, and myself passing. I thought about this in a gentler and more thoughtful way than I would usually due to the thoughtful environment produced by our discussion in the DD.’
- ‘I have been telling people about my experience of being in the death dinner and that has prompted conversations with other people about death in general.’
- ‘The conversations generated at the dinner were really thought provoking and got me thinking a lot about death and preparing for it. I felt compelled to share these thoughts with my partner after the dinner and we have continued having these discussions.’

Several participants expressed a wish to take specific actions to ensure their wishes regarding their own death and dying were known by loved ones. These included making a will (traditional and living)

being proactive and talking directly to loved ones about their wishes and revising/ amending plans as needed. Those who did not express such a wish noted a variety of reasons including:

- ‘Logically, I feel that my death is so contingent on so many other circumstances that it is fruitless to plan for it, at least until there is more certainty about it.’
- ‘I still feel quite resistant to that reflection, for some reason. I think it feels like something that I am detached from and that given its uncertain nature and timing, that I feel is fruitless to contemplate and plan for.’
- ‘I think it’s too soon after the event. But maybe I’m just putting it off again!’
- ‘Thinking around my own death varies; I either don’t think about it or I worry about my partner and son. I sometimes worry that if I died before my parents that would have a huge impact on my siblings... so it’s too big to deal with in many ways. Tiptoeing around it feels ok.’
- ‘I had the opportunity to discuss this with my mum last week and didn’t raise the topic (so I’m clearly still reluctant to discuss it in certain situations).’
- ‘This is an interesting question. I suppose being ‘young’ I don’t think much about my own death, let alone plan for it. I would speak to my partner about this if I were in a serious relationship and my family do know that I want to be an organ donor and I want to be cremated but beyond this, I haven’t thought about or discussed it much.’
- ‘Usually my conclusion is that it won’t matter to me how my death is managed but the death dinner experience has made me appreciate that it would be less selfish to leave instructions on what I want to happen. My first thought would be to have a humanist ceremony with cremation and to have lively music. Celebratory rather than any other tone.’

Most participants commented positively on the experience of being hosted. Then also remarked on the structure of the event and its positive impact on their ability to engage fully with the subject,

- ‘The dinner made the engagement seem informal and provided a suitable forum for discussion about something so fundamental.’
- ‘I like the idea of coming together with strangers for such an intimate conversation and then disengaging again at the end of the event.’
- ‘I also enjoyed the different personalities and backgrounds present around the table and people’s contributions to the questions asked.’
- ‘I thought the dinner was well structured with my only quibble that it could have been much longer with more space for people to explore their thoughts and develop them.’

Participants also acknowledged the autobiographical material as a helpful prompt stating that its inclusion allowed them to consider what they would want for their own end of life. One participant commented, 'I haven't thought in too much detail yet, but hearing you, Sheila, speak about how you would like your death to be, did really make me sit up and take notice' while another noted,

I suppose it's quite similar to what Sheila described in the performance. I hope to be old and have lived a full life. To have my family and some close friends nearby and to die peacefully without too much pain or long drawn out illness. To have photos and music around me and to remember what a full and beautiful life I've lived.

Other comments on the positive impacts of the monologues and performative moments imbedded within the event include,

- 'I think the bits of the text that describe specific moments or emotions in concrete terms were the most powerful.'
- 'Your performances were so striking. I was mesmerised and blown away by you, by your writing, your honesty. It felt an absolute privilege to listen, to be there, to be trusted. I would love to read your pieces again. I would love for more people to hear you',
- 'I was moved to tears, and you were funny too!'
- 'The 'readings' between courses really helped to remind us of the issues around death and stimulated the discussions. They stimulated the imagination and it reminded me in some ways of a Burns Supper – formal for the poetry and speeches elements; ritualistic like everything that surrounds notions of dying and death; and human in the social contact and comfort afforded by the dining together.'

