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

Sheila McCormick

Death, Dinner and Performance Project: A Study of the Efficacy of Performance to Enhance Conversations Around Death and Dying: 300 Word Statement

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 encouraged 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 2017 monologue '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 that allowed the research questions to be asked and answered
- Similar practice in area and the project's relationship to that practice
- Ethical concerns
- Logistical and dramaturgical considerations
- The mean by which to capture, document and evaluate the outcomes of the project.
- Future plans for the practice

The PaR research asked the following questions:

- Can commensal practice and performance work together to enhance communal engagement and conversation on the subjects of death and dying?
- Can autobiographical performance strategies be adopted and used as stimuli for such conversations?

The material in portfolio (particularly the supplementary chapter) evidences the success of the research in confirming both of the research questions in the affirmative. As the post dinner responses confirm, commensal practice and performance can work together to enhance communal engagement and conversation on the subjects of death and dying and autobiographical performance strategies can be adopted and used successfully as stimuli for such conversations.

Why?

Dying, death and bereavement are subject to a range of misconceptions and ignorance' (Kellehear and O'Connor, 2008).

Palliative care needs to encompass a 'health promoting' element so as to encourage openness about death which in turn encourages people to develop ways to live and support each other with death, dying and bereavement (Patterson and Hazelwood, 2014).

Research Objectives

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.

Considerations

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

Efficacy…

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.

Project Overview and timeline

Date	Research Activities and Outcomes
2006-2011	Primary Experience: • Seven years experience working as a nurse in palliative care, first within a hospice setting and later nurse with the Irish Cancer Society, looking after individuals actively dying at home.
2014-2017	• Monograph published, *Applied Theatre: Creative Ageing* (Bloomsbury, 2017) • Plan to develop a new project in light of findings from book i.e. that there appeared to be little written on death, dying and performance from an applied theatre perspective.
2017	• Sabbatical Application

Project Overview and timeline

Date	Research Activities and Outcomes
Summer 2018	• Contextual/ Academic Research: commensal practice, death and dying, rites and rituals , cultural differences in relation to death and dying • Ethical Approval Application • Devising Period: monologues, performance and dramaturgical strategy • Development of accompanying materials: pre and pose questionnaires, information sheet, menu, prompts

Project Overview and timeline

Date	Research Activities and Outcomes
October 2018	• Day of the Dead Celebrations, University of Salford • Three Death Dinner: one week between each for reflection • Analysis of questioners, anecdotal responses and documentation (photographs and video).
November/ December 2018	• Write up discussion of findings

Project Overview and timeline

Date	Research Activities and Outcomes
January to April 2019	• April 2019, Host Performance and Death Symposium (collaboration between Sick! Festival and New Adelphi Theatre/UoS)
	• Death, Dinners and Performance piece for Performance and Death Symposium
	• Development of documentation for portfolio (video material, see portfolio)

Trailer

https://www.facebook.com/NewAdelphiTheatre/videos/427827524644250/?__tn__=kCH-R&eid=ARAfncKTI_JdVh4WxELm5xXI9b0wtRVA-Jp-sn0aJwEY4VEOHfIGhIWi71I94yDXtsNepaULJE4saOpX&hc_ref=ARR0_EBQxlT3EhaYMfkWe1X6ewedLuaaxaoPk2thMay2OLCx407FZznRhYTnReR4-LU&fref=nf&__xts__[0]=68.ARCThLPT29snYfVDNzSzJBzihdyL05yh-Hp8FZDwJo6rDVn-qQXKfOJweVShCU1QhV8gyVuitfHQN6GM3A8h76P1-3bh_c6iNzBU8IrEKyNpYe6J2STIzg0y973lRFUDsJy3jnVEJPLyc9KxNI4jWHx9aEkNnjSDcqWgDfXfGrAGQF9_iOW1RoleGh3kuzmO__9X67_7sqfd53y9pid3YLCiec-ssIwMmqbBSnEcqrEw_ntcVf6iPC0mI1fJNsK5WJ7dpcjG_QfuV7d8pgIAzEJusWiJKVB2o1NjhPRdun5ZfhCTef3ilfYC3KCXfRDnMbxYKNC0zLCq5TjswGQZWLFQFgNQGA

Outcomes: What was learned?

- Attitudes to death and dying
- Recurring Themes
- Performance Practice
- More to research

Responses

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

Categories

- Engagement
- Performative moments
- Performance as a prompt
- Recurring themes

Engagement

‘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 thought ‘death’ 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.’

Performative moments

‘I think the bits of the text that describe specific moments or emotions in concrete terms were the most powerful.’

‘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 tool.’

‘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.’

Performance as a prompt…

‘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 was definitely moved to speak and share more and listen to others.

‘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’.

Recurring themes for further investigation

- Experience as a child
- Fear
- Dying unfulfilled
- Death of a child
- Relationships and death
- Choice and death
- Palliative care and liminal spaces

New Insights for me as a theatre maker/ researcher

- PaR
- Dramaturgy
- Silence
- Characterisation
- Staging
- Role of performance as a prompt

What’s next?

- Autobiography and Society
- Autobiography as Advocacy
- Autobiography as Activism