

Creating a New Old

**A conference by Age & Opportunity as part of the Bealtaine Festival
Reflections by Mary Grehan**

Royal Hospital Kilmainham

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We all need a good conference from time to time. It's like a pit stop for new ideas and approaches, to help us reflect on what we could do better, smarter, more wisely.

Creating a New Old was one such conference, a gathering of top international experts from the UK, the US, Australia, Europe and Ireland, 'who have dedicated their lives to developing a robust and invaluable knowledge base on how to maintain healthy, happy and active older populations'. The conference was based on the 'positive contribution of the creative arts in maintaining health and wellbeing in later life'. It was set against the reality that by 2035, over 50% of the world population will be over 50 years of age and that the aging agenda, or 'longevity crisis' as described by Susan Perlstein, is not simply a professional one, it is also a personal one.

Liz Lerman, choreographer, performer, writer, educator and founder of Dance Exchange, set the ball rolling by reassuring us that she may be older but she is not retired. 'Why do we assume that when an older person changes direction, that they are retiring?' she asked. Why indeed?

Listening to Liz Lerman was like settling into a book by an author you trust and love. She has a credibility that comes from years of practice and reflection. Starting off as a freelancer, in the early years, her working experience was fragmented but in time she realised that she was not the fragmented one. She was whole. It is the world that is fragmented. It is a perspective that surely resonates with any health service user travelling between primary, acute and community healthcare services and any arts and health practitioner trying to navigate these territories.

Lerman encouraged us to change our viewpoint from vertical distinctions between ideologies and practices (e.g. arts therapy versus arts and health) whereby one ideology or practice is put down in favour of another, towards horizontal distinctions where equality exists.

Susan Langford MBE founder of Magic Me, one of the UK's leading providers of intergenerational arts projects and activities, believes that intergenerational approaches creates an energy that 'gets people out of their rut'. She profiled the five principles of



President Higgins addresses attendees at "Creating A New Old". Photo credit – Photocall Ireland

Magic Me's work – a sense of purpose, place, adventure, occasion and achievement and explored the process of matching artforms to context.

Like many of the speakers, Susan Perlstein, founder and director of Special Projects for the National Centre for Creative Aging in Washington, DC, has travelled a personal and professional journey from arts practitioner through to research and policy development. Susan was involved in the first landmark study on Creativity and Aging by Dr. Gene Cohen which concluded that engagement with the arts can teach new skills, develop a sense of mastery in older people and grow confidence. In other words it provides a gain as opposed to the many losses that older people experience, (loss of friends, loss of accessibility, loss of physical ability etc.) and that the social engagement attached to the arts creates a sense of connection, combating the isolation experienced as a result of this loss.

Arts practice with older people in Ireland was well represented with presentations by Justine Foster, Michael Fortune, Brid O' Sullivan, Deirdre Walsh, Ríonach Ní Néill, Ray Yeates, Phillipa Donnellan and Dominic Campbell revealing a range of approaches from the Hearth project in Mayo whereby artists are making art with older people in their own homes to the nationwide Bealtaine festival. According to choreographer Ríonach Ní Néill 'when you approach a person as an artist, the artist in that person responds.' It is a statement that has the power to dissolve many of the constructed classifications and sub classifications within arts practice (professional, community, amateur etc).

The organisers were keen to get us, the audience, talking. We were arranged around white table clothed round tables as if at a wedding and encouraged at regular intervals to discuss what we had heard by the energetic MC, Maureen Gilbert. A TV camera or a microphone was never too far away and there was a feeling that the organisers wanted to hear what we had to say.

As the conference progressed the notion of 'older people' was challenged again and again in different ways. Janet Morrison, Chief Executive of Independent Age said 'there's no such thing as older people – they are you and me'. And so *Creating a New Old* conference was one of those events that crossed from the professional to the personal, because as we were reminded more than once (as if reminding were needed!) 'we are all aging'.

Janet Morrison spoke of 'a deafening silence' in terms of a policy on arts and older people. Are we surprised? No. As in many fields of the arts, the policy framework follows the practice...or not.

The conference closed with Francois Matarasso asking 'do we want to identify 'art and old age' as a sector?' It was a question that challenged the very *raison d'être* of the gathering and yet paradoxically did not undermine the value of the work described. At the risk of sounding glib, so what if 'older' is lost from the term 'arts and older people'? Ultimately, our work brings the arts into the lives of people. We will continue to age and the work will go on.

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