One area of the post dinner questionnaire asked participants to consider the impact of the event on their attitude to death and dying going forward. In this regard, participants commented on the event and its capacity to encourage discussion around a subject often thought taboo, 'in an enlightened and intimate way'. Other comments on the impact of the event included,

- 'It gave me pause for thought. I felt that the event really opened up dialogue and it was a comfortable and safe space to discuss this.'
- 'I am quite open to talking about death in a more abstract way and I think this is partly a cultural thing, but reflecting on it in relation to myself and my loved ones was difficult and emotional, and the dinner provided a very good space to do this.'

- 'I have thought that I should think about what kind of death I would like but haven't got further than that.'
- 'I was definitely moved to speak and share more and listen to others. I was very touched by the honesty of the woman who spoke about her partner dying suddenly. I felt really honoured to listen to stagers speak so openly, and to be heard by them.'
- 'It was a really affecting event and a very special way to learn more about the life of colleagues beyond the day to day concerns of our roles at work. I found myself talking about things I had long forgotten, or thought were not so significant such as a childhood impression or memory. I realised what presses on the lives and preoccupations for colleagues and friends beyond daily tasks.'
- 'It made me more likely to engage with the subject matter as it enabled a kind of practice for the sort of discussion that I might have to have in future about death choices with nearest and dearest. It also allowed articulation of thoughts and feelings that I had not realised that I harboured until they were allowed the space and time to be aired. I felt I learned a lot about the other participants at the dinner and understood better their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and attitudes and I gained some (slightly surprising) insights into my own thoughts about death and dying.'

Themes that arose over the Death Dinners

Over the course of the dinners several themes emerged and recurred. There was a sense that the experience of death as a child impacts on future thoughts and feelings around death and dying. For example, several participants noted their experience of not being allowed to attend a funeral as a child having a negative impact on their adult feelings around death and dying.

Fear was a recurring theme and one that related to a number of different areas particularly fear of dying having lived an unfulfilled life, i.e. lack of achievement/ leaving things undone/ unsaid and fear of the death of others particularly children. This fear seemed to correlate to a lack of experience around death i.e. the more experience one had of death, the less fear was felt about it.

Types of death (sudden versus drawn out for example) were discussed and considered in relation to the ability to more easily discuss one type of death over another. So too was the relationship to the dead person after death. In one particular conversation, the notion of the dead person being sacred

after death was discussed with one participant coining the phrase 'death draws a line under the truth of a person'.

Choice in relation to how one would like to die was considered, particularly in relation to debilitating illness. Regret, such as that felt for not engaging with a person while they were alive, was also discussed. Palliative care and the notion of the home as a liminal space (i.e. being neither home nor hospice) was also explored along with the liminal position loved ones inhabit while caring for a person on a palliative journey.

Interestingly, one individual stressed having mixed feelings about death, trepidation and excitement, comparing their feeling to those associated with creativity and artistic practice stating 'death feels precipitous and visceral. It is like being on the verge of an imaginary death – that is, doing something creatively, physically, and/or emotionally charged and sublime'.

New Insights: Practice

While the responses of the participants in pre and post questionnaires allowed the research questions to be further interrogated, other knowledge gained through the Practice as Research provided key insights. This knowledge was gained over the three death dinners and at times, contradicted assertions or assumptions made prior to the events. Dramaturgically, the importance of pace, timing and of allowing space for contemplation amongst the participants became evident. Also of relevance was the importance of silence and the different types of silence that occur in relation to different emotional states. While in most participatory performances silence of the participants might be a negative thing, in the death dinners silence was often read positively as a sign that participants were contemplating the themes in order to discuss them further. Once I recognised this and let the silences happen they rarely if ever felt uncomfortable or inappropriate.

Understanding characterisation or the importance of not using characterisation was also an important realisation, one that could only be reached by first developing the character of the waitress, testing out that character, reflecting on the outcome and inevitably rejecting the use of characterisation and deciding instead to be myself.

