

International Journal of Ageing and Later Life, 2012 7(2): 117–141. © The Author

“The play’s the thing”: theatre as a scholarly meeting ground in age studies

By VALERIE BARNES LIPSCOMB*

Abstract

Addressing three current critical turns in gerontology, this article proposes the theatre as a fertile ground for various theoretical angles in age studies – including the performative on and off stage, the narrative in the script and the critical questioning of age and ageism in the multiple realities of performance. Beginning from a shared site in the theatre, researchers may be able to establish greater common ground, resulting not only in multi-disciplinary efforts but also in truly interdisciplinary work. With a foundation in performance studies, this article suggests promising directions for age studies and theatre scholarship by examining three aspects of theatrical production: a play script, Jan de Hartog’s popular *The Fourposter* (1951); a collaborative development of a script and production, Jeanette Mathewes Stevens’ 2010 senior drama *ElderSpeak*; and a performance, a 2011 song-and-dance revue staged by an established senior theatre troupe, the Sarasota Senior Theater.

Keywords: Ageing, theatre, performance, performativity, narrative, interdisciplinarity.

* Valerie Barnes Lipscomb, Department of English, University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, Sarasota, FL, USA

One of the major challenges of multi- and interdisciplinary scholarship is to establish common ground, providing theoretical and practical foundations for fruitful discussion. This challenge is evident in humanities-oriented age studies; although we express common interests in the ageing process, our methodologies may differ widely. Swinnen (2011) foregrounded this spectrum of perspectives in a call to interrogate disciplinarity by engaging critical, narrative and performative turns in age studies. While most research focuses on one of the three approaches, this article indicates how the three perspectives may be beneficial at one research site: the theatre. Hennessy and Walker (2011) summarise the potential rewards of utilising more than one perspective: "The advocacy for multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary research on ageing is driven by the recognition that a comprehensive understanding of complicated phenomena like ageing is best achieved through the contributions of different disciplines" (53). While Hennessy and Walker address multi- and interdisciplinary ageing research efforts primarily in the sciences, I suggest that the theatre is a promising site for a multiplicity of approaches, both interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary, and age studies in particular. The promise of multi-disciplinary efforts may seem more apparent, but theatre also is inherently interdisciplinary; the staging of a play requires multiple media, comprising music, the visual arts in scenic design, the actors' performances and the literary nature of the script. Theatre already is built on integration within the arts – experts in various artistic media work together, with shared concerns and shared outcomes. This article advocates for extending that sense of integration further to theatre research, and interprets the theatre as a locus for various theoretical angles, such as the performative on stage, the narrative in the script and the critical questioning of ageism and chronological/biological age in the multiple realities of performance.

I wish to encourage age studies in the theatre in the broadest terms, building from the work of Basting (2000), whose outline of the intersection of performance studies and age studies includes a section more specifically on theatre (263). That work also divides a consideration of performance and age into the categories of "drama therapy, literary gerontology, and theoretical accounts of performance" (261). I offer here a broader consideration of critical paths in age studies and theatre as well as an indication of how the three prevalent paths may converge in the staging of a play. It is

useful to adumbrate first the critical paths briefly as I see their relationship to theatre. First, as Holstein and Minkler (2003) note, critical gerontologists question the questions, exposing and interrogating the assumptions underlying gerontology and attitudes towards the elderly in society at large. Not only is that critical voice needed in theatrical practice but also theatre can be used as a tool to raise the questions of critical gerontology. Theatre practitioners have too often compartmentalised treatment of the elderly, as drama activities commonly are arranged for the elderly in institutionalised settings, while the working theatre unquestioningly welcomes the elderly as audience and excludes the elderly onstage, casting the younger to play the older, if older characters are included at all. As scholars ask how the visibility of critical gerontology may be raised (Swinnen 2011), theatre can be a powerful tool to probe norms and raise awareness of ageist practices among all types of audiences, from academics and health care workers to the elderly themselves.

Second, narrative approaches encompass the relationship of the personal life story to master narratives. Literary age studies scholars typically examine a dramatic script for its representations of ageing and old age (e.g. Deats & Lenker 1991). I suggest that theatre advances a unique opportunity to study the interaction of those experiencing the ageing process – actors, audience members, playwrights – with master narratives of culture as they are manifested on stage. Hartung and Maierhofer (2009) point to one definition of narrative as the sequencing of events according to a specific ideology; I assert that the multiple negotiations of the ageing narrative observable in the theatrical process, from plot to audience reception, merit critical attention, revealing and shaping social attitudes towards ageing.

Third, the performative turn in humanities-oriented age studies may appear to be the most developed link to the theatre. Viewing age as performative has been advanced by such theatre scholars as Basting (1998) as well as Lipscomb and Marshall (2010), who, building on Butler (1990), emphasise the self, created by repeated performance, the “doing” that constitutes “being.” These scholars foresee the potential for growth in the field of age studies built on a performative theoretical foundation. This article extends that analysis to scripts and productions that span ages from young adulthood to the fourth age, with particular interest in the

implications of performing against the grain of one's apparent chronological age. While age studies researchers long have adopted theatrical techniques for therapy with elders in institutionalised settings (e.g. Noice & Noice 2009), a turn towards research of the production of a published play script in a theatre setting (which I will call "traditional" theatre) affords rich possibilities for age-oriented scholars. Zeilig (2012) asserts that "narrative and literary approaches to age and ageing when allied to perspectives from critical gerontology can furnish scholars with important perspectives for interpreting and re-configuring 'age'" (7). Similarly, age studies could benefit from the multiplicity of research opportunities as yet unexplored in the traditional theatre, from professional and community productions to troupes specialising in senior theatre. Perhaps, researchers from various disciplines could collaborate in examining the same theatrical production, leading to increased true interdisciplinarity. Such collaboration could foster shared methodology to reveal greater insights about age and ageing identities.

