

JUBILEE



An Age Exchange Publication

JUBILEE

Memories, Photos,
a Play and the story
of how it was made



by Pam Schweitzer
with The Good Companions
and volunteers from
Age Exchange

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About Age Exchange

Founded in 1983, Age Exchange is a charity devoted to improving the quality of life of older people by emphasising the value of their reminiscences and life stories. We operate nationwide, undertaking projects in community and daycare centres, residential homes, schools and youth groups, and running training courses for community and health workers. Visitors are welcome at our Reminiscence Centre in Blackheath Village, South East London (easily accessible from Charing Cross, Waterloo, Victoria and London Bridge stations).

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INTRODUCTION

What Age Exchange does

Age Exchange is a charity where we believe that memories matter. By sharing stories across generations and cultures, we seek to celebrate the extraordinary lives of 'ordinary' people who have lived through the massive social upheavals of the 20th century, travelling huge distances in time, place, relationships and attitudes.

Our base is the Reminiscence Centre, a unique community centre in South East London, with its own hands-on museum of everyday life in the 1930s and 40s. The Centre also hosts a gallery where three-dimensional interactive exhibitions are created around the memories of older Londoners from many cultures on different aspects of their lives. It is the focus for a wide range of cultural activities involving older people, and a centre for inter-generational projects in which young people can engage with their elders in creative exploration of the past.





Over the years Age Exchange has pioneered many new ways to bring the life experiences of older people to a wider public across the UK and in many European countries. These include developing original reminiscence theatre shows, exhibitions, educational workshops and publications.

A new reminiscence play to mark the Golden Jubilee

On May 29th 2002, to mark the occasion of the Jubilee celebrations and the 15th anniversary of the Centre's opening, a new reminiscence theatre piece called "Jubilee" was premiered at the Age Exchange Reminiscence Centre in Blackheath. This new play was performed by The Good Companions, a group of older volunteers who enjoy making theatre from their own lives with professional direction. The play was based on stories of the early 1950s told by members of the group. During the development period, these stories became the basis for improvisations, which were then written into a script, with music of the period suggested by the group members. May 29th was the first of many performances to older audiences across London and beyond during the Jubilee year.

The audience at the premiere of "Jubilee" and the party which followed it were volunteers at the Reminiscence Centre. They were asked to bring along to the celebration an object connected with the period and to share the memories it evoked. People brought photos, souvenirs and even Oxo cubes and Heinz baby food tins,

which held memories for them. They shared their reminiscences of life in London and abroad in the early 1950s around the time of the Queen's Coronation. These stories were recorded and the objects photographed to preserve this modest record. Warmest thanks to all who have agreed to share their experiences with a wider audience through these pages.

A booklet of Jubilee memories

New Horizons Trust kindly funded Age Exchange to produce the new Good Companions play marking the Jubilee and to publish a booklet of memories of the period. We have decided to publish the script of "Jubilee" as it includes many good stories of the period in an unusual format; the past brought to life as though it is happening in the present. We have often been asked to describe how we create theatre from memories, so a brief rehearsal notebook is included to shed some light on this process, explaining how each session was structured and how the stories were "worked out on the floor". All the songs and stage directions have been included as well as the spoken word, to help the reader to get the feel of the play in performance.

We hope that readers will find this book enjoyable, triggering memories of the 1950s and giving the inspiration to share these memories with friends and family. We hope they will also find it informative, showing as it does how memories can be used creatively by older people themselves, shaped into an artistic product and then shared more widely for the benefit of the whole community.



JUBILEE: THE SCRIPT

Scene 1: End of War Celebrations

Cast enter to peal of bells sharing joy with the audience that the war is over, with piano playing peal of bells as they sing:

All Sing: 'Happy days are here again
And the skies above are clear again
Let us sing a song of cheer again
Happy days are here again.'

Hilda: *(stepping forward and preparing to dance with Eileen)* All the Mums were out in the streets, doing 'Knees up Mother Brown'

All sing: 'Knees Up Mother Brown
Knees Up Mother Brown
Knees up knees up,
Don't get the breeze up
Knees Up Mother Brown.'

Piano introduction to "Yes, we have no bananas." The cast form a queue outside an imaginary shop.

Eileen: The war may be over, but we're still queuing.

Hilda: What are we queuing for? Does anyone know? I've just queued for an hour and then found it was for horse meat. What a waste of time!

Lil: *(indicating Kitty as pregnant lady beside her)* Here, let her go to the front. She's expecting. *(Pregnant lady gets pushed to the front of the queue)*

Hilda: It's probably a Yank's baby. You can tell.

Kitty: My baby's due next week. I hope I get some sugar.

I'm craving for sugar.

Joan: *(showing her ration book to Hilda, standing in the queue in front of her)* Look I've got this ration book and I don't really know what I'm doing. I was only married last week. My mum did it all before cos I was working till then.

Hilda: Don't you know what to do then?

Ralph sells black market items (nylons and cigarettes) to Kathy.

Lil: I was shocked when they put bread on ration. It's worse than during the war.

Hyacinth: I'm in the Caribbean on the island of Antigua queuing for sugar, which is odd as that's where all the sugar comes from.

Kathy: I've queued for ages to get one orange on my baby's green ration book.

Margaret: And we won the war!

All Sing: 'Yes, we have no bananas
We have no bananas today.'



Scene 2: The men come home

Eileen steps forward, holding a picture of her husband, Bill and looking at it.

All sing: 'Coming home my darling
Coming home to you
I can see your bright eyes shining
Every cloud has a silver lining.'

Eileen: It's 1945 and Bill's been demobbed out of the army. They've given him a lovely brown suit with a chalk stripe and a trilby hat. He looks very good in it. It's wonderful to have him back. And I'm back in London now too. Until recently I've been working up north on an assembly line making aeroplane wings for Wellington Bombers. But now I'm home and Bill and I are finally able to set up home together. We've found three rooms to rent in a big old house round the corner from my mum. A neighbour said to me, "Three rooms! What do you want with three rooms? There's only the two of you." Well we were just lucky, don't you think?

Eileen steps back into the group.

All sing: 'Through the years of sadness
We'll be smiling through
Waiting for the day when I'll be
Coming home to you.'

Hilda steps forward.

Hilda: Well, I wasn't so lucky I can tell you. Stuck in one room with a baby. A double bed, the baby's cot and a table and two chairs. No room to move. My husband was fed up, so he sent off for forms to get what they called an assisted passage to Australia. Lots of

people were going. You could get a one-way ticket for £10. We spent two whole nights filling in these forms. Pages long they were. Then he said, "No, I don't want to go. I don't want to leave my mum." I was furious. I tore all the forms up and threw them in the bin.

Hilda returns to the group. Margaret steps forward.

Margaret: My husband was offered his old job back after the war at £3 a week. Well that's what he was on before the war. He felt very let down by that, so he wanted to go to Australia. But then we got a letter from a friend of ours who'd gone out there. She said it was horrible. She was living in a tin Nissan hut full of insects and the heat was unbearable. Her little girl had developed a skin condition and they couldn't get proper treatment. They just wanted to come home. Well, we didn't fancy it after that.

Margaret returns to the group. The actors sing the following in a choreographed routine as explorers and sailors.

All sing: 'All over the place
Wherever the sea may happen to be
A sailor is found, a-knocking around
All over the place.'

Hyacinth steps forward.

Hyacinth: I was on the island of Barbuda in the Caribbean, and all the young men that had been in the forces during the war were so proud of themselves. They were walking around in their uniforms to show they'd been fighting for king and country. Of course they'd seen a lot more of the world and a lot of them wanted to leave the Caribbean and settle in England or America.

