**Can We Talk About Death?**

**Autobiography and Connection: A study of the adaptation of socially engaged practice for a public audience**

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**Introduction**

Building on previous research from an earlier 2018/19 Practice as Research project (PaR) (the Death, Dinner and Performance: A Study of the Efficacy of Performance to Enhance Conversations Around Death and Dying (DDP)) The Can We Talk About Death? project (CWTAD?) also PaR, took place in the Winter/ Spring of 2022/23. The practical output, a live performance of the show also entitled Can We Talk About Death? happened in the New Adelphi Studio at the University of Salford on the 25th of May 2023.

While the 2019 project (DDP) developed death dinners (dinners which moments of performance used to prompt discussion) to considered the ability of autobiographical performance and commensal practices to enhance conversations around death and dying, the 2023 project (CWTAB?) looked to build on that experience to consider how the strategies and materials from the DDP project might be adapted for larger audiences. Thus, the CWTAD? project sought to:

* test the adaptation of the DDP project into a public facing performance that used original autobiographical material as well as responses from the participants of the death dinners;
* consider that change on engagement and outcome;
* consider how autobiographical and verbatim material could be adapted to create connection to and discussion of difficult subjects in a public forum;
* consider what dramaturgical strategies need to be used in that adaptation to encourage optimal audience engagement with the subject.

To do so, the Practice as Research methodology was used in the following activities:

* development of script using adapted monologues from the original death dinner and verbatim material from the death dinner participants captured from audio recordings of the dinners themselves;
* development of a performance strategy;
* dramatical development of performance for public facing audience.

**Research Overview**

The following is an exposition of the research from the Can We Talk About Death? project, its development, and practical outcomes. It should be read alongside other material in the portfolio (three-hundred-word statement, research timeline, scripts of the original death dinners and adapted script for Can We Talk About Death, video and photographic documentation).

Along with the DDP project, an earlier research project on performance and ageing that culminated in the publication of my monograph Applied Theatre: Creative Ageing (Bloomsbury, 2017) also found 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 (Lambert South and Elton, 2002; Kellehear and O’Connor, 2008; Patterson and Hazelwood, 2014 and The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015). A practice review (appendix) found limited examples where death is the main subject explored. Similarly, a review of Applied Theatre projects found little work (particularly in terms of didactical performance) in this area. Research on performance in relation to ageing does exist but most of this material explores the experience of ageing alone rather than its relationship to death and dying.

I previously trained as a Registered General Nurse and worked extensively in palliative and end of life care. I have also 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 both projects. These experiences informed the autobiographical creative writing used to develop the monologues and the dramaturgical strategies used in the final Can We Talk About Death? performance.

As stated above this PaR research draws from earlier research and experience including:

2004-2011: Palliative care nursing (hospice and home care)

2011: PhD Documentary Theatre

2017: Monograph *Applied Theatre: Creative Ageing*

2019: PaR project, Death, Dinner and Performance: A Study of the Efficacy of Performance to Enhance Conversations Around Death and Dying

2019: Death and Performance symposium (Sick! and New Adelphi theatre)

The Death, Dinner and Performance project

The 2019 Death, Dinner and Performance projectcreated a performance strategy and ritualised encounter that was used to encourage discussions on death and dying with invited participants/dinner guests. 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, in turn, allowed 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. 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 entail 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 conclusions to be drawn 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.

The outcomes of the project showed intimate autobiographical performance and commensal practices can be successful in encouraging conversation and engagement with the difficult and taboo subject of death and dying. A complete project in and of itself, it provides the basis for this current project, both in terms of the subject matter and indeed, raw material for use in the dramaturgy of the Can We Talk About Death? performance.

Within the DDP 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

The research objectives for that project were to:

* 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.

Can We Talk About Death?

The Can We Talk About Death? project built on the findings of the earlier project to explore the capacity of autobiographical material, along with verbatim material taken from the responses of the Death Dinner participants, to form the basis of a larger public facing performance for a public audience. To that end, the project also drew on my PhD research into documentary theatre and the ethics of developing creative practice using other peoples’ words.

The project allowed different dramaturgical decisions in terms of participation to be explored going from the participant/ facilitator in the first project to audience/ performer in the second. It also allowed the creative practices used in adaptation to be examined and the outcomes (both creative and in terms of reception) to be analysed.

Within the Can We Talk About Death project, the following areas were considered:

* The development of dramaturgical 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 audience members and the participants of the project whose words were used in the development of the Death and Performance piece
* Adaptational and dramaturgical considerations
* Document of the Death and Performance adaptation, development and performance and evaluate the outcomes of the project

These followed the research objectives of the project; that it would

* Interrogate the potential for intimate engagement to be adapted into larger public facing performance and to explore the outcome of that adaptation.
* Explore the ability of autobiographical performance strategies and the discussions of participants to be adopted and used as creative material that is dramaturgically shaped for a public facing audience.

