

Melissa May Smith runs a Therapeutic Creativity Course at Nottingham Playhouse

I was recently asked by the Age of Creativity to write a blog with regards to an upcoming workshop I am leading for Over 55's at the Nottingham Playhouse. I ordinarily lead sessions with young actors so wasn't sure how qualified I was to blog on working with an 'older' demographic, but then I decided I would like to share the reasons why I decided to do it, what I was planning on doing and why I was looking forward to it so much.

The older generation has wisdom. They often have immense life experience. They often don't sweat the small stuff (they've been through worse). They are usually exceptionally caring. They also oftentimes have untapped creativity. I have often met older actors on set who have blown me away with their talent and I am then amazed to hear they had not long started acting!

I set up a drama group called Urban Young Actors in Leicester 12 years ago, which I still lead today. During my time directing, I have made many discoveries about actors and the importance of their wellbeing. This has then lead to me creating a new concept of workshops called 'Therapeutic Creativity'.



During these sessions, I share holistic and practical exercises that can also be used beyond the sessions to support positive mental health outcomes and explore how our thoughts can be channeled through various forms of creativity. The ideas explored have made noticeable differences to the young people I work with, so I figured they would likely have the same effect on older people too.

I had also inadvertently been 'testing' some of these ideas during adversity I was facing in my own life. Channeling my thoughts into writing became my saviour. Sometimes thoughts are positive, sometimes they are negative – such is life. But I found that having a creative outlet was incredibly therapeutic and cathartic for me. There was just something about emptying the words from my head that made me feel freer, lighter. I had a conversation with renowned British film

director Shane Meadows about this recently and I said it was like putting 'pain to paper'. He said he was going to 'nick' that phrase as I think it made a lot of sense to him too.

Therapeutic Creativity is not a formal therapy. But it can be an outlet. One of my favourite exercises I like to do in sessions is to give all participants a pen and a piece of paper. I then ask them to write down whatever comes into their heads for 5 minutes. You'd be amazed at the findings! A creative piece can always be discovered from that exercise alone.

Sadly I no longer have my grandparents with me so relish the opportunity to spend time with the older generation. I recently met some relatives in Ireland for the first time who were all 70+ and my heart felt so full. I felt connected to something at a deeper level. The history was there and the stories of another world, a world I could never be part of but knew it was part of me.

My mother Sharon is almost 60. She is incredibly beautiful and inspiring to me. She genuinely is one of the most selfless humans I have ever met. She has worked hard her whole life but is now in a new phase whereby her children have all left home and she is almost rediscovering herself. I suggested she takes classes in something she's interested in. She said to me 'I don't really know what to do. I feel a little invisible now I'm older. I'm not sure what my talents are'. I said 'You can do anything you put your mind to, but just always do what makes you happy. It's never too late'. I really stand by this motto. Every single day is a new opportunity. To learn, to grow, to broaden horizons. My mother is now enjoying pilates classes.

Socrates said 'The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new'. Isn't that true?

The 'Club Encore' group at the Nottingham Playhouse is a friendly theatre group specifically for Over 55's. They meet once a month with each session focusing on a different talk, workshop or Q&A with a range of art practitioners and industry professionals. Martin Berry, who is the head of participation at the playhouse thoroughly loves having the Encore group in the building.

Martin states 'It is always a joy to have Club Encore members at the Nottingham Playhouse. We so appreciate the energy, loyalty and creativity our members bring. We love to see members enjoying socialising whilst investing time into their own wellbeing and health. We offer a range of activities which benefit our members both mentally and physically. Members have often been interested in the arts for many years and bring a breadth of knowledge and experience to the room. They are most valued.'

For more information on Melissa May Smith & Therapeutic Creativities please visit www.melmaycreative.com

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