Hyacinth steps back. The group sings, as sailors.

All sing: 'All over the place
The north or the south
The east or the west
Half of the world tattooed on his chest
All over the place.'

The cast sit in chairs at the back of the stage.

Scene 3: New conflicts abroad

Ralph steps forward.

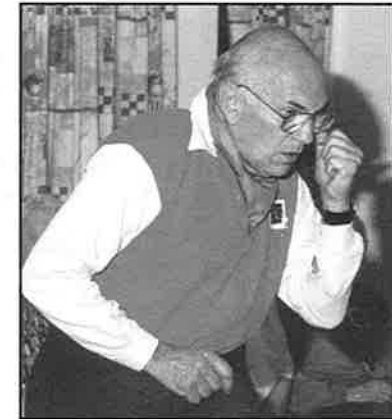
Ralph: It's 1950 and I'm a corporal in the Royal Army Ordinance Corps. I've been posted to Berlin in the British army of occupation in Germany. I've travelled through devastated cities with names familiar to me from radio broadcasts in the war years. All bombed to bits. *(Ralph walks a few steps across the stage.)* Now I'm standing all alone in the Berlin Olympic stadium. It's huge, it held 100,000 people in 1936 and now it's empty and silent. I'm standing at the podium where Hitler addressed the crowds and thinking this is where the whole terrible business started. Oops I've got to go and man the phones at army command. *(Ralph walks across to a different area of the stage.)* They've said it will be all quiet, a piece of cake, boring really and I should take a book. Ah yes, the black phone is for the sergeant and the red phone is for emergency calls from army headquarters.

Ralph settles into his office onstage. One of the cast members makes the sound of a telephone ringing. He picks up the phone.

Ralph: Hello? *(Ralph mimes using a pen and paper to "take notes").* Inform all unit commanders Soviet troop movements increasing. Yes, all leave cancelled.

Yes, demobilisation postponed. Situation status red. Yes, war broken out in Korea. *(He hangs up the phone and picks up the phone from the other side of the desk to make a phone call.)* Sergeant Major. Corporal Gooding here sir. Serious situation. Can you come over? *(To audience)* So much for boredom!

All of the cast members make the sound of telephones ringing. Ralph sits down with the rest of the cast. Joan and Kitty step forward, one on each side of the stage. They are each holding love letters.



Joan: *(Reading letter from Ron)* November 1950, Malaya. Hiya honey. Hope you're well. Missing you. Only another two months to go. We've been having intensive jungle manoeuvres and things are really hotting up. Double guard duty and live ammo. All leave cancelled. I think it's the trouble in Korea that's affecting us here. Got a bit tipsy the other night with the lads. Now don't tell me off but I had a tattoo done all up my arm. It says "JOAN" in a circle of flowers. You'll have to stay with me now! I don't even remember having it done. Please keep writing. Longing for the time when we will be together. All love, Ron. P.S. Just received devastating news. Our time out here has been extended by another six months. Will write when I know more.

Kitty: *(Reading letter from Bill)* Ooh, a letter from Bill at last! 3rd March 1951. Tripoli. My darling Kitty. Sorry I haven't written for a few weeks. I wasn't allowed to

move because I was bitten by a scorpion. (*She gasps*). I'm all right now and I didn't want to worry you by telling you. We're all feeling a bit fed up. We've heard that National Service is being extended to two years because of the war in Korea. Longing to get back home and start life again with you. All my love, Bill.

Joan and Kitty continue to stand on opposite sides of the stage. They sing the following song while the rest of the cast, seated on their chairs, hums along.

Joan & Kitty: 'You'll never know just how much I miss you
You'll never know just how much I care
And if I tried, I still couldn't hide
My love for you
You ought to know,
For haven't I told you so
A million or more times?

You went away
And my heart went with you
I speak your name in my every prayer
If there is some other way
To prove that I love you
I swear I don't know how
You'll never know
If you don't know now.'

Kitty: When Bill came home, we went out dancing every night, the Hammersmith Palais, the New Cross Empire, Greenwich Town Hall... we had a ball. But then that stopped because we were saving to get married and start a family.

Scene 4: Baby-boom Mothers with babies in prams

Joan steps forward, imitating rocking a baby in a pram. She sings:

Joan: 'Bye baby bunting, Daddy's gone a-hunting.'

Joan continues to rock her baby as Margaret steps forward. She sings:

Margaret: 'How much is that doggy in the window?'

Margaret and Joan rock their babies as Eileen steps forward. She sings:

Eileen: 'Mares eat oats and does eat oats
And little lambs eat ivy.'

Eileen, Margaret, and Joan continue to rock their babies as Kitty steps forward to sing:

Kitty: 'Go to sleep my baby, close your pretty eyes,' etc

Piano music begins as all of the cast members stand in a line across the stage. Ralph is standing offstage.

All sing: 'Twenty tiny fingers, twenty tiny toes
Two angel faces each with a turned up nose
One looks like Mommy with a cute little curl on top
And the other one's got a big bald spot.'



Ralph takes on the role of a father. He moves down the row, crouching so he doesn't block the faces of the actors, and pretends to take photos of all his children. The ladies point at Ralph as he moves down the line taking photos.

'Exactly like his Pop
Pop, pop, pop
Poppedy pop, pop, pop
Poppedy pop.'

Scene 5: Early 50s images of mothers and babies

Margaret: I'm bouncing the pram down four flights of stairs from our one bed-roomed flat in an old Victorian house in Holloway. My daughter Pat, she's four now, is "helping". Hold on to the banisters love, that's right. First we've got to cross the big main road. You take your life in your hands. There's no crossings. *(She talks to her invisible daughter)*. Hold on to me Pat. We're going to walk all the way up the hill with the pram to Waterlow Park. That's the nearest park and it's miles away. *(She talks to her daughter)*. There you are Pat, see the ducks. There's a bit of bread for them. On the way back I call in at the shops for three slices bacon, a bit of cheese, margarine and a loaf. I give my Co-op number. And I get a co-op tin check which I'll save towards something from the Co-op for Pat for Christmas. Then it's bump, bump, bump up the stairs again with the pram. *(She talks to her daughter)*. Shush, Daddy's on night work. Don't wake him up.

Margaret sits with the rest of the cast. Hilda steps forward.

Hilda: I've been pushing this pram round all day without speaking to a soul. We're living on one of these new council estates out at Harold Hill. It's miles from anywhere. When they offered it to us we had to look on

the map to find it. Course we had to take it cos we were living in one room back in Stratford. Oh it's lovely inside. Full of things we've never had before, and new furniture.

Hyacinth: In the Caribbean, only the rich folk had prams. We didn't. You carried your baby on your hip. That's why I still walk with a list. Actually this is not my baby. It's my little sister. I'm looking after her for my mum while she's working in the fields. I was still at school in Barbuda in 1951. I'm so pleased when my mum comes back and I can go and play with my friends. *(Hyacinth recites Caribbean clapping rhyme.)* 'Mosquito one, mosquito two, mosquito jump in the old man's shoe. One pound ten, Dominica hen, All jump up and come down again.'

The piano plays "Island in the Sun" as the rest of the cast sing and dance to the music.

All sing: 'Oh island in the sun
Willed to me by my father's hand
All my days I will sing in praise
Of your forests, waters, your shining sand.'

The cast returns to their seats, this time forming two groups of women sitting on the terrace at a club, sipping drinks, smoking, etc. Olive (who has been playing the piano) steps forward.

Olive: There's plenty of sand where I am. It's 1951 and I'm a long way away from London. I'm in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. My husband Tom works for a big American oil company and we're living out here now. It's Thursday night and that's the beginning of the Muslim weekend out here. I always come up to the club for a meal and drinks with friends. All the wives sit out on the terrace looking out over the desert and that's where you hear all the latest gossip and scandal.