As primarily a literary critic, I do not presume to be able to indicate all the possible avenues for theatre research in other disciplines. Rather than being exhaustive in such a broad proposition, in this article, I attempt to pique interest in theatre research by limning three examples that lend themselves towards different turns in humanities-oriented age studies. This study begins with literary analysis of a mid-century play script, *The Fourposter*, incorporating performative and narrative perspectives to examine the written text and its possibilities in production, rather than a specific production. *The Fourposter* has not heretofore attracted attention from age studies scholars but has enjoyed enduring popularity in amateur and professional theatre. The play text reveals issues of age and ageing that have been overlooked in drama. The article then explores both the development and production of a new script, *Elderspeak*, indicating narrative and critical approaches to its anti-ageist theatre activism. This play is an example of a collaboratively produced script by and for seniors, chosen for insights into the process of creating senior-oriented theatre. Moreover, this script has been featured by the leading ageing-oriented publisher of plays, ArtAge, whose website states that the play has "been well received at retirement homes, senior centers, and conferences for health care professionals" (Vorenberg 2011). Finally, a call for greater

“The play’s the thing”

attention to the growing senior theatre movement focuses on one Florida production that can be studied from all three critical foundations. This production was chosen because the Sarasota Senior Theater is a long-standing troupe considered exemplary among US senior theatre endeavours, “a strong company with an excellent reputation” (Vorenberg 2011). Rather than conducting a fully detailed analysis of each example case, this essay will point out elements of the theatre that intersect with each of the three perspectives in age studies in the hope that scholars in a variety of disciplines see the theatre as a valuable site of encounter for age studies. As Marion Fries-Dieckmann (2009) notes, many Western dramatic conventions regarding the performance of age can be traced to Shakespeare. In that vein, whether research pursues the health benefits of senior theatre or an analysis of age portrayal in *Hamlet*, “the play’s the thing” (Shakespeare 2008: 2.2.609) offering significant potential to better understand the human experience of ageing.

Performativity, Narrative, and the Ageing Process in *The Fourposter*

The intersection of age studies with the theatre may at first seem to rest in textual analysis of older dramatic characters. I suggest that age studies will benefit from broadening its scope beyond a focus on plays featuring older characters (e.g. Fries-Dieckmann 2009; Lenker & Lipscomb 2002; Lipscomb & Marshall 2010) to plays that invite analysis of the ageing process. Both the performative and the narrative turns in ageing studies could apply; a dialogue about such plays between performative and narrative critics would enrich the understanding of age in both areas. Numerous plays highlight the ageing process by employing the convention of one actor portraying different ages during the course of the action – canonical modern plays (such as Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Wilder’s *Our Town*, and Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*) may come to mind immediately. However, for this study, I focus on a popular play that has not yet garnered traditional literary-based critical analysis, but warrants attention from cultural age-studies critics because it has struck a chord with contemporary society.

Jan de Hartog's *The Fourposter*, written in 1951, spans the period from 1890 to 1925 in the life of one couple. The Broadway production ran for 632 performances and won the 1952 Tony for Best Play (Broadway League 2012). This play has been a staple of US community and student theatre, not only in its original form but also as the 1966 musical adaptation *I Do! I Do!* In fact, the musical version evidenced such enduring popularity that a professional theatre near Minneapolis presented it continuously for more than 15 years, totalling more than 6500 performances (Freeman & Nelson 1989).

While the play's lasting popularity with theatre groups is due in part to the ease of staging – one set and two actors – I assert that this drama continues to draw audiences by its depiction of the life course on narrative, theatrical and performative levels. A consideration of age in the script shows the intertwining of these three veins. First, the performative age-studies approach to such a play may be the most apparent choice of the three critical perspectives, as the concept of performativity has become central to performance studies, which can trace its roots to theatre studies (Loxley 2007). The narrative critic can read in *The Fourposter* a master narrative, the depiction of major events constructed to represent a "typical" Western life course. On theatrical and performative levels, however, this presentation of a dominant "aging" discourse is challenged. The audience witnesses a changing performance of age that interrogates the accepted understanding of "being" an age, rendering instead age as repeated performance that creates the sense of reality. As one actor is cast to portray a certain character over years of time, the ageing process represented on stage points out the mechanism of the performativity of age off stage. The actors not only represent older men or women in a narrative, they also and at the same time remain themselves, the reality of their bodies being in dialogue with the dominant social and cultural discourse of ageing.¹ In *The Fourposter* and similar plays that show the passing of decades on stage, the actors' corporeality is in dialogue with the characters' changing ages, revealing the basis of performativity: repeated iterations that constitute reality.

¹ For an analysis of performances that insist on the body's persistent materiality, challenging the dominant social and cultural discourses of aging, see Stalpaert (2012).

“The play’s the thing”

The conscious age performance on stage points out the unconscious performativity of age off stage.

The Fourposter script begins on the wedding night of Michael and Agnes, and continues with scenes in their bedroom until the day they move out 35 years later. The six scenes in *The Fourposter* depict marriage milestones rather than time milestones, so that the performance of age does not change at regularised time intervals, and the impression of choosing events to build a narrative is particularly strong. The second scene of the first act occurs just one year after the wedding night, as Agnes goes into labour with the couple’s first child. The two discuss how they have matured in just one year as well as what they have learned about each other and about marriage, but there is no overt reference to age in the dialogue or stage directions. Only one year has passed; the action focuses on inward change and does not connect that change with ageing. However, this is not the case at the beginning of the second act, which takes place eleven years into the marriage. The stage directions dictate that everything in the bedroom except the fourposter bed has changed, which marks the passage of time and a new level of success for the couple. Michael’s professional success leaves Agnes feeling insecure, so that when he informs her that he has become infatuated with another woman, Agnes asks, “Is she . . . young? How young?” (55). Her first assumption is that she would be replaced by a younger woman, but Michael denies this accusation. Agnes also refers to her age in conjunction with her reaction to the news: “What do you think? That I should faint in my thirty-first year because of something so . . . ordinary?” She implies maturity gained since the play’s first scene, a loss of naïveté. During the course of their disagreement, they claim to have changed; when Michael asks Agnes what she sees when she looks into his eyes, she replies, “Wrinkles!”