Can We Talk About Death? was a live event that incorporated the verbatim comments of the participants in the death dinners. Thus, the themes from the death dinners and indeed, to a certain extent, the structure of those events was integrated into a public facing solo performance that also included ritualistic dramaturgical devises (the making and unmaking for the hospital bed for example).

While the earlier project had participants, this project has audience members (some of whom are former death dinner participants). Ethical concerns were still present but, in the public facing performance, audience members were not asked to discuss death and dying. Similarly, while the age, gender and experience of each dinner guest was carefully considered in the earlier project, in the CWTAB? project, no attempt was taken to control these variables. Indeed, the audience included a random configuration of audience members with diverse backgrounds/ ethnicities/ ages etc.

In the DDP project, participants 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 the death dinners, participants were asked they were asked to complete a questionnaire that probed their attitude to death and dying and their feelings around discussing 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 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. Following the death dinners, participants were asked to fill in questionnaires was to explore if the experience of the event, the meal and performance as well as the conversation it prompted, had any effect on their thoughts around death and their wish to discuss subject further both personally and more broadly as part of life.

For CWTAD? audience members were asked to complete a similar questionnaire. Participants from the death dinners in attendance at the show were also asked to consider the adaptation of the earlier work and their contributions from the death dinners in the development of the performance thus allowing the differences between the two experiences in terms of engagement to be explored.

The research questions for the CWTAD? project built on the previous research to consider the following:

* The efficacy of contemporary performance strategies to develop practice that encourages audience engagement with the subjects of death and dying
* The forms of theatrical strategies used in the adaptation of the intimate, commensal, performance event into a public facing performance.
* The changes that occurred through this adaptation in terms of engagement and reflection.

**Developing a Practice as Research Strategy**

When developing the DDP project the challenge was to produce a commensal event conducive to conversations of a personal and intimate nature in a traditional theatre space. The challenge for CWTAD? was how to move from a commensal, intimate setting into a traditional performance space, potentially reinstating the fourth wall in the process and to consider the outcome of that move.

In the DDP project, thought had to be given as to how one would encourage/ prompt discussion. In CWTAD? I had to consider what was lost once that literal prompt (me asking a question) guiding the conversation was removed. Through that, a consideration was needed of what metaphorical/ theatrical prompt could be devised to encourage subjective reflection on the topics within the play.

In developing the public performance, I had four questions:

* How should the event be staged/ set?
* How should the monologues be delivered?
* What dramaturgic devices should be used?
* How might the words of the death dinner participants be used?

Also, for consideration, was how the words of the participants from the DDP project would be used in the CWTAD? performance. Consent was asked for and obtained from all participants with the assurance that they can withdraw that at any time. To assist with this, the script was shared with the participants in before the show.

Similarly, throughout the development/ editing process, an effort has been made to use verbatim material from the death dinners that address universal themes rather than individual experiences. This was done to maintain the privacy of the participants and creatively, to draw on universal themes that would speak to the audience of CWTAD?

In the death dinners, the chosen performance and hosting strategy emphasised my role in making my dinner guests as comfortable as possible. In CWTAD? my interaction with the audience happened in the sections positioned centre stage where I spoke directly to the audience about my understanding of death and dying. At other parts of the performance (monologues, action at hospital bed, song etc) to create an atmosphere for contemplation, I deliberately did not interact with the audience.

In CWTAD? commensal practice was completely removed. The monologues remained and were developed and accompanied by recorded extracts from the death dinners. The development CWTAD? saw recurring themes in both elements (autobiographical monologues and recorded audio) being used together with performance practice to move the action of the play thematically from early experiences of death, to current feelings around death, to the consideration of ‘good death’ and how one might consider one’s own death.

In the staging of the death dinners, the decision to hold the events in the theatre quickly lead to my acknowledging and embracing its theatricality capabilities and this understanding was used in the staging of CWTAD? It informed all creative and logistical dramaturgical decisions for the public performance including how the materials on stage were set, how the lighting changed between moments of performance and moments of action, how the recorded and visual elements were used and how the audience was interacted with.

**Outcomes**

The staging became more about the symbolic capacity of the live space. The song at the opening, the use of the hospital bed and other materials, my proximity (both from audience and marked spaces on stage (the bed space, the microphone space, the critical reflective space where I spoke to the audience directly) all meant something different in the context of the piece and its structure. Their use allowed me to explore the culture that surrounds death and my/our relationship to it in our medicalised society.

The use of verbatim material sound and projection, the movement of the work from an intimate, commensal space to one that was more communal and less intimate, the dramaturgical mixed use of autobiographical and verbatim material, and the inclusion of props associated with the medicalisation of death created criticality for me as a performer and an ability to objectively observe their outcome in the performance. For the audience they worked to enhance the theatricality of the piece which was very different to the intended and actual outcomes of the death dinners.

