

And The Wheels Went Round

Good morning, I am Anne Gilmour from The Questors Theatre, Ealing, West London and one of three co-ordinators of a Reminiscence Theatre project, established in 1989 called **PlayBack**, which I am delighted to share with you today.

Before you see our show, ***And The Wheels Went Round***, I would like briefly to set the scene.

When PlayBack began, oral history was used by some Museums, and by those working with dementia patients, who often incorporated reminiscence, especially songs, into their therapy.

But in the world of theatre, other than Age Exchange, established in 1983 by Pam Schweitzer, reminiscence was rather new and exciting with no definitive way to use oral memories to create theatre. The model developed by PlayBack was, not surprisingly, influenced by our access to the resources of The Questors to develop, and stage, full length plays.

PlayBack's 1990 debut play, *Soapsud Island*, was about the work of the small, mainly privately owned laundries in Acton, between the 1930s and the 1950s. Music, dance and mime were woven into scenes created directly from the shared memories of the mainly female laundry workers. The set - 6 laundry baskets, 3 stools and a hat stand – worked both on the stage of The Questors and on tour to community venues, of which more in a moment.

Soapsud Island worked so well that it became the Playback model of reminiscence theatre and to date we have created eight full length reminiscence plays. They are an eclectic range: Cycling – which you will hear about in a moment; the Co-operative Movement; The Cuckoo School, about the life of orphans at an Ealing Poor Law School attended by Charlie Chaplin; Ealing Film Studios – a look behind the scenes; Brentford Football Club – about the families of the fans; and most recently, life on an Allotment.

Once a subject is identified, the PlayBack team interviews, records and transcribes the memories and a commissioned writer creates the script. Typically, composite characters share monologues directly with the audience which are lifted verbatim from our interview material. The eloquent words of our contributors so often express the feelings of the characters and explain the context of their lives so much better than a writer can devise.

Gathering memories in the community, PlayBack has always looked beyond The Questors Theatre and our productions have toured to church halls, old-people's homes and community centres – and as far afield as Edinburgh. The production at The Questors is just the first venue on a community tour.

Because so much of our material did not make it into the full-length productions, in 2001, PlayBack created Reminiscence Roadshows. These are short, script in hand, productions of around 40 minutes, which draw on all our reminiscence material with themes such as *Children at War*, *A Night at the Cinema*; and *Down our High Street*. It takes up to 18 months to create a full-length play, but a Roadshow only takes several days drawing on one co-ordinator and four performers. Local community or voluntary groups invite us to stage a Roadshow and our diary is already full for 2016, and 2017 is coming along nicely. After each Roadshow, performers chat with the audience over a cup of tea and share their reminiscences which might be incorporated into the next Roadshow.

Today, Maggie and Russell will offer a taster from our cycling Roadshow, *And the Wheels Went Round*. This extract will give you an idea of how we edit and structure our material and use songs alongside verbatim reminiscences. It also shows how real life really can be funnier and sometimes, more moving than fiction. We do hope you enjoy it.