

## **‘Withness,’ Creative spectating for residents living with advanced dementia in care-homes**

### **Abstract**

This article presents work by Caroline Astell-Burt, puppeteer and teacher and Theresa McNally, nurse and puppeteer, aiming to illustrate the potential for puppetry as a useful resource in dementia care, opening the door to developing it in applied arts research. The authors argue that play with puppet-objects derives from the deeply performative relationship human beings have with objects. The practice for this research demonstrated that skilled puppeteers not only achieved remarkable emotional connection with residents but point to potentially longer-term therapeutic benefits. The puppeteer stirs kinaesthetic memories in the spectator in addition to breaking down emotional barriers between the person and the world around them, signaling a brief magical moment of trust and joy. Such experience of puppetry dissolves the unitary autonomy of the puppet replacing it with the ethical and relational presence of the puppeteer-with-puppet-with-spectator. This 'withness' encourages the playful, creative spark of presence expressed in the spectator.

### **Keywords**

Advanced dementia, theatre-for-one, creative spectator, presence, kinaesthetic, haptic, puppets, puppetry, puppeteer.

## Introduction

According to the report by the Alzheimer's Society (2014) there were approximately 850,000 people in the U.K. living with dementia - due to rise to 1.6 million by 2040. Another report, dated 2018, predicted that with services already under-funded and ill equipped, the potential strain on carers and care facilities is anticipated to reach crisis point by as early as 2021. In order to provide consistent quality of life for people with dementia, there is growing research concerned with the lived experience of dementia in the care home setting. This article aims to contribute to the body of knowledge concerning this condition by describing and analysing an innovative project launched in 2018 by two professional puppeteers who have been using their puppets to stimulate not just memories on the part of people living with dementia, but connections with the world and a sense of identity. This practice brings moments of true expression, selfhood and joy through new levels of communication with residents in the late stages of dementia living in an end of life care facility. This article presents an account of how this partnership came into being, details of the practice itself and examples of its impact and affect through observations and 'stories' about the residents.

### Maudie and the Kiss

Arriving in the ward to set up my puppets the only sound I heard came from an old woman slumped against a radiator and repeatedly scraping along it with her nails. This individual and others were eventually scooped up from other parts of the room and dumped like so many bags of jumble around the table and I performed a story for them which contained a particular little scene.

'A kiss for you,' a puppet sang, 'a kiss for me.' (No visible response from my audience so I decided to try something different). The puppet kissed her tiny pet bird, 'Hold out your hands for the little bird to visit you.' I held my breath then completely unexpectedly, one at a time, hands unraveled from the assortment of cardigans and bent over bodies. The little bird started her journey alighting on each expectant hand and fluttering on to the next.

Then there was Maudie, she opened her eyes for the first time, brightly twinkling she pursed her slack whiskery lips as the bird landed on her hand and with a look of triumph to me, she kissed it. How extraordinarily moving and fulfilling the reaction was for everyone, and how rewarding afterwards when the staff said the residents had never been so animated nor behaved like this as a group and no-one could remember Maudie being left so contented (excerpt from the artist's diary, Hull 1975).

Key to working with people with dementia is understanding memory loss. In an article which described the creation of playful objects to develop the touch senses: 'In the moment: designing for late stage dementia,' Cathy Treadaway et al. (2016), explains how the condition

steals both logical and emotional memory systems, and yet the emotional memory remains intact far longer. Discussing the effects of different kinds of memory impairment caused by dementia, revealing, '[c]onsequently a person may not remember who someone is, but they will remember how they feel about them' (Treadaway et al. 2016: 4). This also applies to objects and situations encountered both in daily living and in the realm of puppetry as performance. For instance, the authors claim, '...objects may retain important emotional significance and stimulate moments of clarity when past memories are revived.

Attachment to personal possessions, clothing, pieces of furniture and places, result from their emotional value and significance to the person living with dementia' (Treadaway et al. 2016: 4). However, although care homes regularly offer objects as a means of maintaining these memory pathways (for example, by providing robotic toys and other less animate objects for residents to pick up and play with), this article argues that puppetry demands the more necessary active presence from the spectator stimulated by the movement of the puppet in its haptic and gestural potential provided by the puppeteer. Together the spectator and puppeteer instinctively collaborate to co-infuse the puppet with life. Implicit and emotional memories are stirred, enabling a creative response.