Let's see what this lot are on about. *(One of the seated groups of women begin excitedly, and silently, gossiping. Olive walks up to them. She bends down to listen. She turns to the audience.)* Ooh, I daren't tell you what they're saying!

Kitty calls to Olive from the group gossiping on the other side of the stage.

Kitty: Hey Olive, where's Milly Fisher tonight?

Olive: Haven't you heard?

Kitty: No. What happened?

Olive: Well they've sent her home. *(The group reacts. Olive walks across the stage to speak with them)* She was at a bachelor party in the old buildings and she'd had a lot to drink. Well, you know they've got those big stone fireplaces and mantelpieces. Well, she was standing naked on the mantelpiece posing as a statue for the fellas. And someone from security came in and caught her. So she's on her way home.

Hilda: It's always the women who get sent back isn't it? The fellas never get into trouble do they?

Olive: She's going to find it a bit of a come-down in a couple of rooms in Surbiton.

The group on the other side of the stage looks out onto the horizon.

Lil & Kathy: Ooh look, shooting stars!

Hyacinth: Let's makes a wish.

Eileen: It's like a firework display.

Margaret: Look there's a train of camels on the horizon.

Olive steps forward.

Olive: As a matter of fact, a lot of those families who lived the ex-pat life never settled back in England, and they spent the rest of their lives travelling while their children grew up in boarding schools in England. Well I didn't want that. I had a good time out there, but I was glad to come home. We'd saved enough out there in Bahrain for the deposit on a nice house of our own in Sidcup.

Olive leads the group in reciting:

All: 'Ours is a nice house ours is
We've got no rats or mice
It's cheap, cheap, cheap, sweet, sweet, sweet
Ours is a nice house, ours is.'

Olive returns to the piano. Kathy steps forward.

Scene 7: Kathy and the pre-fab story

Kathy: In the early 1950s the Council gave us a prefab. I moved in there with my husband and my little boy. We were very pleased to get it as we'd been living in one room in my parents' house. *(Eileen steps forward)* Well the council woman said to us:

Eileen: These prefabs are coming down in 6 months. We'll be putting you in something new, so don't bother unpacking.

Kathy: Well months passed and nothing happened. No news from the council, but we kept most of our stuff packed up, ready to go when they told us. And I had my second son there a little while afterwards. *(Eileen steps forward.)* I went up the Housing Department for news and the woman said:

Eileen: Oh yes, the new place will be ready in a couple of months. Don't bother unpacking anything. It'll be any time now.

Kathy: Well, I knew where the new council flats were supposed to be being built, but there was no progress and I began to give up. When I had my third son and was wanting to get settled, *(Eileen steps forward)* I went back to see the housing lady.

Eileen: Yes, I'm afraid there has been a delay, but it'll be any time now. Don't bother unpacking.

Kathy: You won't believe me if I tell you it took eleven years for them to provide us with a new home. *(Ralph steps forward and mimes straightening out his uniform).* Well, by that time it was a bit late for us as a family. My husband had been working as a chauffeur, with a smart uniform, driving a beautiful car. *(Margaret steps forward on the stage opposite)* They gave us a telephone, so he could get called all hours of the day or night.

Phone rings

Margaret: Please can I speak to George?

Kathy: It's for you.

She hands the phone to Ralph.

Ralph: Right. Yes yes, I'll be there. Sorry love. What can I do?

Ralph walks off the stage then returns to the same side he was on before.

Kathy: I got a bit suspicious when this same woman kept

phoning the house asking for him to go and collect her. She'd phone at night time too.

Phone rings

Margaret: Please can I speak to George?

Kathy: And off he'd go, all booted and suited. *(He walks across the stage and stands with Margaret.)* Then one day, I took the boys out shopping, and when I came back, he'd gone. Didn't even leave a note. I didn't hear anything from him for ages. I had to ask my mum and my sister to look after the boys while I got a job. I drove an electric van for Taylor Woodrow's. Well I had to have money, didn't I? He'd left me nothing to live on. After a couple of months, he phoned.

Phone rings

Ralph: Hello Kathy. Listen I've been having a talk with Daphne

Kathy: That was his new woman, the one who'd been phoning up. He was living with her now.



Ralph: Yes, she says she'll take the three boys on and bring them up as her own.

Kathy: Well, you tell her to come here and just try and take them. Well, he didn't bother after that. He came back once when I was out and more or less cleared the house. He took all his tools and everything and the campervan we'd all gone on our holidays in. But he didn't take the most important thing, my three boys. *(Pause)* I took him through the courts and he had to pay out in the end.

Piano music begins

All sing: 'Who's sorry now? Who's sorry now?
Whose heart is aching for breaking each vow?
Who's sad and blue, who's crying too?
Just like I cried over you.
Right to the end, just like a friend,
I tried to warn you somehow,
You had your way, now you must pay
I'm glad that you're sorry now.'

Kathy sits down.

Scene 8: Women's dreams and aspirations

Ralph steps forward.

Ralph: After the austerity of the war years, the consumer explosion of the 1950s has hit both sides of the Atlantic like a tidal wave. Everyone wants to look slimmer, younger and more prosperous. Clothes are brighter, hems are shorter, skirts are fuller.

Hilda: In the early 50s, after I had my children, I put on a lot of weight, so the doctor told me to take these slimming pills. Well, they really speeded you up and I

was doing everything at the double. I never sat down all day. I couldn't eat. The pills did work, and I did get thinner, but I couldn't sleep at night. I used to sit up all night doing my knitting listening to my husband snoring away beside me. My husband said, "You're getting on my nerves running around all the time. All you do is nag and knit." And he threw the slimming pills in the bin. At that time, you see I really wanted to be slim and glamorous. I'd imagine looking at myself in the mirror, maybe getting ready to go out, singing, 'Lovely to look at, delightful to know, heaven to kiss'.

Song underlying the opening and closing of this sequence is "Dreaming". All start from doing a household task, then switch to the fantasy, the dream self.

All sing: 'Dreaming, just idly dreaming
Dreaming and scheming of what I might have been
Might have been a tailor
Tinker, soldier, sailor
Might have been a failure
Not worth a bean.'

Olive continues to play under the following

Margaret: I'm imagining I'm a model in a shop window with a short skirt and incredibly long legs. People stop to admire me. 'Look! sheer silk stockings, fantastic, a joy to behold.'

Kitty: I'm dreaming of being a star turn on the dance floor at the Hammersmith Palais. Look at my beautiful high heeled shoes. I'm wearing a very glamorous black dance dress, the new length, short, just beneath the knee, and everyone is watching me dance.

Lil: I'm dreaming of going on an exploration trip to Canada. I've got my camera and my guide book. *(The cast reproduces the sounds of birds.)* Beautiful birds everywhere. Never seen that one before.



Joan: I'm the greatest diver. I'm wearing a beautiful red swim suit, everyone is looking at me, and then I dive, an elegant double flip, then enter the water without causing a ripple.

Kathy: I dream of being an air hostess with smart uniform and little pill box hat. I'm just going up the aisle, saying: 'We are landing in twenty minutes, would you like some more champagne?'

Eileen: I'm on the back of a motorbike with a lovely silk scarf round my neck and my hair flying behind me. I'm wrapped round a hunk of a motor bike rider and we're off to the West Country. We'll stop for a cream tea on the way to the seaside.

Hyacinth: I'm wearing a scarlet suit with matching bag and gloves and I'm just stepping off a plane from USA to Barbuda laden with presents. I say to all my family, 'I told you I'd come back, and come back rich'.

