**Performance Research Seminar: Sabbatical Feedback**

**Slide 1**

* Ok so I’m going to talk about my recent performance research project entitles: Death, Dinner and Performance: A Study of the Efficacy of Performance to Enhance Conversations Around Death and Dying
* Or Death, Dinner and Performance for short
* Start with a provocation and then I’m going to show a short trailer of the work

**Slide 2**

Ok, so 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 encourages people to develop ways to live and support each other with death, dying and bereavement (2014, 77).

And it’s on these principles that the project was first developed

**Slide 3: Trailer**

**Slice 4**

* Autumn of 2018 in the New Adelphi Studio at the University of Salford.
* The death, dinners and performance project was developed to:
* Interrogate the potential for commensal practice (so eating together) and performance to work together to enhance communal engagement and conversation on death and dying.
* Explore the ability of autobiographical performance strategies to be used as stimuli for such conversations.
* Earlier research on ageing and creative applied theatre practice that culminated in the publication of my 2017 monograph *Applied Theatre: Creative Ageing* and my previous professional experience as a Registered General Nurse working in palliative and end of life care.

**Slide 5: IMAGES DINNER**

Creating a performance strategy and ritualised encounter (a three-course meal) and adapting already existing commensal methodologies the Death Over Dinner (https://deathoverdinner.org/) and the Death Café (https://deathcafe.com/) movements for example, the Death Dinners incorporated three autobiographical monologues based on my lived experience and concerns around death and dying, both personally and professionally.

**Slide 6: IMAGES MONOLOGUES**

Aligning the performance to a traditional three-act structure, each of the three monologues punctuated a course of the meal, allowing a moment of pause and reflection on the themes therein, themes that were then discussed over the next course.

To use the second monologue as an example, this was 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 would leave behind, my fears around dying alone, these themes are all embedded within the monologue. Framed this way, the performance encourages 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.

So… using autobiographical performance practice allowed me to prompt a discussion and hold that discussion and the participants safely, returning to my own experiences if at any point the conversation became too upsetting for any one particular individual.

**Slide 7: Developing a Performance Research Strategy**

When developing a Research Strategy for the Death Dinner Performance, consideration had to be given to theatrical, dramaturgical and indeed, ethical factors. These related to my use of commensal practices and autobiographical performance, atmosphere and how I prompted discussion for example, characterisation or the lack thereof, staging and proxemics, transitions from the outside to the inside space and back again, beginnings and endings and most importantly, the welfare of the participants. In conjunction with questioners 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.

**Slide 8: So… Outcomes: What was Learned?**

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 my embodied experience of hosting the events and reflecting on my dramaturgical and performative decisions.

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.

**Slide 9**

All participants commented that the experience of the death dinner was a positive one

**Slide 10**

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.

**Slide 11**

Most participants commented positively on the experience of being hosted and the theatrical, dramaturgical and commensal elements used. Participants also commented on the positive impacts of the monologues and performative moments imbedded within the event.

**Slide 12**

Overall participants commented favourably on the event and its capacity to encourage discussion around a subject often thought taboo, ‘in an enlightened and intimate way’.

**Slide 13: Themes that arose over the Death Dinners**

Over the course of the dinners several themes emerged and recurred. These included:

* Childhood experience and its impacts on future thoughts and feelings around death and dying.
* Fear

particularly fear of dying having left things undone (i.e. lack of achievement/ leaving things undone/ unsaid

fear of the death of others, particularly children.

Fear and its relationship 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 were discussed (sudden versus drawn out for example) particularly in relation to grief.
* Relationships to people after their death and 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 illnesses.
* 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 not 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’.

**Slide 14: So, outcomes… new insights?**

While the responses of the participants in pre and post questionnaires allowed the research questions to be interrogated, other knowledge gained through the Practice as Research provided key insights into the practice itself in relation to the following areas:

* Pace, timing and of allowing space for contemplation and discussion
* Silence and an understanding of the different types of silence that occur in relation to different emotional states.
* Persona, characterisation and the performance of ‘self’
* The role of performance to prompt, frame and engage people in difficult discussions around death, dying and grief.

Slide 15: What next

Well, the project isn’t over and there is definitely more to learn.

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. I would also like to develop the event for a variety of audiences, including larger groups.

So… I hope you don’t mind being my Guinea pigs later on.

Thank you