

The University of Liverpool's "Cinema, Memory and Wellbeing" Project (or "When Carmen Miranda visited Liverpool")

Funded by a HOP Pot grant in 2017 and featured in Pete Carr's film on three of the projects supported by the HOP network that year

<https://happyolderpeople.com/2017/10/02/happy-older-people-the-film/>

by Lisa Shaw

Colleagues at the University of Liverpool, but above all great friends who both had elderly parents and a passionate commitment to developing projects to engage with and support the local community, in late 2014 Lisa Shaw (Reader in Brazilian Studies) and Julia Hallam (Professor of Film and Media Studies) came up with the idea of combining their interests and teaming up with care homes in the Merseyside area to create the project "Cinema, Memory and Wellbeing".

Julia Hallam has published articles on British cinema, and carried out research on the historical relationship between Liverpool, the film industry and amateur filmmaking as part the government-funded City in Film project. She worked with the Wirral-based filmmaker and collector, Angus Tilston, who regularly screened his old movies of the city to local groups and in care homes. As Julia says: "When I discussed the screening of these films with him, he talked about how the films stimulated a collective memory that was often shared by the group and gave them something to talk about. He was convinced that these screenings had a therapeutic benefit".

Lisa Shaw, on the other hand, has published books on Brazilian popular music and cinema, particularly the musical comedy tradition known as *chanchada*, a genre that launched the career of Carmen Miranda in Brazil before she was catapulted to international stardom in Hollywood in the 1940s. During research for her book *Carmen Miranda* (British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), Lisa was struck by the numbers of elderly fans of the star from all over the world (including her own mother and auntie from Runcorn!), who were keen to tell her about the therapeutic value of watching one of her films on DVD today.

The "Cinema, Memory and Wellbeing" project that Lisa and Julia created aims to use a combination of archive footage of Liverpool and the surrounding area, and clips from Carmen Miranda's spectacular Hollywood musicals, to trigger memories and spark reminiscences among older, care home audiences. Both researchers are also interested in the emotional wellbeing benefits of group reminiscence of this kind. With the financial support of a University of Liverpool Knowledge Exchange Voucher, in March 2015 they held two "Cinema, Memory and Wellbeing" events for residents at a BUPA nursing home in Liverpool. The audience responded enthusiastically to a series of short clips of documentary footage of scenes of the city in the early 1960s, as well as excerpts from feature films shot on location in Liverpool. Clearly fascinated by these locations associated with their younger lives, they began to reminisce with each other. The following phrases are just a few examples:

"Oh! I remember walking down those steps with my mother!"

"I remember walking through bombed out houses!"

"My brother had a stall on the old [St. John's] market. ... There was a woman selling flowers – a couple of them. We all used to go there for flowers"

"I used to work in that Co-op. I served Bessie Braddock once! I was about 20 or 22"

"I used to travel on the Overhead Railway. I worked at Tate and Lyle's"

“You used to get stuck in them tram lines with your bike wheels!”

By filming the audience’s reactions and interactions on video, Lisa and Julia gathered valuable evidence of the positive wellbeing benefits of the film events, such as participants becoming increasingly animated, smiling and laughing, chatting animatedly with each other, and one lady even breaking into an almost word-perfect rendition of a Carmen Miranda song! These impressions were backed up by the feedback obtained from wellbeing questionnaires, filled in by the audience members and care assistants. The care home’s activities coordinator later commented: “It was great to introduce our resident group to new and interesting people and encourage conversation, interest and social engagement. We are always looking for ways to help our residents maintain community connections and feel part of the wider city around them – which this project did. The project was also of genuine interest to the staff supporting our residents and encouraged reminiscence across generations.”