All sing: 'We are dreaming of what we might have been.'

Scene 9: Margaret's husband and the encyclopaedias.

Margaret steps forward

Margaret: In the early 50s, there was lots of people coming round the doors trying to sell you things. Anything from a feather duster to a set of encyclopaedias.

Eileen: That looks possible. Nicely kept home.

Lil: Yes, a kiddy's bike outside. Shall we try? *(Knocks on door and Margaret opens)*

Eileen: Can we interest you in this set of encyclopaedias? There's every possible subject and everything you'd ever need to know.

Lil: You've got children haven't you? And you want them to do well.

Eileen: It's a special offer. Half a crown a week. And just for this week, there's no down payment. The offer runs out at the weekend.

Margaret: My husband has to decide about these things. He's not here till tonight. I'm afraid.

Lil: Well, we'll leave you a couple and we'll come back to see your husband later, so he can have had a good look.

Margaret: All right, then.

Lil and Eileen leave the house. Margaret thumbs through the encyclopaedias.

Lil: Do you think that's a sale?

Eileen: You can never tell, can you?

Lil and Eileen leave the stage. Ralph enters the house.

Ralph: Hello love. Is my tea ready?

Margaret: Yes, but first just sit down and have a look in here. *(Ralph sits down. She hands him a book.)* These encyclopaedia men came round. It's got ever so much in it. Only half a crown a week. Good gardening tips I was looking at.

Ralph: We've only got a window box.

Margaret: Well, you never know. One day... And it's got all the illnesses. Look, *(she points at part of the book)* I'm sure I've got that.

Ralph: *(Ralph looks through the book and becomes interested in it)* Ooh it's good on astronomy. That's a long section. Pass me a bit of paper and a pencil. *(He takes notes furiously)*

Margaret: *(To Ralph)* And look at that, "The sex life of the flea". *(To audience)* Well, he was writing away furiously for ages, so I thought he wanted it. *(To Ralph)* So you think we should have it then?

Ralph: No, of course not. We can't afford it. I'm going down the Red Lion. You'll have to tell them.

Ralph leaves.

Margaret: Typical!

Lil and Eileen come to the house and knock on the door. Margaret opens it.

Eileen: Well, have you decided to take them?

Lil: And to help your kiddies to get on in the world.



Margaret: Well, no. My husband says we really can't take them at the moment. I'm very sorry. You'll have to take them back.

Eileen: You don't know what you're missing.

Margaret: Yes, well I'm afraid you'll have to go now. I've got a tummy ache.

She shuts the door and rushes away.

Lil: I thought she was a definite.

Eileen: You can never tell, can you?

Eileen and Lil leave the stage.

Scene 10: Hilda's Hoover man.

Ralph steps forward

Ralph: Housewives compete to have the most labour saving kitchen appliances, the snazziest furniture, the most perfect families and of course the cleanest laundry. The advertiser is king.

Ralph sits down. Joan steps forward.

Joan: For a spotless boil you need Surf.

Joan sits down. Lil steps forward.

Lil: There's no pride like Tide pride! I thought I knew what whiteness was, but I've never seen sheets as white as this. Frosty! Almost blinding!

Lil sits down. Kitty steps forward.

Kitty: I had my babies in 1953, 1954, 1955, 1958 and 1961. I'd have two buckets of nappies soaking, two lots on the stove, two lots hanging on the line and two lots ready to use. I had 46 nappies and they were all Terry towelling. Well, I always used to use Lux, but they've just brought out Daz. My neighbour said to me, 'I've never seen napkins so bright and beautiful'.

Kitty sits down. Hilda and Hyacinth step forward.

Hyacinth: Good morning madam. I've something here you simply won't be able to resist. It does everything in the house for you. It's an Electrolux vacuum cleaner with separate small brushes to do the stairs.

Hilda: Oh, isn't that wonderful.

Hyacinth: Can I come in and show you properly?

Hilda: Oh, all right then.

Hilda lets Hyacinth into her house. She demonstrates the Hoover.

Hyacinth: Now, watch this. See that bit of carpet? Well, watch this. *(She hoovers and empties out the dirt from the Hoover)* Look at all that muck that came out.

Hilda: And I cleaned that this morning. I don't believe it. How much is it?

Hyacinth: It's only £20. Or you can have it for 2/6 a week.

Hilda: Well my husband decides these things.

Hyacinth: You tell him you really want it. You're the one doing the housework. I'll be back later.

Hyacinth exits. Ralph comes in.

Ralph: Is my dinner ready?

Hilda: Yes, I'll get it out of the oven. This man came today selling vacuum cleaners. You should've seen all the stuff it does. And it's only £20.

Ralph: Only! We can't afford that sort of price.

Hilda: You should have seen the dirt it picked up. I couldn't believe it.

Ralph: You're not having it and that's that.

Hilda: Well then I'm not cleaning the flat. You can do it yourself in future. *(She cries)*

Ralph: Sorry love. Don't let's fight. But you don't want to be taken in by these fellows. They bring the dirt with them and empty it out on your carpet. I've read about it in the paper. It's a swindle. Listen, I'll take you to the Ideal Home exhibition. Not buying though. Just looking. All right?

Hilda: Ooh yes! *(To audience)* Everyone went there to see the latest ideas.

Scene 11: The Ideal Home Exhibition

The cast moves around the stage imagining they are looking at the exhibits, singing as they go:

- All sing: 'Magic moments, memories we are sharing
Magic moments, when two hearts are caring.'
- Ralph: Wow, look at that Hoover. *(Everyone crowds behind Ralph and Hilda to see)* Look, it cleans your curtains by spraying out cleaner from that nozzle and sucking up the dirt with that one. And it paints the house with that special spray thing. Still, I bet it'd get all gunged up. We're not having that.
- Eileen: *(With everyone peering through the crowd to see the demonstration)* Ooh look at that. A bottle opener combined with a glass-cutter. That's clever isn't it?
- Kitty: Ooh look, that machine peels all your potatoes and makes them come out crinkly. Wonderful. I'll have one of those.
- Joan: Ooh a magic duster. It'll do the dusting for you and make everything sparkle. I'll have one of those.
- Hilda: Ooh look, wipe clean formica furniture, bright red. Lovely.
- Ralph: Only looking, remember. Not buying.
- Lil: Isn't that clever. You take a radish and twizzle it in that and you've got a pink rose to decorate your plate.
- Kathy: Course, when you got them home you never used them. Couldn't get them to work!

Margaret: Ooh that'd be good for baked apples. A corer and then you put your currants inside. Lovely.

Kathy: Ooh you're making me hungry. Look, they're giving away free food over there. And bags with little Hovis loaves to take away.

Kathy points to a different part of the stage. Everyone converges on freebies, takes bags and little Hovis loaves and then sits down. Eileen and Ralph stay on stage.

Eileen: Look Bill, I've bought this wonderful chair we can make. Only 10/- It's a kit and very easy to put together. We'll get another and soon we'll have a three-piece suite.

Ralph: Have you got all the screws and all the directions?

Eileen: Yes, look. A to B, and C to D. *(Ralph struggles connecting As and Bs, and Eileen talks to the audience)* Two hours later he was still trying to work it out. It don't look right to me.

Ralph: It's all right. Try it. *(When she sits in the chair, she falls out.)* Well, it ended up as firewood. That was a waste of ten bob, wasn't it?

Scene 12: Death of King George VI

Funeral music is played.

Lil, Kitty, Dorothy and Kathy guard the King's coffin. They are positioned at the four corners of an imaginary rectangle with backs to one another and holding a sword each. Hilda is standing at another part of the stage. She is at home.