Because this scene occurs at the beginning of the second act, accompanied by a significant set change, the actors would have had time to add markers of age, perhaps apply some ageing makeup in addition to changing their costumes. However, the stage directions do not mention a change in appearance for the characters in this scene, even though the dialogue signals an ageing process. The script’s silence leaves the staging choices fully open for individual productions, as the director must deal with the tension between the dialogue’s focus on change and the continuity of seeing the

same performers on stage. Agnes's outburst asserts that the physical changes over eleven years, from the early twenties to the early thirties, reflect inner change as well. Meanwhile, the actors are both "doing" changes in age on stage [following Schechner (2001) who defines performance as "showing doing"], and "being" their own chronological age. The conscious change in "showing doing" from one scene to the next reveals to the audience how age is performed, that in fact age is performative, that repeated "doing" creates the sense of "being."

While the play as a whole establishes age as a performative, the second scene of act two revolves around the master narrative of coming of age, as the couple awaits the late-night return of their teenage son. The dramatic theme has alternated between the conjugal relationship and parenthood; this scene establishes a sense of one generation's being replaced by the next. Michael worries about his son Robert, contrasting their behaviour: "Now, in my young days, if I was told to be in at a certain hour—" (73). The comparison and contrast between generations are more pronounced because the couple has one son and one daughter, replicating themselves. When Agnes accuses Michael of being less strict with their daughter Elizabeth, he even alludes to the Electra complex, replying, "So! I have an unhealthy preference for my daughter. Is that it?" (76). Michael objects to Elizabeth's taste in beaux, and Agnes asks, "Are you suggesting that the only person the child will be allowed to fall in love with is a younger edition of yourself?" (81). Their discussion of Robert's possible drunkenness and Elizabeth's love life recalls the play's first scene – Michael and Agnes, both a bit tipsy and very much in love on their wedding night. They, too, were once young, and, although they do not address the issue directly, obviously Agnes and Michael are no longer claiming youth now. This relinquishing of their youthful titles to the next generation as the children approach adulthood causes some conflicted emotions, ending in resignation (85). Their references to age leave a distinct impression of the progression of the couple's life story, reflecting on their ageing processes and the unstoppable life course, while the actors themselves remain relatively static.

Thus, narrative and performative critics may be able to collaborate in studying a production of a play such as *The Fourposter*, finding commonality in questions raised. Basting (2000) notes that a performative

“The play’s the thing”

approach to play analysis expands the scope of questions to be asked about producing a play:

How will the characters be depicted? Will they wear age makeup? Will they wear age-appropriate clothing? What *is* age-appropriate clothing after all? How will they move on stage? Will the characters be cast according to the actors’ ages? (262)

The Fourposter highlights such questions, as the actors change generations during the action, moving steadily through the life-course narrative.

The play’s sense of the repetition of the life course is even more pronounced in the stage directions for the opening of act three, which indicate that Agnes is holding a wedding bouquet and Michael is “humming the Wedding March” in anticipation of their daughter’s wedding day (89). Rather than delivering the typical reminiscences about their own wedding day (which, in stage time, happened only an hour earlier), Agnes realises that she has been a wife and a mother, but an unfulfilled human being. She complains that she goes through life like a puppet, not even feeling alive, remembering what it was like 23 years earlier when she had looked at herself “in exactly the same way, in the same window perhaps” to check on her bridal veil (96). All at once, her life seems worthless, “[o]nly wrinkles and a wedding ring, and a new cash book for the household every year” (96). Michael convinces her that she is reacting to the emotion of the day because, since her children are leaving home, “she imagines her job is over” (103). He reminds her that she is his inspiration, that he will always need her, and Agnes “is so amused and relieved that she cries and laughs at the same time” (104). The episode is constructed as Agnes’s mid-life crisis, peppered with references to the passing years for both husband and wife. Despite the emphasis on mid-life review, Agnes’s reference to wrinkles – which seem to be the major outward marker of age in her estimation – furnishes the only overt allusion to physical ageing. The sense of the life cycle is particularly strong in this scene; the narrative aspect of age is more prominent than its performative aspect.

The life-course narrative of *The Fourposter* does not extend into old age but stops after 35 years of marriage, which could raise questions for critics. Does this choice reflect the elision of old age from the adult life story? Does the ending imply that one actor may play young and middle

adulthood, but not an aged self? The action ends when Agnes and Michael will no longer be sleeping on the fourposter bed, which will remain in the room as they move to a smaller apartment – but a newlywed couple will be the new occupants. Michael notices the repetition: “It’s odd, you know, how after you have lived in a place for so long, a room gets full of echoes. Almost everything we’ve said this morning we have said before” (116). Of course, in compressed stage time, most of these repeated lines were uttered less than two hours earlier, strongly supporting the concepts of self-continuity and coherent story throughout the ageing process. The couple’s exit from the room also echoes their initial entrance, as Michael carries Agnes over the threshold. This is one of the few times that the stage directions point to the physical changes accompanying age, explaining that he “leans down and hesitantly, but surely, picks her up” (117). Their kiss on the way out of the room represents the standard happy ending, but also a sense of having lived a satisfying life together.