## **Background**

The work described in this article is facilitated primarily through a collaboration between Caroline Astell-Burt puppeteer, Theresa McNally, as Creative Practice Manager and her employer Vida Healthcare. Vida is a specialist dementia care provider based in Harrogate, North Yorkshire, whose progressive policies prioritize creative art-based interventions for all its residents. McNally met Caroline Astell-Burt in 2017, with the aim of exploring Astell-Burt's pioneering use of puppets in therapeutic contexts (1981, 2002). Their work together began to develop sensitive and reflexive approaches to applications of puppetry for people living with dementia. To this end, Astell-Burt has recently honed her research to focus on the nature of 'puppeteer presence' by devising a complex triangular theoretical framework consisting of the puppeteer-with-puppet-with-spectator.

This convergence of aspects of puppetry dismisses the concept of the 'magically' autonomously living puppet, instead, 'witness' demands an active and imaginative co-creativity on the part of the spectator and puppeteer to animate puppet-objects. Subsequently,

'witness' or 'creative spectating' for a care-home resident was measured by the researchers as their physical alertness over a period of three to five minutes, a level of absorption in the 'world' of the performance and a positive desire to touch the puppets and other props after the show. The puppeteer therefore invites the spectator to respond by adeptly moving the puppet for them. By stimulation of the emotional memory invested in their attraction to the performativity of the puppeteer in the puppet-objects, the spectator's response is a proclamation of their own presence. The activity of creative spectating is the result of invoking in each spectator a kinaesthetic response to puppet movement with moments of enjoyable playfulness and the satisfaction of close proximity with the puppeteer.

Discussion in this article revolves around the accessibility of the performances, the creation of imaginary worlds and location of the puppeteer and the spectator at the center of complex forms of haptic knowledge based on their bodily presences, touch, movement and memory of touching, the attraction of objects - issues rarely articulated outside puppetry. The originality of this research therefore leads on to question the viability of the practice of puppetry in a care-home setting. What form might puppetry take to best encourage, facilitate and integrate mutually enabling communication strategies between the puppeteer and spectator?

### **Presence and 'witness': first principles**

'Witness' is an awakening of the spectator's ability to attend to the puppet and is crucial to the impact of puppetry work in dementia care. Inherent in the presence of the puppeteer is their facilitation of 'presence' in the spectator allowing them to become integral to the performance. McNally and Astell-Burt met at a point where their individual practices were questioning the nature of both puppeteer and spectator presence. Both puppeteers agreed that the collective notion of 'audience' felt ambiguous in relation to their activities and decided to implement the singular, participative and more precise term 'spectator' for this study. The process of creative spectating was to contribute to the enhanced quality of life and wellbeing of someone living with advanced dementia. If such a person is less responsive in a larger audience, as was discovered in early performances, it was first necessary to rethink the spaces being used. This resulted in moving towards 'theatre-for-one' as a form of puppetry which might see the mutuality of spectator and puppeteer in closer proximity as a desired approach to achieving communication between them.

### **‘Witness’ satisfying the need for closeness: Theatre-for-One**

In general, Astell-Burt and McNally have two distinct ways of creating their performances with puppets; McNally creates very beautiful stage sets into which the spectator is drawn gradually becoming involved with the work of the puppeteer. Astell-Burt in contrast brings props and puppets which she and the spectators collaborate in unpacking, presenting, working and adapting from response to response. Astell-Burt provided for the research a scenic vocabulary of adapted clothes rails, tea trollies and wheelie suitcases.

The research began in 2018 with three colleagues: Emma Fisher, Astell-Burt and McNally taking tea trolley puppet shows to elderly people in a Derby care home. The curiosity created by this visit of London School of Puppetry puppeteers caused them to recognise the benefit of using puppets in very short shows without strong narratives to encourage and facilitate mutually enabling communication for those living with advanced dementia. Based on this McNally provided an informal, intimate yet playful atmosphere by converting a small side room into a designated ‘Puppet-Room’ within the care home. She also wheels her shows around Vida’s different care homes to work one-to-one with each resident. However, at the designated Puppet-Room, a carer or family member with whom they share the pleasure of the performance might often accompany each resident. They capitalise on the opportunity for a glimmer of social interaction absorbed in something beautiful in a shared experience of positive and perhaps lasting memories. Astell-Burt, familiar with street performances, will improvise in any space.