Hilda: Oh look at this pile of ironing. I'll need a bit of music to get me through this. Let's see what's on the wire-

less. *(Turns on the radio and hears a 'Boom, Boom' sound. Then nothing.)* Oh I think my wireless is bust. *(Hits the radio and then hears only the 'Boom Boom' again. She is quite upset because she cannot listen to music.)*

Ralph: This is London. It is with the greatest sorrow that we make the following announcement. It was announced from Sandringham at 10.45 today, February 6th 1952, that the King who retired to rest last night in his usual health passed peacefully away in his sleep earlier this morning. Of George VI it will be written, "This was a king his people loved".

The four ladies keep their position around the king's coffin. Eileen and then Joan line up to go past the coffin to pay their respects.

Eileen: I felt I had to come. I feel so sad. I only live in London, but people have come from all over the country to pay their respects. God rest his soul.

She makes the sign of the cross.

Joan: He was a good man, especially when we had the bombing in the East End. He was one of us. We will miss him.

Margaret: My Ken brought three newspapers home tonight, with the sad news. Look, this one's got a black border. It says, "The King is dead. Long live the Queen".

Olive and Hyacinth are standing at a great distance from the grave.

Olive: I'm still out in Bahrain on the Persian Gulf. *(She makes a phone call)* Are you there Betty. Have you heard the news about the king? Sad isn't it? Ooh and the club's closed so we can't get a drink there tonight. But Tom had a case of beer delivered last

night. We're the only ones with booze, so everyone's meeting up here. Better come over quickly or it will all be gone.

Hyacinth: I'm still in Barbuda in the Caribbean. I'm very sad about the king's death because he was my king too you know.

Funeral music is played while everyone leaves the stage and sits. Hyacinth remains onstage.

Scene 13: Coming From Far Away



Hyacinth: I never imagined that I would come to live in England. When my friends left for England I used to recite this poem to them: 'Oh England is a pleasant place for those that's rich and high, But England is a cruel place for such poor folk as I!' Then I met my future husband, and when he left the West Indies for England I followed. When I first came, I asked my sister-in-law what all these buildings were with smoke coming out - were they factories? She said

that they were houses that people lived in! "They have to heat the house with coal in the fireplace so that's where the smoke comes out." I expected when I came to England that all the houses would be really big and nice, but no. There were all these little houses joined together. I thought that was funny, because in Antigua and Barbuda everybody lives in their own separate house. It took me ages to get used to the cold winters over here. It was so cold.

Scene 14: Fog / smog at end of 1952

Eileen: I think the winters were colder then. And we often had thick fog. And then there was smog. I remember a particularly bad one in 1952. It went on for days and a lot of people died of bronchitis that year. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

The cast play out walking through fog. They walk slowly giving the idea that they cannot not see much. They cover their mouths and noses with handkerchiefs and cough.

Scene 15: Coronation in 1953 and the arrival of TV

The cast is all together on the street. It's raining and cold. They are waiting for the Queen. Margaret stands with a real umbrella on the end of the row.

Margaret: I remember going to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. It was in 1953. We were all waiting to see her go by in her carriage. It was very cold and it was raining. Some of us had been waiting all night. There was a terrific atmosphere. We were very excited. Here she comes!!

The cast cheers and waves as though the Queen is passing in front of them.

Kitty: Wasn't she lovely.

Lil: A lot of people watched this big event on TV. For many of us it was the first time we'd seen a television. Usually there was one person in the street who had one, and we all squashed in to watch the coronation.

The cast sets up three chairs and gather together, standing and some sitting on the floor to create a 'crush' to watch television. Kitty comes in, pregnant. Someone gets up to offer her a seat. Everyone looks at the imaginary television.

Ralph: Shall I adjust the television?

Everyone: No. Leave it.

Ralph: *(Talking them through it)* They're putting the crown on her head. Oh isn't it heavy.

Everybody puts a crown on their heads while looking at the TV.



Everyone: God Save the Queen. God save the Queen. *(Kitty produces a vocal fanfare)*

Ralph: Oh look, she's got the orb and the sceptre. She can hardly stand up. Ooh look, she's walking down the aisle. They're opening the doors. She's coming out.

On the TV the church door opens. The cast produce a vocal peal of bells. The cast then stand and sing the first part of the National Anthem, while still fixing their eyes on the imaginary small screen.

Everyone: Wasn't that lovely. Didn't she look wonderful, etc

Hilda: Let's all go down the pub and have a drink or two.

Scene 16: Hilda's scene in the pub

The cast moves the chairs off the stage and sings:

All sing: 'My old man said follow the van
And don't dilly dally on the way
Off went the van with my old home in it
I followed on with my old cock linnet.'

Hilda: I was seven months pregnant and feeling sick. I had to sit on a little wooden chair and hold everyone's coats. They were all wet because it had been raining. I wasn't enjoying myself.

All sing: 'I dillied and dallied
Dallied and dillied
Lost my way and don't know where to go
You can't trust a special like the old time copper
When you don't know your way home.'

Hilda: My old man was very merry. He'd been in the pub all day and he was having a great time. He was singing at the mike with this blonde in a silly hat. He never even asked me if I was all right or if I wanted a drink.



All sing: 'There's an old mill by the stream Nelly Dean
Where I used to sit and dream, Nelly Dean.'

Hilda: I was so fed up I dropped all the coats on the floor and walked out. He never followed me. I went home and cried.

All sing: 'Well the waters as they flow
Seem to murmur soft and low
You're my heart's delight
I love you Nelly Dean.'

Ralph staggers from the pub home to Hilda and slumps in a chair.

Hilda: How could you do that to me? When I've had this baby I'm leaving you. *(To the audience)* I didn't speak to him for a week. *(Ralph picks up chair and slopes off)* So I remember Coronation Day and I'll never forget it.

Eileen steps forward.

Eileen: All the children have had a coronation tea party and

they're all tired out. So am I. I made 100 jellies yesterday and they've all gone! Now the children are tucked up in bed, so why don't you all come round to my house for a bit of a knees up?

Lil: Oh come on Hilda, all the neighbours are going round Eileen's for a bit of a sing-song.

All sing: 'When you've got friends and neighbours
All the world is a happier place
Friends and Neighbours
Put a smile on the gloomiest face
(Kitty tap dances from here to the end of the song)
Just take your little troubles and share them
With the folks next door
Makes it twice as easy to bear them
That's what friends are for
Cos if you've friends and neighbours
That is something money won't buy
You can hold your head up high
Although you've not a penny
And your house may be tumbling down
With friends and neighbours
You're the richest man in town.'

THE END

PART 2: JUBILEE STORIES

In our reminiscence work with groups at Age Exchange, we often start by passing round objects and photographs which are linked thematically and relate to a particular period. The colour, texture and weight of the object help to stimulate recall, concerning its use and the surrounding circumstances of life at the time. This is an excellent way of focussing people's memories on a particular subject and period, creating possibilities for comparing experiences within a group.

The memories in the pages which follow were triggered by important mementos and images from the early 1950s. Age Exchange volunteers brought in photographs of themselves and their families taken at that time or objects from home which had associated memories. The stories they then shared give a good feel of everyday life at that time as well as the tellers' response to the coronation itself. We hope that readers will find their own memories stimulated in turn.



Vic Welch and friends in 1952 on the annual beano to Margate for men of the switchgear department of Johnson and Phillips of Charlton. All the lads in the photo had started as apprentices back in 1937 or 1938.

