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

Introduction
This paper explores the origins, development and outcomes of my 2019 Practice as Research project entitled *Death, Dinner and Performance: A Study of the Efficacy of Performance to Enhance Conversations Around Death and Dying*. The project brought together commensal practices and autobiographical performance strategies in the New Adelphi Theatre at the University of Salford. It was undertaken to explore the use of both to develop a performance/ participation method to encourage engagement and dialogue around the often difficult and taboo subjects of death and dying.

Video for chat:
https://www.newadelphitheatre.co.uk/the-death-and-performance-symposium-at-the-new-adelphi-theatre/
https://fb.watch/v/1xhJrEqSq/

Slide 2 Origins and Critical Context
The project followed two years of research into performance and ageing that culminated in the publication of my 2017 monograph *Applied Theatre: Creative Ageing*. While researching this area, I was struck by the evidence that suggests open conversation around death and dying positively impacts on the experience of both ageing and death.

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 will inspire people to develop ways to live and support each other with death, dying and bereavement (2014, 77). Research shows that lack of communication about end-of-life preferences is one of the main reasons people do not receive the care they prefer, which, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit is often palliative rather than interventional (date). Thus, as is evidenced by the Office for National Statistics, avoiding discussions on end-of-life results in greater health care spending and more unwanted hospital admissions (Date). Considering this, a review of Applied Theatre projects showed little work (particularly in terms of dialectical performance) in this area. Similarly, while some research on performance in relation to ageing exists, most material available explores the experience of ageing rather than its relationship to death and dying.

Slide 3 Theatre and Death
In his book *Theatre Death*, Robson (2019: IX) suggests, 'If death is not to dominate us, we have to learn to live with it. And this must have a double focus: how to live with the shadow of our own mortality, and how to survive the death of others'. One of the aims of the Death, Dinner and Performance project then was to consider whether a performance methodology could be developed to encouraging open and honest conversations around the reality of

death and to consider what Robson suggests is, 'theatre's persistent confrontation with death […as] one of the vital ways in which it continues to find an ethical and political force' (Ibid).

Death, as argued by Lambert South and Elton, remains taboo and this taboo has a negative impact with studies showing the most death adverse countries (and thus those least likely to discuss openly end of life) remain the lowest ranked in terms of end-of-life care quality (Economist Intelligence Unit).

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Out of this understanding have come several initiatives developed to encourage engagement with this difficult subject including: the Death Cafes, Death Over Dinner, The Conversation Project, Before I Die Festivals. At its core, the Death, Dinner and Performance project builds on these initiatives, developing a performance strategy and ritual event to examine the potential of intimate performance in a communal, commensal setting to transgress taboo and enable access to the difficult subjects of death, dying and bereavement.

Slide 5: About the Research: Overview
Following a period of initial research, three death dinners in total were held. Aligning the performance to a traditional three-act structure, each monologue punctuated a course within the meal. This structure was deliberate as it allowed a pause and moment of reflection on the themes within the monologue to occur naturally before those themes were then discussed subsequently over the next course. While the monologues were based on my own lived experience, exploring my personal concerns around death, and dying, their intended function was to encourage reflection in the participants so at the end of each, a question was posed. The questions were as follows:

- Can you remember when you first became aware of death? What was that like? What impact did it have?
- What does death mean to you at this moment in time?
- Is there such a thing as a good death?

The monologues were staged using dramaturgical and proxemic interventions with the first exploring my early experiences of death and dying and the impact these had on my subsequent understanding of and relationship to the subject. The next examined my feelings about death now having experienced it personally and professionally and the final monologue explored the notion of a 'good' death and what that would be 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.

With an emphasis on being as unobtrusive as possible, participants were observed and recorded while dining. The footage obtained was later examined in conjunction with pre and post dinner questionnaires. These materials provided visual, aural and written records of responses to the prompts presented through the performance and staging of the event. Together, this documentation along with the anecdotal material obtained from the

questionnaires was analysis to explore the impact of the performance on the participants' attitudes to death going forward.

Within the questionnaires, participants were also asked to consider the performative elements of the event and the impact these had on their experience. Thus, the project explored the event holistically (the meal and the performance, as well as the conversations these prompted) questioning its potential to impact on the participants' attitudes towards death and inclination to discuss and consider death and dying both personally and more broadly with others.

Slide 6: Efficacy
As well as addressing the initial research questions, the Practice as Research thus allowed the following to be explored:

- 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 to encourage ongoing reflection in participants on death and dying and conversations therefrom.