The Fourposter demands that actors work across a span of 35 years, with little time between scenes for the physical ageing transformations that the dialogue acknowledges. Some plays’ notes indicate how to perform differences in age; for example, *How I Learned to Drive* directs in scene one that Li’l Bit is “softer-looking” in her 40s than at 17, and “stands awkwardly” as a 13-year-old in scene 13 (Vogel 1997). However, De Hartog’s script leaves staging and casting choices to the individual production. Interestingly, the well-known actors who originated the Broadway roles were middle aged: Jessica Tandy was 42 and husband Hume Cronyn was 40, while the script covers the period from young adulthood to what is considered the end of middle age, from about 20 to 55 years old. During this span of time, the characters of Michael and Agnes would be expected to garner some of the simplest markers of advancing age, but the story does not continue into the characters’ elderly years, which would require the actors to display more evident physical markers. Simple adjustments of makeup and costume could suffice to maintain a conventionally realistic mode of production, the range within audience suspension of disbelief – which is broad. The audience unquestioningly accepts the enactment of different ages on stage, an unchallenged convention of the stage that speaks to age as performative offstage, supporting the

“The play’s the thing”

assertion that constant iterations of performance constitute the ageing self (Lipscomb & Marshall 2010).

The narrative thread of *The Fourposter* transcends the typical binary construction of youth and old age to show both change and self-continuity from young adulthood to the cusp of old age. The choice and sequencing of major life events shape identity for Agnes and Michael in relation to the master narrative of the cyclical nature of human existence. Most intriguing in this type of play is the tension between a character’s proclamation of maturing self – a claim to the sort of progress narrative that Gullette (2004) has addressed – and the perceived stability of self that accompanies one actor’s portraying decades of the life course in only two hours. Studying the staging of such a play would allow scholars from numerous perspectives to raise questions about how a production can not only reflect but also influence attitudes about the life course – whether it facilitates intergenerational understanding. *The Fourposter* stretches the consideration of age as performative and narrative, viewing ageing as a predictable story that unites humans, who all are acting their age.

The Three Critical Turns and Anti-Ageist Social Theatre

Issues of age and ageing often have been deemed of minor importance (at best) in traditional plays and the scholarship surrounding them. More recently, accompanying the ageing of the post-World-War-II baby boomers in the United States, a number of plays have been published that overtly confront the concerns of ageing. Quite apart from plays such as *The Fourposter* that seldom mention age, these plays are narratives written to make sense of the ageing process, whether they directly or subtextually interrogate what it means to grow older. As Katz (2000) succinctly states, narratives “are practices that connect the contents of stories and the circumstances of storytelling to the art of rendering lives coherent and meaningful” (144). By depicting individualised characters, these plays address the individual meanings of ageing, asking whether these experiences are widespread and exploring the possibility of positive change. Frequently, they fall under the category of “social theatre,” as defined in Thompson and Schechner (2004): “theatre with specific social agendas; theatre where aesthetics is not the ruling objective; theatre outside the realm

of commerce, which drives Broadway/the West End, and the cult of the new, which dominates the avantgarde" (12). In addition to the performative and narrative lenses that are valuable in analysing these plays, the critical turn in ageing studies yields insights as well. Once again, the veins will intertwine, as anti-ageist social theatre uses narrative techniques to question current assumptions about and treatment of the elderly.

One script that recently has been capturing the attention of US senior performance groups, for example, is *ElderSpeak*, by Stevens (2010), which arose from seniors' experiences with ageist attitudes. It focuses on Joan, a woman in her 50s, as she copes with both a rehabilitation facility that is infantilising her mother, and the new ageist policies that her employer is adopting. The one-act script challenges norms of institutional care: In order to show the rehabilitation facility staff members that they are condescending to their patients, Joan asks Dunbar, the nursing supervisor, to pretend to be a new patient. Dunbar sits in a wheelchair and masquerades as a woman about 20 years older than her apparent age, as a nurse greets her:

HARRINGTON (to DUNBAR): Well, how are you young lady? (to JOAN) Dolly is it?

Doesn't she have a pretty name? Does she like it here at Shadyview Meadows?

(HARRINGTON fusses over DUNBAR) Here, Sweetie, let's get all comfy. (lifts DUNBAR's legs and places her feet rather roughly into the wheelchair footrests) I know we'll get along just fine. Would we like some yummy pudding for our tummy, Sweetheart?

DUNBAR: Quit talking to me like that. I'm an adult. And quit fussing over me. Talk to me, not them! Leave me alone. (17)

It takes only a moment for Dunbar to understand how insulting the staff's *elderspeak* is when she enacts old age on stage, when her actions create a reality of age. As she dons the physical markers of frailty, she immediately experiences the drastic change in interaction that accompanies advancing from middle to old age.

Turning a critical eye on how the US health care system continues to marginalise and objectify seniors, this script transforms everyday elder experiences into theatre for social change, a traditional function of

the theatre that involves all three turns in ageing studies. In a telephone interview (28 November 2011), playwright Stevens explained that the play is one of eight original works developed so far by the Silver Stage Players in Knoxville, Tennessee. The senior theatre group takes on such issues as post-retirement depression and losing a spouse, gathering stories from those who are connected with the local John T. O'Connor Senior Center, then using them as script material. "About ninety-nine percent of the script [*ElderSpeak*] happened to someone I know," Stevens recalled. Narrative and performance scholars may pursue the relationship between presenting a "real" story on stage, particularly portraying one's own story, and publishing that story as a dramatic script that anyone can perform.

