

An Interview with Magdalena Schamberger



Magdalena Schamberger, the artistic mind behind Curious Shoes, has been working creatively with people living with dementia for over 18 years. She uses physical theatre and a cross-arts approach to create highly visual performances, which are equally enjoyable, stimulating and beautiful. In between performances at the Mayfair Centre Church Stretton, Magdalena took time out to discuss her interesting career to date and what events led to the creation of her innovative performance approach, Curious Shoes.

1. What led you to start working with people living with dementia?

I grew up in a house with my grandparents and from then on I knew I wanted to work with older people. Whilst working at Hearts and Minds, a charity I co-founded in Scotland, I was approached by the Development Services Centre in Stirling who had heard about our Clown Doctors project for children. They suggested we branch out, with their assistance, and work with people living with dementia. At the time I knew nothing about dementia, nor did I know anybody who'd been affected by it... but I was curious.

I went in to some dementia units and found it so easy to relate to the patients; when you suspended the need for remembering, the need for answers and the need for reality, it is incredibly easy to communicate. So I accepted their offer and we created the Elderflowers programme specifically developed for people with dementia.

2. How did Curious Shoes come about?

I did all the work myself for the Elderflowers programme, which meant I gained a lot of experience working with people with dementia on a daily basis. I remained Artistic Director of the programme until 2017 when I was lucky to be awarded a Paul Hamlyn Breakthrough Fund grant to further advance my work. It felt like the right way for me to depart from Heart and Minds as I wanted to work with people with dementia on a more 1 to 1 level - I just fell in love with the older people and found that if you invited them to engage with you, without trying to solve a problem or create a solution, they would just come to life. I got so fond of that that I just wanted to do more with it; that is how Curious Shoes came about.

3. In what way has Curious Shoes been created for people living with dementia?

To gain more experience I worked a lot with people in the advanced stages of dementia, who are very curled up in their chairs and beds. I just thought it would be interesting to start with that as a view point. If that view is somebody's whole world, I asked myself how I could get them out of it. I thought what better way than to use interesting (or curious!) shoes to get them initially engaged with rhythm, and then move up a step to gradually get them to engage with the world again – and that was the preamble.

Most importantly, from the beginning we worked with a focus group of people with dementia and their loved ones. They helped us develop the performance and choose the name. We would present them with our ideas and see where their curiosity would take us and where their interests would lie. The group are still involved 3 years on, 5 of the 8 originals came to the North Edinburgh Arts preview performance and they also helped with recasting Bette and Fred's characters. We haven't played lip service on any level, we've taken things very seriously, from the programme, size, colours, lighting and small details. All the original artists and designers did a day of Artful Minds training, so the show was completely tailored for people living with dementia.

4. Did the shoes influence the characters, or the characters influence the shoes?

To be honest, we didn't have the characters. I invited some people I knew, one of them being Tim who now plays Charlie, to a play day. I asked all of them to bring in interesting pairs of shoes and then we improvised with some of them, in fact the boots that the character Bette wears were there on that day, as were a very similar pair to the ones Fred wears.

We picked shoes that were very different from one another, so by just looking at them you would know it was a different person and personally – you have Bette's Afgan boots, Charlies black shoes with mismatched laces, Fred's two tone tan and green brogues and Vicky's slippers. For people with dementia strong colours are good and patterns are not, so we went for strong primary colours for their characters. So the characters and the shoes naturally came together in a way, but I also wanted to anchor them with some kind of style, that is how they became Fred after Fred Estair, Vicky after character Victoria Page, Bette after Bette Davis and perhaps the most obvious Charlie after Charlie Chaplin.

5. Curious Shoes was originally performed on a theatre stage, how have you adapted it to work in care and community settings?

You are restricted with how much you can take touring, in theatres we have round table with colour coordinating table clothes that correlate to the characters, we have to rely on what the venues have when we tour.

In theatres the set is a little bit abstract with white sails that you can project on to, literally with moving imagery, but also figuratively as you can project on what it is and where it is. I think there is a freedom for interpretation when things are abstract - there is no one meaning and if you can alleviate that feeling that there has to be one meaning, then you alleviate the whole concept that there is a right and there's a wrong.

In the theatre production there is a red carpet around the set, an embrace that brings everyone together. This came about because I originally had an idea for a love seat with a blanket on that audience members could sit under, however, when piloting the idea people couldn't get further away from it! Older people felt that were placated, put in a corner under a blanket, everywhere they went – something I had not considered. I didn't want to give up the idea completely which is why I put a red carpet around the set, a metaphorical embrace.

6. What do you hope that participants gain from the performance?

A moment of treasuring the here and now and not thinking about the past. A moment that a future is possible, of imagination, of other things rather than the four walls of the room they are in. Hope. Dreams. A moment of life and light, and being part of something.

7. Do you improvise in the performance?

The structure of the performance facilitates improvisation, if the performance is taken in a different direction, there are places for the artists to hook back into the story line. Tim, who plays Charlie, has a huge amount experience of working with people with dementia, so he is particularly good at catering to the audience and improvising. We've had performances where people get up to help Bette when she drops her suitcase in the story, which is very sweet, we also have people dancing in the background or on the set. It doesn't matter. Sometimes it is more of a challenge when staff and carers feel embarrassed and they try to make them sit down. We try to explain before a performance that as long as nobody is endangered, anything is fine.

8. What advice would you have for artists wanting to create dementia friendly work?

Two things -talking to people who are in the field and involving focus groups. I believe there are a lot of initiatives that talk about being dementia friendly but in my opinion they doesn't go far enough. People make performances dementia friendly by changing the light and sound cues. But I never wanted Curious Shoes to be like this, I wanted it be completely dementia accessible, and accessible to everyone in fact. I also believe you can't do anything without a focus group, you can go too far down the line with your ideas without testing them, you have to risk that your ideas are rubbish and not take yourself too seriously. We permanently asked ourselves through the creation process 'is this really good for who we are creating it for' about every element, I think that's really important.

9. Will you tour Curious Shoes further?

Yes I think so, there is already a lot of interest!

10. And lastly, what do you enjoy most about touring?

Meeting all the individuals from different parts of the country. I'm very lucky that the team is fabulous, we are all in it because we love it, rather than it being just a job. And I think you can sense that in the performances and in the touring van, we are delighted to be together. The people that have been chosen to do this, were chosen because they have a passion for it and if you get 6 people with a passion, you are really on to something good.