While the project and its Practice as Research produced several interesting outcomes, for brevity, I will discuss outcomes in relation to two specific areas: the use of autobiographical material and commensality.

Slide 7: Use of autobiographical material
We cannot know death until it happens to us. Indeed, Heidegger notes that while most discussions of death (historical, biographical, ethnological, psychological etc) **appear** to come out of an inherent understanding of death, it is in fact only a presupposed concept of death that we 'understand'. Similarly, he punctuates the received wisdom that death is inevitable by suggesting this thinking is, in fact, a way of postponing death rather than recognising what is **truly peculiar** about it, namely, '*that it is possible in every moment*' (2010, p52 Heidegger's italics). To talk about death then is to recognise its existence and conversely the existence of life. If death is inevitable and arbitrary, so too is it integral to as May argues 'a fullness of life that would not exist without it' (2009, 4). While it is possible that Heidegger is correct, that death is the one thing that cannot be shared 'death in mine and mine alone' (2010 p53) our concerns about death are universal and sharing them may be something we can do together. As May continues, 'thinking about death, leads us to think fruitfully about life' (2004:4).

One of the ways theatre allows us to engage with death is through the provision of a safe substitute, someone who acts for us, someone who's experiences of loss, death and bereavement we can experience at a distance. Considering this, while developing the Death, Dinners and performance project, I began to consider what Heddon calls the 'here-and-nowness of autobiographical performance' and the 'visible presence of the performing subject – their here and nowness too' (2008, 6). Rather than provide a fictional character through which an audience could experience death vicariously, I wanted to explore autobiographical and autoethnographic performance to consider if personal experience

might provide a safe, inclusive prompt to encourage a communal consideration of the taboo subject. As Heddon continues, in autobiographical performance,

> the relationship between performer and spectator does set this mediation of experience apart from other modes. Though it is not less mediated, its different form of mediation enables a potentially different impact that can be capitalised on strategically'(ibid).

Positioning myself and my stories at the heart of the event, I provided a safe platform from which personal reflection could develop and to where we could as a group or individually retreat if the conversation at any point became too distressing. Thus strategically, the autobiographical material provided both a prompt and a safety net, encouraging personal engagement when possible and 'holding' participants when necessary.

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The monologues also framed the evening with one participant noting they, 'were very effective in giving the event a structure and in bringing one into the evening'. Providing a chronological and thematic framework that encouraged participants to consider their individual relationship to death and how that had changed/ developed over the course of their lives, the monologues also allowed larger themes to be explored such as community/ society and death and dying; ritual and death and dying; types of deaths in relation to impact and the taboo that surrounds violent or childhood deaths. These themes recurred in each of the dinners.

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The moments of performance explored my relationship to death and dying at different points of my life with the first reflecting on my experience of death as a child. Positioned at the beginning of the meal, after introductions and the opening toast, this performative prompt encouraged a conversation around first experiences of death to unfold naturally between participants and for those experiences to be examined in relation to participant's individual attitudes to death that developed out of those experiences.

The second monologue explored my experience of death both personally and professionally as an adult. My anxiety about my own death, what I will leave behind, my fears around dying alone, these themes were all embedded within the second performance. Framing the event in this way, the monologue encouraged participants to consider their own fears around death and out of these reflections to engage in more broad conversations around social responses to death and dying and the importance of ritual and community.

The third monologue explored the notion of a 'good death'. Positioned towards the end of the meal, this monologue encouraged a conversation to develop around the practical elements of death and dying and what participants might need to consider and perhaps put in place **now** to support a 'good death' in the future.

Structuring the monologues thematically in this way encouraged engagement and interaction with one participant noting 'the performances were thought provoking and sparked conversation' and another suggesting 'the moments of performance worked very

well structurally to move conversation into different areas, while also offering a hook for us to attach our responses to, to link back to and to reference in the course of the conversation'.

Exposing my fears meant participants could remain in the conversation without having to expose their own. Using my experiences, I could prompt a discussion but also hold that discussion and the participants safely, returning to those experiences if at any point the conversation became too upsetting for any one individual. As one participant reflected, 'It was important to feel held, and that someone was leading the conversation, even if you didn't actually need to add a lot. It allowed us to relax and not feel responsible for anything other than thinking, reflecting and sharing our experiences'.

