A Student’s Work Placement as Project Coordinator

I undertook the role of Project Coordinator as a work placement during my studies at the University of Greenwich. This role enabled me to work closely with intergenerational actors, ranging from university Drama students to older people from the Greenwich Pensioners Forum, in addition to Pam Schweitzer and Heather Lilley. I was able to direct performances, work with current students on the Applied Drama course using materials from the archive to inspire them and I helped them in the creation of their pieces. I was also able to assist in the organisation of events and workshops. A stand out moment for me during my placement was my part in the event: ‘A Reminiscence Theatre and Oral History Day’. I assisted in the running of the day and directed and co-directed two of the pieces performed.

A Reminiscence Theatre and Oral History Day

On the 9th October 2015, the University of Greenwich and the European Reminiscence Network came together to share work both within theatre and history projects. The day began with the Reminiscence Theatre Archive sharing performances that had been created over previous weeks, followed by guest speakers, including partners of the European Reminiscence Network from Dresden, Germany, involving a performance from a young theatre group. The afternoon consisted of the Memory Grand Challenge, organised by the university’s History Department, showcasing work that had been done recently, including Memories of War and The Great War Greenwich projects.
Wartime Memories

The morning began with the premiere of a play created by Pam Schweitzer and co-directed by Heather Lilley and myself.

_Wartime Memories_ was performed by members of the Greenwich Pensioners Forum, focusing on their own experiences and memories of World War II, brought to life from transcribed interviews. They had no previous acting experience and were aged from 81 to 98. The performance delved into the lives of these people as children and young people growing up during a very different time.

All of the actors played themselves, they reminisced about their childhoods - except for one lady, May Wellard, who was in her twenties when war broke out. They talked about the games they used to play, what happened during air raids and how it felt when the war was finally over. Most of the actors had scripts with them on stage for their performance, but used them only for support. They were surprised with themselves how well they had learnt their lines! There was one lady, Joan Harbottle, who was set to act in the play too, but unfortunately, she found it all too much during the rehearsal period and didn’t feel that she could continue, but still came to every rehearsal to support the others!

Heather Lilley stepped in and played her instead, speaking her memories for her. It
was interesting, and worked well, despite the age difference! The other actors leaned on Heather for support and often followed her lead during rehearsals - I think they found it comforting having someone in the play who was familiar with the whole process.

My role throughout the rehearsal period of this performance was not only to assist with direction of the piece, but also to generally support the actors. They would often feel nervous or lose confidence in their ability and I was there to reassure them and keep them going. I also organised lighting for the performance and had assembled various photographs to be projected on to the backdrop whilst the actors performed and I controlled this on the day. Everyone was really pleased how well these photographs complimented the stories told.

The performance was such a success, others watching were in tears and it was so touching to see people relive their memories and younger people further their understanding of what it was like at that time. I myself had a brilliant time helping to create this performance – I met some wonderful people it was so lovely to learn that not everything that happened during World War II was completely awful and terrifying – people just had to carry on. The actors who shared their stories with me explained that as they did not truly know any different, they of course had many happy memories too. I enjoyed learning of these happy memories, as it is not something that you are usually taught about.
You only know of the obvious terror of the time period, and that is all you can imagine, but meeting these people and hearing several stories of their lives at the time helps you to comprehend what it was truly like for them.

**Cast:**

Ann Webb  
John Webb  
Jean Wilkins  
Joan Harbottle (portrayed by Heather Lilley)  
Joan Plant  
Olive Williams  
May Wellard

**Wartime is Over**

The next piece to be showcased at ‘A Reminiscence Theatre and Oral History Day’ was a performance by third year University of Greenwich Drama students, based on real stories within the Reminiscence Theatre Archive, directed by myself, with creative guidance from Heather Lilley. The story captured moments from VE Day and revolved around a street party in London where people joined together to celebrate and look to the future. We created a collage, in a way, of two Reminiscence Theatre performances that we created when we studied on the Applied Drama course last year. I re-wrote
the scripts so that we could use the best of both pieces, extracting stories that
complimented each other and worked in the party setting.