From a performative view, the seniors who are depicting their own stories on stage create a special version of what Schechner (2001) describes as "showing doing," a conscious performance of self, even as the self is being created less consciously by repeated iterations of performance. Auslander (1997) explains that this performing body "can be understood as a body that exposes the ideological discourses producing it, through performance that insists on the body's status as a historical and cultural construct and that asserts the body's materiality" (92). Each performing aged body is contextualised by other onstage bodies as well as the hegemonic discourse of ageing. The sense of "truth" perceived in performing one's own experiences on stage can lead to social change off stage.

From a narrative perspective, the Silver Stage Players see the creation of onstage narrative as life writing; other theatre groups who purchase the script may regard it as a dramatic work that privileges verisimilitude. The shaping of such personal narrative into purposeful drama is the nature of social theatre. To fight ageism, these seniors are devising conscious narratives of the ageing self, which merit scholarly attention as an alternative form of life writing. One model for the narrative analysis of ageing in the dramatic text is supplied by Fries-Dieckmann (2009). Using Maierhofer and speaking of various elements in works by Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, Fries-Dieckmann concludes, "Above all, it is the narrative act that constitutes or rather negotiates old age identity in the plays" (195). Narrative critics can find theatre particularly insightful regarding age, in that the story is told in/by the body as well as in language. This emphasis on the physical narrative is particularly evident in

Stevens' play: The physical markers of age immediately lead to discriminatory treatment.

In staging works that intend social change, theatre practitioners often collaborate with outside groups, perhaps indicating willingness to cooperate with academic researchers as well. Because the Silver Stage Players wanted to investigate employment discrimination as well as more general ageism, the members worked with the Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee Office on Aging (2011), a public non-profit agency serving Knoxville and its surrounding county. According to its website (<http://www.knoxseniors.org/about.html>), the agency advocates for senior citizens, assesses their needs and coordinates services to meet those needs. The Office on Aging assisted the group in locating older citizens who were seeking jobs and believed they had encountered age bias, either in losing their positions or in being unable to find a new position. The script then takes a narrative approach to fighting ageism by representing those stories on stage. In the 2011 interview, Stevens reported that this real-life plot has generated numerous responses of recognition, as audience members stop the performers afterwards to tell them, "That's exactly what happened to me." Attending issues-oriented theatre is unusual for these audiences, Stevens noted, so the comic portions of the play are essential. "No one likes to be preached to," she said, "and this is a critical audience. If they don't like the play, they'll get up and leave. But we had capacity audiences for *ElderSpeak*."

Although many of those audience members already were aware of the cultural issues that the play engages and appreciated the drama's foregrounding of such concerns, others had internalised ageism so thoroughly that they did not believe they had experienced it. Stevens recounted that when the dozen members of the acting troupe asked senior centre participants for examples of ageist treatment, some claimed they knew of no examples. After viewing the play, they realised that they had indeed encountered ageism and age discrimination. "We definitely raised their awareness," Stevens asserted. Social theatre is intended to be transformative; these senior audiences were empowered to identify and fight against ageism in their everyday lives. Currently, this performing group's evidence of effectiveness in fighting ageism is anecdotal and informal; research could provide a more solid basis for their efforts.

“The play’s the thing”

Multi-disciplinary collaboration with such a group is again the most obvious option. However, as Thompson and Schechner (2004) observe regarding separate disciplines, “Social theatre is not – or at least in our view, ought not to be – limited to taking performance practices to ‘nontheatrical’ spaces, as a meeting of two distinct unrelated wholes: theatre and social work. We need to think, rather, about the dynamic interaction of the two practices, an interaction that can change both disciplines” (12–13). Perhaps, if performative, critical and narrative age studies scholars from such disciplines as literature, psychology and sociology also could be involved from script development through the production process to analysis of audience reception, truly transformative interdisciplinary scholarship would emerge in anti-ageist social theatre.

The Untapped Potential of Senior Theatre

The *ElderSpeak* script is designed for a mixed-age cast from 40s to late 70s, but it was developed by a senior theatre group and is marketed through ArtAge, an Oregon-based publisher specialising in supporting senior theatre. Senior theatre groups define themselves as being reserved for older performers, usually at least 50 years old and often composed primarily of retirees. While I have suggested that mainstream plays and activist drama hold potential insights for age studies scholars, the most obvious common ground for multi- and interdisciplinary efforts would be in the senior theatre movement. Basting (1998) paved the way for such projects in *Stages of Age*, which analyses the work of several senior theatre groups. She argues for scholarly attention to older actors: “Performance, in terms of how we perform ourselves in everyday life and in terms of theatrical representation, offers a way to imagine old age as a valuable stage of life; one that links generations, that is engaged in both the present and the past, and that is constantly changing. For older adults the very *act of acting* interrupts popularly held notions that old age is a narrative of decline and rigidity” (2). Still, more than a decade later, this branch of the arts remains woefully under-researched and under-theorised, despite its growth. The Senior Theatre Resource Center, affiliated with ArtAge Publications, has tracked the development of senior theatre from 79

US companies in 1999 to nearly 800 troupes in 2011 (Vorenberg 2011). The troupes sometimes attract theatre academics as directors or consultants, but seldom attract researchers or theorists. The potential for collaborative age studies work in senior theatre deserves to be tapped.