These various ‘stage spaces’ lend themselves to the unfixed, ephemeral and transient performance in which imagination and memory enter into physical movement dialogues. Astell-Burt and McNally design their stages to become, ‘facilitator[s] of flows’ rather than containers of fixtures (Grosz 2001: 164). One might understand theatre-for-one ‘gynaecologically’ with the work being expressed in small, enclosed, self-animated spaces through which energy flows giving participants the resources ‘to produce worlds’ (Thrift 2012: 140).

### **Performances as places for ‘withness’: the presence of the puppeteer**

The resources ‘to produce worlds’ rely on enough memory to make personal sense of the objects in performance — this might not be shared sense. There is no need to be over literal, or to impose a story but to be playful with the objects at the speed of recognition available. Astell-Burt’s performance of ‘Baby’ offers such an example. Five pieces from an old doll were tipped out of a transparent bag onto a coffee table in front of four spectators and their carers. The tiny show was about testing the ability of the spectator to form fragments into a whole. Astell-Burt then slipped each piece onto the fingers of one hand, chatting casually to the group as she did so and naming each piece, ‘foot...’ ‘hand...’ etc, until all the pieces were attached to her fingers. She moved her whole hand creating movement — more baby than doll-like. The effect of the audience was affectionate and smiley. Those who could speak would throw out comments such as ‘baby, baby’.



[Figure 1: Caroline Astell-Burt, Baby, c.2018]

‘Creative spectating’ involving in the resident’s engagement with the performance, can be described as a combination of their imagination with memory of how specific life experiences feel. The spectators enjoyed the familiarity of the individual objects: feet, hands and head represented in the puppet. What they saw of the fragments was combined with

information already in the memory. This was demonstrated by one spectator who enquired, “so the baby is a boy?” Another ‘tickled’ the puppet saying, “goo goo goo”. Each spectator going through the creative process of spectating, was mentally and physically evaluating what they were seeing, combining this with what they already knew. In this way, the fragments became a whole image in movement.

Theodor Lipps (1851-1914), exploring kinaesthetic empathy, compares imagined perception of movement in an inanimate object with the kinaesthetic experiential memory of watching an acrobat but this is applicable to our memory of any kind of movement. Similarly, to identify the form of puppetry that best facilitated communication between spectator and puppeteer, this research explored the emotional memory of touch giving meaning to the movement of an inanimate puppet visibly operated by a puppeteer. Lipps' *Einfühlung*, is an imaginary fusion between the observer and the object (Montag, Gallinat and Heinz 2008). This process, called ‘inner mimicry’ describes a spectator’s experience of bodily feeling as they imagine consciousness in an inanimate object such as a puppet. Therefore, they are feeling into the experience of the ‘baby’ moving. What is undoubted is that the performing of puppets represents more than the puppeteer’s or the spectator’s sense of touch and more than what the spectators are seeing with their eyes (Gibson 1979: 63). It may be better aligned with architect Juhani Pallasmaa’s expression of tactility. He argues that our involvement in the world depends on our multi-sensory engagement with the materials of our environment.

Vision reveals what the touch already knows. We could think of the sense of touch as the unconscious of vision. Our eyes stroke distant surfaces, contours and edges, and the unconscious tactile sensation determines the agreeableness or unpleasantness of the experience. (Pallasmaa 2010: 42)

The relationship between touch and vision is illustrated in McNally’s first performances launched at Vida’s 2018 Autumn fair where the community witnessed the start to the project of ‘producing worlds’ in between the raffle, cakes, tea, the hustle and bustle of a second-hand book and gift stalls. McNally offered a pop-up puppet show in what later became the Puppet-Room. She set up an old nursing screen covered with a huge silk parachute and decorated with fairy lights and furnished with four chairs. With the main lights off and some filtered light from the blinds, there was a gently lit and warm atmosphere made cosier by the underfloor heating. A small poster outside the room and a ‘pay as you feel’ jar for the resident’s social fund, invited residents and their visitors in, ‘...and so I was prepared for

anything or nothing' (McNally personal communication 28 October 2018). The spectacle of a house in a street, images of birds flying, and a beautiful female figure who was attempting to fly and evocative movement held the audiences. The visual vocabulary of 'Bird Land' is small like 'Maudie and the Kiss,' and 'Baby.'