It was useful for me to be working with the older people and the students at the same
time, as I used experience from working with the pensioners and transferred what I
had learnt to assist me in the direction of *Wartime is Over*. I used my newfound
knowledge of how people who had experienced the war delivered their stories to help
me direct the people who have no real life experience of it.

The play was a triumph, audience members said that we really captured the
atmosphere of the street parties and told the stories in such a believable way,
including the older people who had had street parties of their own after the war.

**Cast:**

Eileen Taylor-Horsley
Jack Hewitt
Flinn McManus
Kate Taylor
Jolanta Vimba
Yafhet Habte
Emily Peplow

**Dresden Group**

The final theatre performance of the conference was when partners of the European
Reminiscence Network from Germany showcased a short theatre piece by a young
theatre group. The performance was based on memories of Dresden as told to the actors themselves by older relatives. The piece involved looking at history from different perspectives and angles, for example, looking at war through glasses of peace.

**Cast:**

Nina Deubel  
Helene Uhlig  
Lea Schubert  
Shirin Azizi Ghanbari  
Anna Hartig  
Katharina Dittrich  
Sandra Wirth  
Matthias Neutzner

**Guest Speakers**

A collection of guests spoke and allowed for general discussion at the event.

**Pam Schweitzer** – MBE, Honorary Research Fellow, University of Greenwich, Coordinator of European Reminiscence Network.

**Heather Lilley** – Drama Programme leader and senior lecturer, University of Greenwich.

**June Balshaw** – Head of History Programme, University of Greenwich.

**Frank Matzke** – Senior lecturer in Drama, University of Applied Sciences, Frankfurt, Germany.

**Myrto-Helena Pertsinidi** – Jugend und Kultur Projekt, Dresden, Germany,
coordinator of 'Remembering the Past, Building the Future', an international project including the European Reminiscence Network and the University of Greenwich and Greenwich Pensioners Forum.

**Workshop**

On the 10th October, the day following the conference event, the actors and speakers who had joined us from Dresden, Germany, accompanied Pam Schweitzer, the Greenwich pensioners and myself to a workshop. This workshop was an intercultural and intergenerational endeavour, used to share stories of different places at the same time. Within this workshop everyone was paired up - one Greenwich pensioner and one young person from Dresden. Within these groups, stories were shared of World War II, whether it be their own or those of older relatives. Using the stories, the pairs created snapshots together and short scenes. Everyone found it enlightening to hear
stories of British and German people during the war, discovering that it was utterly terrifying for everyone.

**Applied Drama**

Additionally, as part of my placement I worked with Heather Lilley on the Applied Drama course. First, I created inspiration packs for the Reminiscence Theatre groups. They were not just to inspire, but also for the groups to take stories, anecdotes or transcripts from the packs and use them in their performances. They were based on old winter and Christmas memories during World War II and I collected them from resources found from the archive. Once they were made, I began to work with the people using them, helping them choose stories and how they could bring these tales and clippings to life. Sometimes we hit difficulties – a few students got stuck on ideas, but I was there to help them work through it, to be the voice of encouragement or to tell them to move on and try something else.

The end performances were brilliant, they captured snapshots in time, including anecdotes about Christmas puddings and parties and also the difficulties faced during the winter, like illness and the sheer cold!

Overall, my experience working with Pam Schweitzer and Heather Lilley as part of the Reminiscence Theatre Archive Company has been extremely valuable. I have furthered my skills in directing and organising and have gained experience in communicating on an intergenerational and intercultural level. I believe that the reason that the company is so useful and successful is because the archive preserves all manner of stories, not only bad, but also wonderful stories of love and families.
These stories could otherwise be forgotten if not stored and theatre can be created to bring these stories back to life, for elderly people to reminisce from and younger people to learn from.

Charlotte Price-Stevens