In addition to performing the real-life experiences of seniors, elders also challenge their culture's ageist stereotypes by creating alternative narratives and performing the age they choose, regardless of social constraints. Eighty-year-olds play the ingénue or the dashing romantic hero, the roles that society continues to claim are in their past, despite the insightful analysis by Gullette (2004) of performing younger ages. Gullette (2004) posits the notion of a "default body," a "package of habits" that become the physical self with repetition (161), reminiscent of the ageing body as performative. She emphasises the conscious choices of everyday bodily performance that can be transformative in altering perceptions of age, similar to the transformative power of performativity that Butler (1990) has discussed. While society may censure or simply humour the elder who is performing significantly younger on stage, Gullette argues that the performance is credible because that actor has in fact been younger – as opposed to the younger actor who has never been older (166). Still, casting practices favour the younger actor who performs an older character by adding wrinkle makeup and other markers of age, as if the audience will value those physical markers over the obvious psychological advantage that Gullette points out of having experienced the younger age being portrayed.

These senior troupes defy typical ageist casting practices, often in a gleefully self-aware, postmodern fashion. As Auslander (1997) explains, a tension continues to exist between scholars' postmodern understanding of the self as constructed and acting teachers' traditional pedagogy, which values being truthful, seeking truth. However unconsciously, senior actors often abandon that traditional model, playing what they do not believe to be true (such as teenage nubility), but constructing their own relative truth in performance and affirming a model of ageing that differs from the master narrative of decline and decay. Moreover, the groups do not necessarily promote the opposing master narrative of "successful" ageing, which sometimes denies the normality of changes that accompany old age. The troupes welcome seniors of all abilities, not only those who are exceptionally talented and physically able.

“The play’s the thing”

That welcoming atmosphere is an important social aspect of senior theatre, which rejects the typical decline narrative of seniors’ isolation and alienation. Particularly in contemporary US society, older people may be physically separated from biological families who are scattered all over the nation and world, but it is common for senior theatre participants to view the theatre as creating an extended family, a group of people who care about and for each other by choice (Vorenberg 2011). Moreover, these family-type groups often span about two generations of ages, from 50 to 90. Senior theatre troupes are known for reaching out beyond the troupe to make intergenerational connections as well, whether by collaborating in dramatic activities with students or mentoring young performers (Strimling 2004; Thomson 2009). Senior theatre is therefore typically fully engaged with the larger community.

Exploring a recent production by an exemplary troupe will illustrate some of the facets of senior theatre that would benefit from further age studies inquiry. According to its website (<http://www.sarasotaseniortheater.com>), the Sarasota Senior Theater (2011) group was founded in 2000 and “is the only official senior theater group in Florida. SST performs musical variety shows, dramas, and intergenerational projects.” The group merged with a respected community troupe in Sarasota and transformed into the Sarasota Silver Stars in September 2011. The senior theatre’s spring 2011 show, *The Blue Revue*, subtitled “The Bluest Show in Town,” combined musical numbers and sketches, all with a blue theme. Much of this was standard variety-show fare, but the show also included a section called “Burley-Que Blue,” featuring an elegant striptease and a Sally Rand-style fan dance. Of course, all the performers were over 50 years old, and most were at least 70. The burlesque elements of the show were performed absolutely straight, no irony or comic exaggeration, and only the soft lighting may be construed as an accommodation of aged bodies. A full feminist reading of the troupe’s choices, delving into the objectification of women throughout the show, is beyond the scope of this article, but it is intriguing from an age studies perspective to consider this strong burlesque denial of a narrative of decline and decay.

The entire burlesque section of the show challenged stereotypical notions of sexless older women who are no longer erotically appealing or inclined. While the women who stripped or participated in the fan

dance met contemporary standards of fitness for the exposed body, they also were visibly aged, choosing to bare skin that would be rejected as unattractive by the culture at large. The instance of striptease asks the audience to consider whether the aged woman is allowed to claim a fullness of identity, an unrestricted ability to perform a self, especially a self that remains consistent with the individual's past. According to *The Blue Revue's* playbill, some of the performers had been professional dancers or models in their youth; one had been crowned Miss Rhode Island Universe. As these women perform stereotypical female sex appeal, they continue to construct sexual outer selves despite the sense of alienation from the mirror image that Woodward (1991) has described as a mirror stage of old age, in which the older person rejects the strange, aged reflection, thereby rejecting old age (67). The dance performance can be read as a proclamation that this body, too, is attractive, is sexual and is integral to self-construction.

The theatre provides to the performers and the audiences a space where they can feel that freedom to construct the self, to engage in play, to examine taboos, to speak of the unspeakable, to imagine and explore possibilities. On stage, the senior can be overtly sexual or perform youth without the spectre of cultural censorship that may materialise off stage. As Schechner (1985) has noted about the nature of the staged performance, the actor is not the character, but also not *not* the character (110). The actor subjunctively behaves "as if" he or she were someone else, and rather safely lays a claim to that someone else. The conscious performance and behavior "as if" rely in part on the presence of an audience that also is conscious of the performance. The live performance is not fact but also not fully fiction. This in-between liminoid space is especially open to analysis relating to our understanding of the cultural construction of older age, exposing assumptions about elders.

This in-between space is evident in *The Blue Revue* in one additional element: Several scenes describe the characters on stage as being actors or performers from the past, rather than fictional characters. Performers impersonate Sally Rand, Marlene Dietrich, W. C. Fields, and so on, rather than characters that these performers depicted or generic singers and dancers. Perhaps, it is more comfortable for these seniors to add an extra layer of performance by representing a performer, rather than to lay claim

“The play’s the thing”

to a character directly. When the performers choose to portray characters from the past, they link present-day selves to memories, affecting their own self-construction as well as that of senior audience members. Likewise, the formats and plots of vaudeville-style shows are likely to be familiar; *The Blue Revue* included not only a scene between W. C. Fields and Mae West, but also a traditional meet-me-round-the-corner-in-a-half-an-hour routine. However, younger audience members may have no previous exposure to these bits or performers. While the seniors may feel more comfortable performing famous performers who are performing famous sketches, young audience members may have no forestructure for these scenes, and see a character for the first time, judging that character and scene on their own merits rather than through the layers of performance that older audiences see. The seniors have the opportunity not only to entertain but also to pass down a history or legacy of particular live performances to younger generations.