Life in Post-war Britain

The Saturday Beano

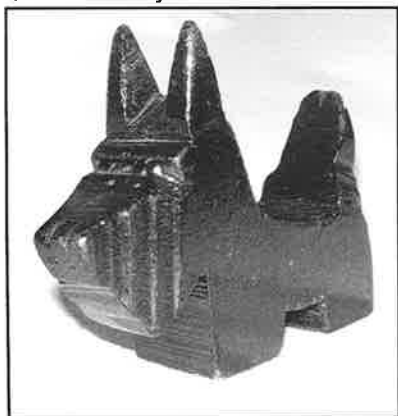
In 1949 or 1950 we used to be called the lads of the village cos we were out drinking on a Saturday. I remember down at the local factory, Johnson and Phillips, all the lads went out on a Saturday Beano in the coach. We had crates of beer lined up in the back. I remember everybody went on Beanos from all the factories in those days. All the women. You had the time of your life there. All the young lads with all the young girls. And all singing, "Knees up Mother Brown." In the picture (previous page) we're all holding up our glasses and we had a drink before we set off at eight in the morning.

Victor Welch

No dole, no sick money

In the early 50s, my husband Bill worked as a scaffolder at a glaziers. He developed a bad back. They put him in plaster from his waist to his neck, hoping that it would help. Course it meant that he had very great difficulty sitting down or doing anything. He couldn't go to work. And so we had no money coming in because you didn't have any dole money or sick money or anything like that long ago.

So, I found a job and went back to work for a little while. I worked



in the packing shop of Stone and Company where they made the wooden packings for the castings. One day a chap came in and he cut a little wooden Scottie dog out of wood. He gave it to me for our son Peter. Later I stuck it in a glass cabinet and it's been sitting in there ever since.

Lil Murrell

Holiday camps, Cars and Caprita

I used to go to the Hemsby holiday camp near Yarmouth. We used to have the wooden huts and really hard beds, but it was good fun. We didn't have an awful lot of money.



This photo was taken in 1954 when my husband and I were courting. My sister and her husband were there and they've all got on their thick shoes and socks on and their bell-bottom trousers. And when you got home the sand would all fall out of the turn-ups.

Our dresses were made of caprita. Remember that? It was a material that was cotton and it had a print on the outside. You didn't have to iron it. We used to make lots of dresses with it. I remember caprita because I was in the needlework trade with Dickens and Jones for six years.

In those days there was only about one car in the road, wasn't there? My father-in-law had a car. He was a magician for 40 years. There was a lot of street parties in those days. And my father-in-law was booked up to go all over the place. He did everything. He used to make cakes out of sawdust and bring rabbits out of a hat. I actually worked with him and jumped out of a box. It was a black box and it looked like there wasn't anybody in it. I was there one minute and wasn't another!

Irene King

Pre-fabs and pre-babyfood



This is me with three children when I lived in a pre-fab. You can see all the old pre-fabs opposite. That there is my front gate. And look at the old fashioned pushchair and the dirndl skirt. We were just off to the shops.



My first baby was born in 1951. When you put babies on solids then you didn't have baby food like they do now. And I started her off with mashed potato and Oxo gravy. And that was her first solid meal.

Hilda Kennedy

Pre-fab Parties

When I lived in a pre-fab in the early 50s, we'd have all the parties there and the music was blaring out, because nobody cared. We could make as much noise and mess as we liked, because the pre-fabs were only temporary and we had to be ready to move out all the time. We didn't really look after them too much because we was told not to bother. And we had a ball, it was like Butlin's.



We lived at Northolt, near the airport. I walked into the pre-fab with my first baby, Richard. He was named after my father, Ricardo, who came from Italy. My second baby was Carl. He was ginger-haired. He took after his father. And this is Michael, the baby, taken by the coal shed by the pre-fab.





Now, they're what I lived for, my three sons. I still do. Eleven years after we moved into the prefab, when my eldest boy was in his senior school, the Council told us they had a place to move us into. That's how long they took to rehouse us, eleven years.

Kathy Hill

The Pram

Big and wide, not new, just knocked about a bit - well used. I used to take the baby out in it, carry back the shopping, take the bag wash to the laundry, get the bag of coal from the coal yard a few streets away, and take the rubbish to the bins in it. It went the way of all things, fell to bits. I last saw it in Holloway Road disguised as a tank, the proud possession of three small boys. I saluted and murmured a fond farewell.

Margaret Phair



Our Family Album

Janice, my first baby, was four pound born in 1953. I have a picture of her, my brother, and my auntie that I took in the garden. This is my aunt's garden in Deptford on Napier Street. I'm taking the picture, so obviously I'm not in it.

This is Janice. She is about four months there. She had no eyebrows and she was so tiny and her head just laid on the palm of my hand. And her little legs didn't come as far as my joint. But would you believe she's got a pixie hat on? For 1953 that was a very small baby, but they said she was quite healthy. She's still tiny. She's only about 6 ½ stone now and she's 49. And that's my brother, Arthur Welch, he wasn't married then. And that's my auntie that fetched me up. I remember she was just coming in from work, and I said, "Quick get in the picture."

Kitty Finch

The Little Mother

When I was thirteen, I used to look after six children. The oldest was five, and the baby was three months old. This was in Deptford. We lived in the flats on Deptford Church Street, just by the Salvation Army, on the corner. They only lived downstairs in the flats. We lived upstairs.

The father of the family was ill with TB, and he was in hospital. The mum was disabled, and used to go every day to see him. So, I always had the kids. I always cared for people. It was just natural, I suppose.

I took them everywhere. Just me and the kids. My sisters used to come sometimes as well. Usually we'd have about twenty kids with us, all the kids in the flats used to come out to the playground. And we'd all go to Sayers Court, to the park along Evelyn Street in Deptford. The park there had a paddling pool and we'd just spend the day. Take sandwiches and drinks, spend the day you know, just mucking about with all the kids and playing and all. It was quite a walk, but lovely. We enjoyed it.

Eventually the father died and the family moved away to Bermondsey. They gave me a baby sewing machine and little clay moulds, where you make Plaster of Paris models. I can't remember what they were animals, or something like that, and ladies, figurines.

Doreen Blake



A Long way From Home

Stationed in Germany after the war, I did a lot of travelling in Germany. When I was in the Army, I seemed to collect all the escort jobs. I got to know Germany like the back of my hand. I was in Berlin for a while, which became sort of a second home to me. Here's a picture of me when I was in the Forces.



In Germany I was able to see places that I'd heard about on the news during the war. Then they were just names to me, but when I went into these cities, which had been badly bombed, they became real. I kept an Army belt, which we were supposed to turn in when we were demobbed, as a souvenir because it's been all over Germany with me.

The other day I got this out of the cupboard and I find I can still wear it. It was made for me by a German leather tailor. I found out afterwards he'd previously made them for the German Luftwaffe fighter pilots. I was chuffed to find out that it still fits me.

Ralph Gooding

From Africa to the Tea Dance in London

During the 1950's, I lived in Nigeria, West Africa. My husband was in the colonial service and his job was to take care of all the electrical instruments used in connection with the ecological services.

Life out there was entirely different to the one we lead in London. We were there for seven years. I'm glad I had that experience. It had good and bad points. The climate was just a killer. The place was called, rightly so, White Man's Grave, though I did bring up my child there and she thrived despite the terrible climate. It was a tropical climate, and the mosquitoes were really very, very bad indeed.

However, about once a year or so, we used to come to London and spend several weeks. It was lovely to see family, friends, and go dancing. I remember the Edmundo Ros Club and going to dances at the Cumberland Hotel. They had Tea Dances on Saturdays and Sundays. I was given this little handbag on one of those occasions, and I've kept it ever since.



This little evening bag consists of two compartments. One is here which can hold Cumberland Hotel matches, and Craven A cigarettes and stamps. Another compartment is there, where you can put bits and pieces. Opening it up there's a mirror and face powder and there is rouge. This

top bit was probably for the lipstick, there. So, I've still got that. It's a souvenir.

