

**Dr Natasha Oxley, University of Greenwich**

**An introduction to the processes and outcomes of the memory box**

**project: an international, intergenerational experience**

*This presentation was made to delegates at the Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today conference in 2017, before they saw performance pieces created by University of Greenwich Drama students.*

Together with Pam Schweitzer, over the last five weeks I have facilitated second year drama students in making short pieces of theatre in response to the memory boxes you saw at the gallery yesterday. This project is part of their second year applied drama module here at the University of Greenwich.

This was the first time these memory boxes had ever been used to create a piece of drama, and it was incredibly fruitful and emotive. I would like to share with you some of the processes involved and explain how the students used the memory boxes as stimuli for the short pieces you are going to see this afternoon. Firstly, Pam gave the students an introductory session on reminiscence theatre in which she explained key processes and practices, and highlighted some of the particular dramatic techniques that often characterise reminiscence theatre performance, including storytelling or narration, song and a montage structure in

which some scenes are recounted and others are shown. During that first week, many of the students also met with members of the Greenwich Pensioners' Forum, who came to view the memory boxes when they were on site here. The students shared with the members of the Pensioners' Forum their responses to their favourite memory boxes. They also shared stories from their own lives that led on from the stories told by the memory boxes.

- The following week, Pam gave a session on the history and journeys of the memory boxes. She facilitated the students in an exercise in which they thought about what they might put in their own memory box at this point in their lives. During that session, we were extremely privileged to have 90-year-old Helen Aronson, a Polish-Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, come to visit the students. She was accompanied by Alex Schweitzer who made her memory box, which tells the story of two parts of her life in Poland and in London. Alex has also talked to students about his own experiences, giving them invaluable insight and detail. He has also made a recording of a letter in German from a father to a son, which features in one of the performances.

Helen's box is the basis for the first piece you'll see today. We were all profoundly moved by Helen's visit, myself included as she

described events similar to some of those my own Polish grandparents' experienced but never discussed. As she described the moment in which Russian soldier told her mother the war was over and she was free, I felt acutely reminded of my own heritage. We are absolutely delighted that Helen is here today and that she will see the performance the students have created about her life. They have formed a friendship with her and their conversations with her have helped reframe their perceptions on their own lives. Some of them commented that the experience had encouraged them to view some of their own difficulties in a new light, which helped them to deal with those issues in a different way. Helen has inspired the students with her positivity and drive. This project has led to some life-enhancing intergenerational exchanges and some lasting friendships.

Gwen Sewell also visited to talk to the students, and she has been in regular contact with Rianna, whose piece is based on her box. We are also delighted that she is here today to see the performance based on her life. Rianna chose this box because it connected with some aspects of her own heritage and biography, and she has been inspired to write a piece about her own grandmother.

Each student selected the memory box they most wanted to work with, and this is how the performance groups were formed. Pam and I encouraged them to look closely at the objects and details within the boxes and to identify the main points of the story, as well as to read the blurb alongside the box and to conduct research into relevant history. The students then had the task of translating the story told in the box into a dramatic story. They had a wide range of options and they were encouraged to take inspiration from the box when deciding on a particular performance style. They also referred back to the characteristics of reminiscence theatre that Pam had conveyed to them in the first session.

The students worked for four weeks during class time, and they put in many additional hours. Some of them have been inspired to make memory boxes with family members, and to begin writing biographical pieces about their own relatives. One of the students told me she felt she had needed reminiscence theatre in her life. The students have approached their source material with great respect, and I know that they feel a great deal of responsibility to represent real people's lives with sensitivity. They have greatly enjoyed the creative process, as have Pam and I, and we hope you enjoy the results.