As scholars consider how to move forward in humanistic age studies, the intergenerational connection may be crucial. Critics such as Gullette (2011) recently have noted that as the youngest members of the US baby boom pass 45 years of age, and the oldest reach retirement age, tensions abound about generations feeling separated; we see possible generational conflict in policy debates about US entitlement programmes for seniors, such as Medicare and Social Security. Just as we explore bringing various disciplines together in our scholarship, we need to be considering how to bring generations together, to avoid isolating ageing studies from younger people as an us-versus-them concern. In the theatre, we can scrutinise intergenerational relationships not only in textual characterisation but also in production, such as addressing the casting practices in plays, or the relationships between senior theatre performers and the younger directors, stage crew and college students who may work with them. Members of the Silver Stage Players, for example, rely on the expertise of younger members of a related community theatre’s board of directors, who provide on-going backstage/offstage support.

Even though the senior theatre designation seems to create an artificial separation by age, it actually welcomes the major age demographic that has been overlooked in recognition of artistic worth. Typical casting practices in US theatre bring to the fore the cultural assumptions about the capabilities

of and limitations placed on the elderly, as directors routinely exclude elders based on presumptions of physical and mental impairment. The challenge issued by Schechner (1989) still is relevant: "It is time to break the chains binding the performing arts to a narrow vision of human possibility. We need to see on our theatre and dance stages women and men dancing and acting in roles previously reserved for one gender or the other; old people playing a variety of parts; and a full-fleshed parade of body types" (10). The growth of senior theatre may dispel myths about the mental and physical capabilities of senior actors. A senior theatre troupe often is organisationally connected to a community theatre group, and there may be cross-casting or other types of collaboration between the two companies, increasing understanding about age-appropriate casting.

Concluding Comments

Swinnen (2011) calls for "discipline-challenging dialogues" along the "three paradigm shifts in the cross-disciplinary study of aging" that will "open new ways of collaborating." The many-faceted nature of the theatre challenges the disciplines with each performance. Scholars from any humanities-related discipline may rise to the challenge, devising collaborative projects to investigate age from numerous vantage points. As an indication of the type of collaboration I suggest, I point to Basting's recent work, *The Penelope Project* (2011), a bold move in this direction, as is evident from the project's website (<http://penelopeproject.wordpress.com/about/>):

The Penelope Project used the story of Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey* to engage an entire long term care community in creativity and learning. Discussion groups, movement exercises, visual art, stories, and music all emerged from this multi-year project that culminated in the performance of "Finding Penelope," a professionally-produced play staged inside the care facility. Over 400 people attended the performances, which were staged in March, 2011 ... The evaluation plan includes pre/post surveys of students; assessing student coursework; focus groups with residents; interviews with staff; analysis of all materials that emerge from the project; and audience feedback in post-show discussions.

The project culminates in a documentary film, a summer institute and a book – obviously an interdisciplinary effort involving a broad spectrum of academics and professionals. Although the data are still being

“The play’s the thing”

analysed at this point, the work appears to be extraordinary and transformative for all those involved, with a great deal of credit to Basting’s talent and artistic vision. Basting’s blog for the project explains: “We endeavored to lift an entire care facility (and all those who live and work there) to the level of symbol – to mean *more* than what the world associates them with, aging and dying. We endeavored to make an entire care facility a symbol of meaning and possibility.” The Penelope Project may be so distinctive that it would be challenging to replicate its results. How might others launch similar efforts? One option, especially for literary critics and narrative-oriented scholars who are accustomed to analysing published texts, would be collaboration with established troupes in the traditional theatre, who perform published scripts, such as those described earlier in this essay. Multi- or interdisciplinary teams of scholars could focus on intergenerational or senior theatre troupes, addressing not only performative elements but also the scripts’ narratives, the performers’ health (physical/mental/emotional), the context of relations to the larger community, the conscious and unconscious responses to ageism evident in their work and their effect on the age-oriented attitudes of their audiences. Moreover, this type of collaboration can convince funding agencies of the practical relevance and importance of humanities approaches to ageing. The Silver Stage Players, for example, have received grants from agencies on ageing, despite lacking research showing benefits for performers and audiences.

While researchers such as Katz (2000) have found some negative reaction among seniors to institutionalised planned activities, which are seen as busyness for its own sake in a society that values activity, senior theatre performers commonly claim that their involvement gives them a new lease on life. Stevens noted the concrete positive effects that her troupe’s participants attest to anecdotally: “Their minds are better from memorising lines, and they breathe better from having to breathe deeply when they project their lines.” Audience members claim a more sophisticated comprehension of ageism, also. “Our purpose is to empower seniors, to give them actual information about ageism so they can go out and do something about it,” she added. No doubt their work can become more effective if based on academic research, possibly building on work such as that by Helga and Tony Noice, who represent exemplary small-scale

interdisciplinary age/theatre research, as the team comprises a psychologist and a theatre professional. Noice and Noice (2009) tested 122 older adults before and after four weeks of acting training. Those who participated in multi-modal acting activities similar to college-level acting classes improved on both cognitive and affective assessments. Research such as the Noices' and Basting's tends to take theatre activities into senior-living centres, while I advocate also working with troupes and/or scripts that highlight the performance of age, to take the researchers into the theatre. Perhaps psychologists, sociologists, social work researchers, literary critics, theatre researchers and performance scholars could team to study numerous aspects of one theatrical production, discovering together how the theatre yields insights into age and ageing.