Helen Aronson

Coronation Memories

The Death of the King

I happened to be home from school ill the day George VI died. My mother had to go to work to earn some money, so I was on my own at home. My nickname in those days was "Skinny." I was only ten-and-a-half, and in my last year of primary school. It was a very ordinary semi-detached house with thin walls. So, I was on my own with the radio on, putting together a scrapbook. My primary school teacher thought it would help us to learn about the Commonwealth if we kept notes and all the scraps from the newspapers where Princess Elizabeth was travelling. But the neighbour came round and said, "Are you all right, love? I know you just heard it on the news." So that was a particular memory for me.

Well, where the coronation was concerned, we were watching the television. By that time, I had moved onto secondary school, Blackheath High School just up the road at Wemyss Road. There were twenty or so of us in a 1920s very small Council house looking at a black and white screen the size of two postage stamps. And it was everyone from babes in arms to the late middle aged. Then, of course, we enjoyed the coronation, but it was only a small black and white picture.

When the Queen did her post-coronation tour, she came across Blackheath. They got us all lined up along the road ready to cheer and wave. I had taken my Box Brownie camera that I had as a ninth birthday present, determined that I was going to get my very own photograph of the Queen. So, I've got my flag in my teeth and my camera there. And I took the photograph. I have a lovely photograph of the chauffeur.

Afterwards, they walked the whole of Blackheath High School and several other local schools, across to the Roxy Cinema near Blackheath Standard, where they showed us the film of the climbing of Mount Everest and the film of the coronation. That really was

memorable, those two things together. That generation, people who were about my age, that generation, we were talking of ourselves as the new Elizabethans.

I saw a black and white and grey picture of the Britannia coming back in after the world tour the Queen did after the coronation on the television last week. They were showing it passing Greenwich. And I thought, "I was standing there!" I was there beside the river with all the other Blackheath High girls and the naval cadets from the Naval College, just the other side of the fence. It kept us busy sort of larking about there while we waited for the Queen to come. We cheered like mad.

My memories are definitely red, white, and blue and not black and white and grey.

Margaret Taylor

Our First Television

When we had the date of the coronation, my father immediately goes out and buys a television. So, that was wonderful. And, he invited me to go in to watch it. By this time I had my oldest boy, Phillip who was about six months old. And there's me who went down to about six stone when I had him.



My father also invited my host family who I was evacuated with. "Would you like to come up to London and possibly see all the parade and the royal coach and everything else and then come back to us?" As the weather was so atrocious, they

decided to stay indoors and watch the television.

Now, as I say, Phillip was about six months old. We go into Mum and Dad to watch the coronation on the television. And of course it's right bang smack in the middle of feeding time. So out comes the Heinz baby foods. And I can remember him being on my lap and absolutely spooning the food in as I'm watching, wiping his little face, and spooning the food in. And that's how we watched the coronation on the new telly.



And this is a souvenir of the actual Coronation service. And I'm not quite sure how we got hold of it. I mean, I most probably bought it afterwards. It's of the complete service of the coronation.

Joan Pearce

The King of Timbuktu

Well, my memory of the early 50s is very vivid. Having been in the Navy, and come out in 1945, I got married in 1947. I had two lovely daughters in the 50s.



Ted's daughter Judy playing with her cousins, Anton and Tommy, in the tin bath outside her house in Admiral Street, Deptford

I worked for a company in Charlton, G.A. Holmes, and was the chief engineer at the time of Coronation Day. I managed to borrow an amplifier, speakers, some bunting, some temporary lighting, and we built our own stage, for a party which was to take place in the street.

At that particular time, I had two friends over from Australia who hired a car, a little old Morris, and I took them up around 5:30am on Coronation Day to the Mall. The police were most helpful, they let me drive up the Mall. I felt like the King of Timbuktu, and then we went back home, and finished the work for the party.

We had already put the lighting up for the evening. The stage was erected, we had the amplifier all right, we tried one or two records. And then of course, it started to rain. We were very fortunate, because at the top of my road was a school. And the old school caretaker said, "I'll open the school up," and we went there. So the kids had their party in the school. I still don't know where they got all the food from, because things were a bit tight to get a hold of.



Ted and his wife Ivy in Oxford Street in the early 1950s

But, all in all, Coronation Day was fairly successful; it's just a shame that the weather wasn't.

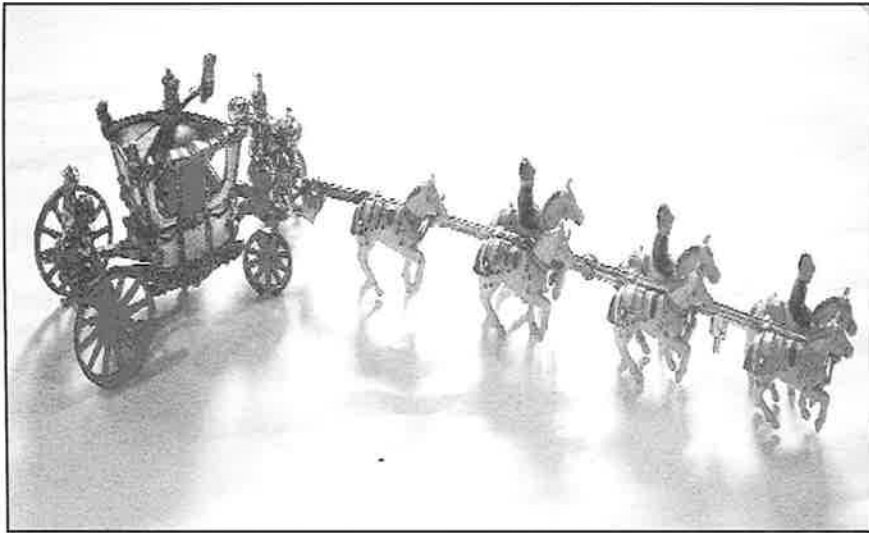
But having said that, the only thing that went wrong was this: I had booked a clown to perform at the party, and forgot to let him know that we were in the school. He didn't know where we were. He performed at some other party a few streets away from us, but he didn't get paid. Anyway, Coronation Day and the 50s to me were a great era.

Ted Aylward

The Queen of Tonga

I was in a grammar school in Kilburn, northwest London, and I was chosen as one of ten boys, to be on the stand near Hungerford Bridge during the coronation. We had a wonderful view, five rows up. And we stood. We had to behave. I think there was a teacher keeping us in order. I don't remember having a flag. But I do remember the procession. Most of all I remember the Queen of Tonga coming along in the rain. She refused to have an umbrella. She just sat there. And I remember she had the most amazingly big arms. And a lovely, motherly smile. I'll always remember that. I thought she was more impressive than the Queen.

Alex Schweitzer



The Souvenir Coach

When it was the coronation my husband Bill took my son Kevin up to London. I didn't go with him because I had just had my daughter Christine, she's fifty this week. And he came back with a little coronation coach.

And when he came home with it, the first thing I said to him was, "How much you pay for that?" I think he paid about 15 shillings, or a pound. He said, "It's not really a toy. It's a souvenir. It's not to be played with. It's got to be put away." Course I said, "Why'd you buy a stupid thing like that?"

What are we going to do with that?" It got put in a drawer, but Kevin did play with it. I think there's one horse that's gone missing, or maybe it's still around in the loft.

For fifty years old, it looks great. It's so well made. I think he was right. It was a souvenir and I'm now remembering that time in our lives.