Following the CWTAD? performance, a comparison of the post show questionnaire with those from the DDP project showed different levels of engagement in the themes discussed in both. When asked to discuss their experience of the event, and its impact on their thoughts about death, the responses in CWTAD? were much less contemplative and active than those from the DDP. They remined positive, both about the performance and its ability to encourage contemplation on the themes it presented, but they were not as open and specific in their responses and did not suggest any action going forward which was present in the DDP responses (writing a will, speaking to loved ones, making plans for example).

One reason for this could perhaps be due to the different levels of engagement required as participants of DDP and audience members of CWTAD?. In DDP participants were involved not just in the commensal practice but in the discussions that followed the monologues and accompanied the commensality. In CWTAD? the audience members were more passive, receiving the event individually with no responsibility to contribute or engage collectively in the themes discussed.

This difference was something I experienced too as the facilitator in DDP and performer/ deviser of CWTAD? I felt the difference in engagement and recognised a shift in my own relationship to the material between the two events. There was an objectivity in CWTAD? that was not present in the death dinners and an ability to distance myself emotionally from the experience of the audience members at the performance. While care was still important, it was not my main priority as it had been in the death dinners. In CWTAD?, theatricality and dramaturgy became much more important in my development and performing of the piece.

Going forward, I do wish to explore this difference further and consider if strategies can be developed in the performance of CWTAD? that might further facilitate a deeper connection to the themes presented and a more reflective response from the audience member.

Appendix A

Performance Review

Before developing the script and live performance, I drew on a number of different performances for inspiration.

* *Am I Dead Yet?* (2016) 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 in that it highlighted the dialectical potential of the practice in the moment of performance. Realising this potential, I began to consider strategic ways to enhance in in my own work.

* *The Midnight Soup* (2015) Leo Burtin

Drawing from her diary, here theatre maker Burtin uses commensal practices and elements of participation and inclusion to engage an audience in the autobiographical story of his Grandmother's death through suicide thus opening conversations around choice with his audience/ participants.

* *This Grief Thing* (2017) Fevered Sleep

Having explored ageing in their *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.

* *Future bodies* (2017) Unlimited Theatre Company and Rash Dash Theatre Company

Future bodies collaboration between Unlimited Theatre Company and RashDash explores our future relationship with death and dying. It considers technological advancement and questions whether, in the future, death itself will become obsolete.

* *Wit* (1999) Margaret Edson

Edson’s play Wit 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* (2016) French and Mottershed

 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 outline the decay of the human body after death and the influence of environments on its final transformation.

These four productions listed above explore difficult themes and debates that around death, dying, grief and loss. From terminal illness to the future of death as we know it, these pieces tackle issues pertinent to a contemporary audience. Experiencing them exposed me to themes vital to both the original death dinners and the themes that emerged and were explored through the Death and Performance piece. These include unexplained death and its impact; the future of death as we know it; isolation in grief and alternative secular strategies and rituals to prevent that isolation.

* Before I Die I Want To, Candy Chang

Chang developed the first Before I Die wall in New Orleans following the death of a friend who (she felt) had left many things undone. Now an international phenomenon, over 4,000 walls have been produced in seventy-one countries in thirty-five languages

* The Grief Series, Ellie Harrison

Ellie Harrison’s The Grief Series includes seven artistic projects based on the seven stage Grief Model from psychology. Each project included a collaboration between Harrison and another artist working (performance, photography, installation, and sculpture) to creative an interactive and participatory creative practice through which grief and bereavement can be discussed openly.

* Death and Birth in My Life, Matts Staub

.Drawing on the experiences of a range of people (from artists to nurses to members of the clergy) Matts Staub’s Death and Birth in My Life is a 2019 art instillation developed from interviews with people about their experiences of life and death.

Experiencing the work of these practitioners (particularly as a participant) allowed me to consider engagement and the outcomes of participation, particularly where there is a marked shift from intimate participatory theatre to creative practice that is more passive (i.e., a traditional theatre event).

* *Utter (*David Annen, 2001)
* *He Left Quietly* (Yael Farber, 2002)
* *Less Than a Year* (Helena Enright, 2006)
* *A Play About My Dad* (Michelle Read, 2006)
* *James X (*Gerard Mannix Flynn, 2003)

These verbatim theatre plays that explore death and grief. Revisiting them allowed a thematic consideration to occur. Along with the academic texts on verbatim and documentary theatre they provided tangible examples of practice that could be explored in relation to the ethics of editing other peoples’ words and how those are arranged dramaturgically in creative practice. The key themes that emerged through the performance review in relation to performance death included notions around acceptance and death, fear and death, rituals (and the loss of rituals) and death and the future of death as we know it. These plays allowed a consideration in relation to engagement and participation in practice to occur and an exploration of form in relation to documentary, verbatim theatre and autobiographical theatre practice.