“Tutti-frutti Turbans: Carmen Miranda and the Music of Rio de Janeiro”, public event at the Museum of Liverpool, July 2015 (photograph by Sara Cohen)

In July 2015 Lisa and Julia organised a special public event at the Museum of Liverpool, “Tutti-frutti Turbans: Carmen Miranda and the Music of Rio de Janeiro”, to coincide with the city’s annual Brazilica carnival, the only Brazilian-themed carnival held in the UK. Lisa gave an illustrated talk on Carmen Miranda’s life and career, with live music provided by students of Music at the University of Liverpool. After tea and cakes people were invited to watch one of Carmen’s Hollywood feature films, *That Night in Rio* (1941) and even have their photos taken in a tutti-frutti turban! As one of the audience later commented, “We couldn’t have wished for a better afternoon”. Carmen Miranda-fever soon caught on, and that year’s Brazilica parade featured some 20 look-alikes, including Julia, Lisa and their friends and colleagues, who went down a storm with the crowds watching (see photo below).



Carmen Mirandas in the Brazilica carnival parade, on the corner of Hardman Street and Hope Street, July 2015

In September 2017 Julia and Lisa held three “Cinema, Memory and Wellbeing” events at Company Matters 4U’s day care centre at Middleton Court in Speke, Liverpool, which were attended by a total of 60 older people. They were joined by their colleague from the Department of Music at the University of Liverpool, Professor Sara Cohen, who provided the added attraction of a musical soundtrack from the 1960s to accompany the silent footage of scenes of Liverpool life from that decade. As well as taking great delight in recognising and commenting on images of old Liverpool, the audience sang along – and even danced in some cases – with great enthusiasm, moving to the music, smiling and engaging with each other. One of the managers of the centre came up with a wonderful phrase to sum up the positive outcome of the events: “Enabling people to flourish in the Third Age”. The animated conversations and lively interaction that the film screenings prompted were captured in a short film made by Pete Carr for the funder of the project, the HOP (Happy Older People) Network (National Museums Liverpool/House of Memories/ Open Culture/ NHS Liverpool Clinical Commissioning Group), which can be viewed at: <https://happyolderpeople.com/2017/10/02/happy-older-people-the-film/>

The positive benefits for the wellbeing of the participants in the short term is clear to see from the smiles on their faces and the laughter ringing in the air, but longer-term benefits were equally noted by the care workers involved, one of whom noted that in the weeks that followed some of the shy male members of the audience were more confident in joining in activities, such as the regular karaoke afternoon, where a lady who previously would not sing “now joins in with gusto”. Another care worker commented: “Everyone continues to talk about the event and can remember different aspects of the day with positivity and fondness. They are excited and interested in what the next event will be”. To make this ‘feel-good’ memory last as long as possible, photos taken at the event of audience members in the guise of Charlie Chaplin or Carmen Miranda (see below) were turned into souvenir coasters/small jigsaws – every time they have a cuppa they can remember the fun they had on the day, and share it with the rest of their family and friends.



Participants “dressed” as Charlie Chaplin and Carmen Miranda

Julia and Lisa have nothing but the highest praise for the care home staff who helped them carry out all these events. Their involvement is extremely important, and the residents/service users gain even greater enjoyment from seeing them singing along with them, dressing up and so on. This was particularly evident at Middleton Court, where the managing directors of the day care company (Company Matters 4U), Ellie O’Hanlon and Debra Murphy, dressed up as usherettes and served ice-creams and sweets during the “interval”, to the delight of everyone in the room, and one of the wonderful care assistants volunteered to put on a spare Carmen Miranda outfit and made a “guest appearance” as the Brazilian star’s “sister” visiting the UK in search of a husband (the gentlemen in the audience loved that one!) It is fitting to end with an excerpt from a poem written for Julia, Lisa and Sara after the event by one of the care assistants – evidence of its positive impact on the staff themselves, but more importantly a reflection of their dedication and humanity.

“Reliving the city and
Its black and white past
Moorfields. Lime Street. New Brighton
The Dockers’ Umbrella
Our buildings reaching to Heaven
Only the best will do
They gather the past
Like pearls of time
And make all our dreams come true”

By Rodger Moir