[Figure 2: Theresa McNally, Puppet and Beautiful Set, 2018]

In order to facilitate communication, McNally strategically makes much of her greeting of each spectator. She knows their names and repeats them as a welcome to put each person at their ease. The first elderly spectator arrived, accompanied by her niece, and was instantly intrigued at the first sight of Bird Girl, "Who makes her clothes?" "Isn't she lovely!" "Where is she from?" "Do you need me to knit for her?" McNally skillfully integrated these interruptions in her performance, continuing but not rejecting the spectator's comments. Finally, she manipulated the puppet to fly down and land on the woman's knee, and the woman hugged the puppet and told her she was beautiful. By now she had stopped asking questions and was completely absorbed with the puppet. She changed from verbal interruption to giving herself over tenderly to the puppet, adding her own creative response, touching, holding, sharing from her memories of beauty and affection.

The next person to enter the space was an old man. He did not speak nor readily acknowledge people around him, he was in a wheelchair pushed by a male carer. At first, the resident could not focus on the puppet stage and was looking towards the door as if agitating to leave. Yet, once the music began, his concentration and attention level rose, and he began to observe and be held by the scene unfolding in front of him. McNally closed the performance as she had done with the first spectator. The puppet 'flew' towards the man and he responded by reaching out and very gently held the puppet about the waist. He held her gaze and cried before softly blowing a kiss to her.

McNally mimicked the spectator's gentle touch by making the puppet stroke him back with the feather it carried. Meanwhile, McNally had noticed the tender way in which the carer was encouraging the resident by introducing touch between puppet, puppeteer and spectator via the feather. McNally had brought them all together, with the puppet at the center of the action. McNally concluded by gently taking back the puppet and putting it away before turning to the patient who took her hands and gazed intently at her for some time. McNally performed a further eight times to a total of eighteen people that day, each performance culminating in a different, yet significant response to the puppet. While some caught at it as it flew, others sang or spoke to it. One man bounced it on his knee. Every one of these various spectators recognized the puppet as a specific thing in which they could imagine life.

Although theatre-for-one appeared to best encourage and facilitate communication between puppeteer and spectator there were concerns about the close proximity to the puppets. However, to the contrary, the complex spectator-*with*-puppet-*with*-puppeteer combination was compelling for the spectator. Fears were in fact unfounded as the possibility of touching illustrated by the study had a powerful affect on the residents. Despite any social constraints, such as the relative formality of a performance; sitting/watching, the spectators found ways of satisfying their need for closeness (Bourriaud 1998: 113). As a puppeteer, the unique proximity of theatre-for-one, represents not performing *to* but *with* the spectator; a 'withness' found when 'we are in touch with ourselves and in touch with the rest of beings' (Nancy 2000:13). McNally and Astell-Burt engage closely and affectionately with their spectators. They handle different moods, agitation and confusion compassionately, responding in the moment-by-moment unfolding of the performances. This approach demands the full attention of the puppeteers to being open and receptive to the possibly unpredictable responses of the spectator.

## **Conclusion**

By prioritising the relationship between the puppeteer and the spectator with puppets, the study synchronised residual multi-sensory faculties with the emotional memory to facilitate unexpectedly striking creative responses to puppet action. Such ‘creative spectating’ was the result of basing the study on a theoretical framework which in turn produced a model called ‘withness’ which was the ‘puppeteer-with-the-puppet-with-the-spectator.’ This model replaced the traditional but disempowering ‘autonomous living puppet.’

Living with advanced dementia ultimately limits the residents means of expression, however, based on the ‘withness’ model of the therapeutic application of puppetry, residents of a care-home can be encouraged to participate in the activity of ‘creative spectating’ as active, receptive, emotionally engaged and playful respondents. The research identified five principles that are useful to undergird those intending to use puppetry in this context:

- The small audience in close proximity to the puppets and puppeteer.
- The ability on the part of the puppeteer to engage in a ‘correspondence’ with the spectator through puppets in very short performances.
- The mobile aspects of the performances which might take place at bedsides, social areas, or in a special room at any time.
- The repetition of the experience was also possible as residents were willing to watch again.
- The active nature of ‘creative spectating’ is of benefit when language and communication is challenged through impairment, illness or neurological decline.

This article has explored through observations of practice, the potential of puppetry for enhancing quality of life and wellbeing for care home residents with advanced dementia. The short study established the ideal type of puppetry to best encourage, facilitate and integrate mutually enabling communication strategies between the puppeteer and spectator. Research placing puppetry alongside more commonly used arts for health such as art, music and dance, might begin a more profound and comprehensive level of interaction between academics and artists from all disciplines. More research is required to explore the potential therapeutic benefits of puppetry. Given puppetry is a unique art form, comprising of theatre, art, music

and literature, this complex mechanism, which stimulates profound and comprehensive experiences in persons with dementia, could be explored in depth.

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