Those involved in theatre from the ancient Greek religious festivals to today claim its significance in intellectual, emotional and spiritual realms. Considering the work of Augusto Boal and Herbert Blau, Auslander (1997) concludes that the theatre itself creates in the audience the desire for an experience of community and unity (100). We seek our shared experiences in the theatre; we pursue a belief in shared experience. The shared experience of ageing is integral to the theatre, as it is an art created over time, displaying a heightened presence of self in the actors, the crew and the audience. The narrative interchange, the shared story of actor and audience separates theatre from other genres, opening possibilities for what art can be, do and mean in age studies. Just as Hamlet concludes that "the play's the thing" because audience members may be "struck so to the soul" (Shakespeare 2008: 2.2.596) that they reveal their inner selves, so can academics fruitfully turn to the theatre to continue revealing the significance of age and ageing in contemporary culture.

Acknowledgements

An abbreviated version of this article was presented at the 7th International Symposium on Cultural Gerontology/Inaugural Conference of the European Network in Aging Studies, Maastricht, the Netherlands, in October 2011.

Corresponding Author

Valerie Barnes Lipscomb, University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, 8350 N. Tamiami Trail, C263, Sarasota, FL 34243, USA. Email: lipscomb@sar.usf.edu

References

- Auslander, P. (1997). *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge.
- Basting, A. D. (1998). *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Basting, A. D. (2000). Performance studies and age. In T. R. Cole, R. Kastenbaum & R. E. Ray (eds.), *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging* (pp. 258–271). New York: Springer.
- Broadway League. (2012). The Internet Broadway database. Available on <http://www.ibdb.com> (Accessed: May 15, 2012).
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Deats, S. M. & Lenker, L. T. (eds.). (1991). *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- De Hartog, J. (1951). *The Fourposter*. New York: Random House.
- Freeman, P. & Nelson, M. (1989). 6,500 ‘I Do’s’ make for one sturdy marriage for Susan Goepfinger and fellow actor David Anders. *People* 31(17).
- Fries-Dieckmann, M. (2009). Performing old age on stage: Selected plays by Beckett, Pinter and Stoppard. In H. Hartung & R. Maierhofer (eds.), *Narratives of Life: Mediating Age* (pp. 183–195). Berlin: Lit Verlag.
- Gullette, M. M. (2004). *Aged by Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gullette, M. M. (2011). *Age-wise*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hartung, H. & Maierhofer, R. (eds.). (2009). *Narratives of Life: Mediating Age*. Berlin: Lit Verlag.
- Hennessy, C. H. & Walker, A. (2011). Promoting multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary ageing research in the United Kingdom. *Ageing & Society* 31(1): 52–69.

- Holstein, M. B. & Minkler, M. (2003). Self, society, and the "new gerontology". *Gerontologist* 43(6): 787–796.
- Katz, S. (2000). Busy bodies: Activity, aging, and the management of everyday life. *Journal of Aging Studies* 14(2): 135–152.
- Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee Office on Aging. (2011). Available on <http://www.knoxseniors.org/about.html> (Accessed: November 20, 2011).
- Lenker, L. T. & Lipscomb, V. B. (2002). Reflections of the aging Caesar: Drama as cultural perspective. *Journal of Aging and Identity* 7(4): 275–286.
- Lipscomb, V. B. & Marshall, L. (eds.). (2010). *Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance, and Film*. New York: Palgrave.
- Loxley, J. (2007). *Performativity*. London: Routledge.
- Miller, A. (1996). *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Viking.
- Noice, H. & Noice, T. (2009). An arts intervention for older adults living in subsidized retirement homes. *Aging, Neuropsychology, and Cognition* 16(1): 56–79.
- Sarasota Senior Theater. (2011). Available on <http://www.sarasotaseniortheater.com> (Accessed: September 20, 2011).
- Schechner, R. (1985). *Between Theatre and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Schechner, R. (1989). Race free, gender free, body-type free, age free casting. *The Drama Review* 33(1): 4–12.
- Schechner, R. (2001). Performance studies in/for the 21st century. *Anthropology and Humanism* 26(2): 158–166.
- Shakespeare, W. (2008). *Hamlet*. In *The Norton Shakespeare, Based on the Oxford Edition*, 2nd ed., gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Stalpaert, C. (2012). Staging age and aging in "The Rite of Spring": Reconstruction or critical intervention? In A. Swinnen & J. A. Stotesbury (eds.), *Aging, Performance and Stardom. Doing Age on the Stage of Consumerist Culture* (pp. 53–74). Wien: LITVerlag.
- Stevens, J. M. (2010). *ElderSpeak*. Portland, OR: ArtAge.
- Strimling, A. (2004). *Roots & Branches: Creating Intergenerational Theatre*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Swinnen, A. (2011). *Introduction to the Conference Theorizing Age: Challenging the Disciplines*. Program Overview. Maastricht University.
- The Penelope Project. (2011). Available on <http://penelopeproject.wordpress.com/about/> (Accessed: November 2, 2011).
- Thompson, J. & Schechner, R. (2004). Why “social theatre”? *The Drama Review* 48(3): 11–16.
- Thomson, D. (2009). “Are we there yet?": Challenging notions of age and aging through intergenerational performance. *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts* 3(2): 115–133.
- Vogel, P. (1997). *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive and The Minneola Twins*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Vorenberg, B. (2011). *The New Senior Theatre Survey*. Available on <http://www.seniortheatre.com> (Accessed: November 15, 2011).
- Wilder, T. (1957). *Our Town*. In *Three Plays by Thornton Wilder*. New York: Bantam.
- Woodward, K. (1991). *Aging and Its Discontents*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Zeilig, H. (2012). The critical use of narrative and literature in gerontology. *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life* 6(2): 7–37.