Slide 10: Commensal Practice

Commensality is defined as the practice of eating together. Kerner et al note, its root comes from the word mensa which literally means eating at the same table (2015, 1). They argue commensality is a fundamental social activity that both creates and cements relationships. Fischler agrees suggesting commensality as an act is itself an articulation of human society (2011, 529). However, commensality does not rely on social and cultural homogeny. Indeed, as Simmell argues, 'persons who in no way share any special interest can get together over a common meal […] There lies the immeasurable social significance of the meal' (1997, 130)

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In contemporary performance practice, commensality or the act of coming together to commune over food has long since been used, particularly in socially engaged practice that aims to involve particiants dialectically. Bringing people together to consider specific themes around death and dying in the familiar and secure setting of a shared meal can be seen in such recent works as Burtin's The Midnight Soup and Reckless Sleepers' The Last Supper. In the Death, Dinner and Performance project, the required communality and level of participation was high and in some ways, the commensality worked to negate this, with one participant noting, 'Having something else to do (i.e. eating) is always a really great way of conversation flowing in a more organic way than I think it does when the focus is entirely on having to make that conversation'.

At the dinner, participants shared equal status and each of their opinions were not only valid, they were vital. Without their input the discussion could not and would not have happened. The events required much of the participants both in terms of the subject matter and levels of participation. Almost all participants commented positively on the commensal element of the event. Their feedback included statements such as 'Eating, drinking wine and talking about our demise at the same time was a comfort and a funny little contradiction', 'The experience for me was very heartening. I 'enjoyed' talking and listening', and 'Eating and chatting with wine felt like an excellent formula!'.

Slide 12: Themes that arose over the Death Dinners

Over the course of the dinners several themes emerged. Universally, there was a sense that the experience of death as a child impacts on future thoughts and feelings around death and dying. Fear of dying and particularly of having lived an unfulfilled life was a recurring

theme and one that appeared to correlate to a lack of personal experience of death and dying.

Types of death (sudden versus drawn out for example) were discussed and considered in relation to the ability to more easily discuss one type of death over another. So too was the relationship to the dead person after death. In one particular conversation, 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 as to how one would like to die was considered, particularly in relation to debilitating illness and palliative care. So too was liminality and death, i.e., the journey to death as liminal, home in long-term palliative care as a liminal space, the liminal position loved ones inhabit while caring for a person on a palliative journey. Interestingly, one participant expressed 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 13 New Insights: Practice
While the responses of the participants in pre and post questionnaires allowed the research questions to be interrogated, other knowledge gained through the practice provided key insights and at times, contradicted assertions or assumptions made prior to the events. Dramaturgically, the importance of pace, timing and of allowing space for contemplation amongst the participants became evident. Also of relevance was the importance of silence and the realisation that different types of silence occur in relation to different emotional states. While in most participatory performances silence of the participants might be read as a lack of engagement, in the Death Dinners the opposite was often true with silence signifying participants' deep contemplation of the themes in order to discuss them further. Once I recognised this and let the silences happen, they rarely if ever felt uncomfortable or inappropriate.

Proximity and the setting of the monologues at a distance from the conversation, as well as the way in which participants entered and exited the space, all impacted on their engagement with the material and the understanding of the event as framed by these devices. Reflection on these elements between the events allowed changes to be made and later analysed. For example, I considered the movement of participants from the event back into the real world in the cool down exercise and explored the use of silence following the monologues to encourage quiet meditation.

Ultimately, I have gained new insight into the role of autobiographical performance to prompt, frame and engage people in difficult discussions around death, dying and grief. While the questionnaires have proved useful in understanding the participants' responses, the knowledge gained from the dinner themselves, from developing the strategy that allowed them to occur and from hosting the events has been invaluable.

Slide 14 Life Beyond the Death Dinners
To finish, my intention is to develop the project further and in doing so to consider:

- The role of the pre-dinner questionnaire and how can it be adapted for a larger, more public facing audience.

A removal of the questionnaire in this instance would allow participants to think about the questions posed 'live' and for the first time in the performance. This would be interesting as it would allow me to consider whether it is helpful or not for participants to have an understanding of what will be explored in the event beforehand beyond an information sheet.

- The position of the host/ performer with a larger group of participants?

To answer this, I need to consider my hosting strategy and whether this can be delivered in such a way as to ensure the inclusion of all participants. For the larger group, I may consider is the idea of co-hosts who 'hold' participants safely and ensure the prompts work to develop conversation.

- With a small, invited audience, outcomes are measured and insights gleaned using the questionnaires. How would this be managed with a larger, public audience?

To be continued

Thank you

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