

## **On Reminiscence Theatre**

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To be a human being is to be creative. It's a simple definition on our complex personalities but it's an important part in the description of ourselves. We know that our brains start shrinking at the age of 40 and the nerves lose their capacity by some progressive procedures. How long can we expect to be creative? These procedures are different from person to person but we know as well that these atrophic processes slow down if we just use our brains! So, go on painting, reading, singing, dancing, talking to each other and if possible, don't live alone. Then we can push Alzheimer and dementia, these devastating diseases, before us into the future.

The growing knowledge that cultural activities could be good for the aging people, made Pam Schweitzer to start "Age Exchange Reminiscence Centre" 1987 in London. The project included many cultural fields, the Reminiscence Theatre most important to us. She has described the method in "Reminiscence Theatre – making Theatre from Memories".

From the beginning, she created a "Creative team" consisting of professional persons of various kinds from the theatre. They gathered a group of elderly people with various backgrounds and interviewed them on a one-to-one basis or on small groups. The memories were recorded and stored. Then the time-consuming process to find a structure in the material, was the next step before writing the manuscript. After that the rehearsals started and the production team went on with their work. The interviewees were encouraged to attend the rehearsals and give the director and the actors a piece of good advice but they were not fully engaged in the theatrical work with this method.

Pam Schweitzer was an Artistic Director between 1983 and 2005 when she left the Centre to take care of a large material of memories. She established The European Reminiscence Network in 1993 which now has partnership organizations in 20 European countries. The most important aim is to organize dementia care of various arts and use theatre and visual arts in reminiscence work.

The nearest partner in the network is the group in Kotka, Finland with Leonie Hohenthal Antin as a leader. They joined the network in 2005 and presented a play about "The life in Kotka during the war". That was an example of Reminiscence Theatre that was not primarily dealing with dementia care but with making theatre. They tried to remember the everyday life with lack of a lot of things. What were the parties like, what could they eat and drink, what kind of clothes had they? What were they singing, dancing? What did they feel when they heard the Russian bombers?

They gathered all the things that could remind them about these years in a memory box which gave them new memories to use in the play.

One of the pioneer groups in Finland is "Kutkutus" which means "Tickling". It was established at a Day center for elderly people in Mikkeli. An ambitious social worker with some experience from the amateur theatre world started the project. They chose a theme and went on improvising over the subject. The actors tried to remember the lines to the next rehearsal. There was no manuscript from the beginning and the actors were free to choose another line if the memory failed although the story must be intact. They went on and soon they started touring all over the country, became famous and very much appreciated. Leonie followed their work for some years which resulted in her doctor's thesis on the subject "Taking permission - Elderly people as theatre makers".

Leonie has given four courses on "Reminiscence Theatre" in various places in Sweden. The participants have been members of existing senior groups and the knowledge has stayed inside the groups and

we have not got the spread of the method that we wanted. We now start a new era by inviting persons who are dealing with old people in their profession and are able to use Reminiscence work in their daily work.

During recent years, we have heard about "Culture and Health". Medical Services have been aware of the importance of cultural activities for our health. Several counties in Sweden have started projects in that field. In my own County, Norrbotten, we have for example an amateur theatre group with a couple of enthusiastic persons, who have been working for many years with old people, much in the same way as the Kutkutus-group in Finland. They get an annual economic support from the county council.

I visited the group one day in People's Palace in Kalix. They should have a performance later that day for a group of retired people. It's unusual to meet a gang of old people with such a happy charisma. I was invited to the "fika"-table with pastries of all kind. The conversation was easy and fluent with a lot of jokes flying in the air. They talked about sickness, but in a positive way, how much better they felt and how few pain killers they needed the day of rehearsal or performance. I had met one of the ladies about 30 years ago. She was active in a theatre group and had a small shop at that time. Sorry to say she was stricken with an early Alzheimer and had to give up both theatre and business. I was astonished to meet a smiling and happy person. Of course she had gaps in her memory but she knew that she was still a natural part of the group. Without any scientific evidence I would say that she was a result of reminiscence work.