Proximity and the setting of the monologues at a distance from the conversation was also something that became important through the practice. This and how the participants entered and exited the space all impacted on their engagement with the material and the understanding of the event as

framed by these devices. Reflection on these elements between the events allowed changes to be made and later analysed. For example, I considered the movement of participants from the event back into the real world in the cool down exercise and explored the use of silence following the monologues to encourage quiet contemplation.

While the inclusion of a week between each dinner allowed reflection and subsequent learning to occur between said dinners, other insights arrived later through reflection after the events. These have impacted on the development of the death dinners for future audiences. For example, I would like to incorporate the themes that emerged over the course of the Death, Dinner and Performance events more into future death dinner events. Similarly, I would like to give more attention to the emotional wellbeing of the participants and would like to look again at the cool down exercise. I have considered how I might develop the event for multiple audiences and am in the process of adapting it for a much larger groups of participants in an upcoming symposium on Performance and Death (see appendix two).

Ultimately, I have gained insight into the role of performance to prompt, frame and engage people in difficult discussions around death, dying and grief. While the questionnaires have proved useful in understanding the participants' responses, the knowledge gained from the dinner themselves, from developing the strategy that allowed them to occur, from hosting the events, review of documentation have allowed a cross referencing between theory and practice and the questionnaires themselves to occur, the outcome of which supports the positive responses offered by participants following their experience of the death dinners.

As is seen directly below in the analysis of participants' pre and post dinner responses, the inquiry led practical exploration provided new insights in relation to the area of commensal and performance practice and their can use to enhance communal engagement and conversation on the subjects of death and dying. The practice encouraged an observation of the use of autobiographical performance strategies as stimuli for such conversations. As these areas had not been explored previously, the project thus allowed new knowledge (particularly in relation to practice) to be developed. These insights are considered in relation to further investigation through practice towards the end of the document.

Life Beyond the Death Dinners

Further Research

Among other things, I am interested in developing the project further research to consider the following:

- What is the role of the pre-dinner questionnaire and how can it be adapted for a public audience? A removal of the questionnaire in this instance would allow participants to think about the questions posed 'live' and for the first time in the performance. This would be interesting as it would allow me to consider whether it helps or hinders participants to have a clear understanding of what will be explored in the event beforehand.
- Does my position as host/ performance need to change with a larger group of participants? To answer this, I need to consider my hosting strategy and whether this can be delivered in such a way as to ensure the inclusion of all participants. For the larger group of the symposium for example, I have considered is the idea of co-hosts who 'hold' participants and ensure the prompts work to develop conversation.
- With a small, invited audience, outcomes are measured and insights gleaned using the questionnaires. How would this be managed with a larger, public audience?

I will be able to interrogate some of these questions further and perhaps provide further insights through a further performance of the event at the Performance and Death Symposium in April 2019 (Sick! Festival and the New Adelphi Theatre, University of Salford). I am co-convening this symposium with colleagues from the New Adelphi Theatre and Sick! Festival and at it, will perform an adapted version of the death dinner events for a large audience of forty delegates. At present, I am in the process of developing my performance strategy to allow the questions above to be considered through the event.

Performance and Death Symposium in April 2019 (Sick! Festival and the New Adelphi Theatre, University of Salford)

The Death, Dinners and Performance project has allowed further conversation on the subject death and performance through the development of a co-produced symposium with Sick! festival. The symposium (scheduled for the 25th of April 2019) will bring together national and international theatre artists, film makers and scholars to consider performance that addresses the topic of death and dying.

The symposium will explore the proposition that subject matter often shapes artistic practice and that for interdisciplinary artists and performance-makers, consideration of subject often takes precedence over art form. In performance that engages with death and dying, the way the work is conceived, developed and presented to audiences is all dictated by the subject it addresses. In a way, the engagement with emotionally challenging subject matter has itself become a creative practice with its own approaches to aesthetics, research, participation and presentation. The symposium will allow these approaches to be considered.

Bringing together artists and scholars whose works have explored death, dying and grief this symposium considers responsibility, both of human subjects who may inhabit these performances but also of those who participate in its creation. It also considers that responsibility in relation to the audiences who experience the finished works.

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