Eileen O'Sullivan

It was raining

I have a photograph of my two children at a coronation party for the Queen. It was bought by my mother, as a souvenir. It was painted by hand. Valerie was dressed as Britannia, and Brenda wore a fancy dress. They were five and four. They were dressed up for a coronation party.

It was raining that day. We were in Deptford. They set everything out on tables for a party outside and then they had to pick it all up. Our party had to break up and we went into separate flats. Luckily the one we went in had a television. So we saw the coronation on the television.

That was the first time Valerie and Brenda had ever seen television. I first saw television in 1946. My uncle and aunt were rich people. They had it. The television was in the lid of a cupboard. You stood and opened the lid up and the picture was there.



Valerie and Brenda in fancy dress at the coronation party

Anne Durrant

The street party

We were living in Court Road, Eltham, when I was little, but then we had a new council house given to us on the Coldharbour Estate. They were still building the estate when we moved in, and there weren't many houses then.

On Coronation Day we had a street party. All the ladies made the food. And we had races planned. We were able to play and do the races in the street because there was no traffic. There weren't many cars. We were the only one on our street that had a car, and that was because my father was a motor mechanic.

My brother had measles, so when we were supposed to be having these races, he was going to be in his bedroom looking out on what was going on. But, the weather was so bad that we didn't do it in the end.

We did all go to somebody's house to watch the coronation on the television. In the photo, I'm the one behind the cake and my mum, Joyce, is behind me on the right.

Joy Nettleton



A Street Party for the Coronation of Elizabeth II

The year 1953, the day June 2nd, and it was my daughter's fifteenth birthday. We were going to have a party for her and didn't know then that it was going to be Coronation Day. We heard that lots of people were thinking about street parties on that day, so my husband and I decided we would do the same. We asked our neighbours if they would like their children to come. We ended up with about 60 people wanting to join in.



Well, parties cost money, so we held a raffle every month, the prizes always groceries, and we began to accumulate some extra cash. This was growing into quite a big event and very time-consuming. We had two treasurers, a printer, a headmaster and a couple of housewives. To keep everyone informed we had a monthly news sheet, called the Quaggy Press news sheet, the Quaggy being the river that runs near our street.

As well as a tea party, we decided to have entertainment: as square dancing was popular, we had two sets of six people practising for quite a few months before the day.

That morning, everyone was up early. We had made bunting and people bought flags, so we closed the street and hung it across. We also had scaffolding up and with a little stage as we had a band. Everyone was helping with the food and, as an emergency of it rained, we'd arranged to use Lee Manor School.

Well it did rain and, as hardly anyone had cars, we all walked round with the food in prams or just bags. When we got to the school, the children played while we set up the tables. We had a lovely spread, just as though it was a wedding, quite a banquet!

After the tea, children went home to get ready for the evening, dancing and singing and more eats, and everyone was in good spirits. Each child was given a carrier bag, full of goodies, and a coronation mug, a bar of Cadbury's chocolates in a coronation tin.

Lilian Burnett



A coronation tray which Anne Durrant has kept since 1953

PART 3 - HOW WE CREATED THE SHOW, 'JUBILEE'

The Good Companions: Who the performers are and how they came together

The Good Companions have been working since 1992. Their first production, during the European Year of Older People of 1993, was presented across the UK and in several other countries as part of the celebrations and exchanges of that year. Since then, they have developed eight play-scripts together under the professional direction of Pam Schweitzer or visiting directors from Germany and the U.S.A. Their work as a theatre group has enabled them to travel widely across the UK and in other countries in Europe, where they have provided a very strong model for other projects to emulate. Some of the members of the group have been involved since the beginning; others, including a member born in the Caribbean, have joined more recently and brought with them different and valuable new stories. The group enjoy working together and have indeed become good companions.



Some of the Good Companions relaxing 'on tour' in Somerset

The Good Companions range in age from 65 to 83 years old and each production has a cast of about twelve, mostly women, but with one or two brave male performers! Most of them have had no previous experience of performing, and the few who have belonged to amateur groups have not participated for many years in any theatrical activity. What binds them together is a sense of enjoyment of the reminiscence process, a willingness to share experience and an interest in exploring ways of making their individual

stories into an entertainment which will give pleasure and stimulus to other people of their generation.

A subsidiary aim is to share their dramatised experience with younger generations as a means of creating understanding, appreciation and respect. Some of their shows have actually involved younger people, who play alongside them, often representing the older people when young. For example, in "Grandmother's Footsteps", produced in 1994, the older people portrayed their own grandparents, with the children representing them as youngsters, and in "Cheers", produced in 1995, the children performed the older people's memories of wartime evacuation and the older people played out their own and their parents' experience of civilian life in London under bombardment.

A new show for the Jubilee

For the Millennium celebrations in 2000, the Good Companions had made a play called "Our Century and Us", in which they revisited key moments across their lives, putting their personal experience into the wider context of social change. This show toured for two years and gave many audiences the chance to reflect on what their own experience of those changes had been and to discuss their recollections in post-show discussions, both formal and informal.

It seemed appropriate to change the focus for the Jubilee year and concentrate on a particular period of time and bring together the group's very varied experience of life in the early 1950s. At the start of the collaborative development or devising period, there was considerable anxiety as to whether "anything happened" in this period, as people tended to remember it as a rather dull time of austerity and very slow economic recovery. As we began to share stories, focused on a narrow time frame, memories began to flow and the whole period started to come to life. The more the stories were "put on the floor" and improvised, the more the members of the group surprised themselves by suddenly remembering other events, places and songs which figured in their lives at that time.

The devising and rehearsal process: Director's notebook

What follows is a record of exercises and improvisations from the first seven devising sessions, showing how they led up to the eventual script. This is included for those who are interested in reading about the process of travelling from story into scene through a collaborative dramatic exploration and a series of group discussions.

All rehearsals began with a physical and vocal warm-up. This helped to relax the group, to focus their energy and to encourage sensitivity and acute listening. The physical warm-ups were simple limbering exercises, loosening, warming and stretching different parts of the body. This was also a time when group members could complain about bits of their bodies which were troublesome and give those areas some special attention, with sympathy, humour and physical contact.

The exercises were suited to the age and different levels of frailty within the group, but they did help members to feel alert and ready to work. Breathing and singing together, copying sounds, rhythms and actions, helped people to concentrate and work together as a group.

We incorporated techniques from Playback Theatre into these warm-ups, so that when each member "checked in" with a story about what had happened to them during the week, or how they were feeling at this moment, the rest of the group played back to them what they had said. Members enjoyed seeing their stories played back and the exercises served to alert the group to how individuals were feeling, physically and psychologically, and to "tune in" to one another.

The first seven devising sessions which are described here were followed by a more conventional rehearsal process in which the original improvisations were revisited, lines were added as new memories came back and action sequences were mastered. Sessions with the Good Companions lasted between three and four hours with breaks for tea and refreshments. Very often the ses-

sions were observed by students on placement with Age Exchange who joined in all the warm-ups, watched the devising process and gave feedback.

Between each rehearsal, I wrote up the improvisations from the previous session and added them to the organically developing scenario and the eventual script. This gave a sense of progress to the group and showed how small pieces of individual reminiscence were contributing towards the whole. When a player had to drop out of the group, which did happen on this production with Barbara, one of our more experienced performers who became too ill to work, her ideas were still in the play, but redistributed amongst the remaining cast.

Music was also added in at every rehearsal. The Good Companions have their own gifted pianist, Olive, herself in her eighties. She quickly worked out how to play whatever the group suggested from their vast collective repertoire of songs of the time, and decisions regarding songs to include were normally agreed by the whole group.

Rehearsal One

1) Creating a sense of time and place

The group were asked to work in pairs and describe for each other a photo which was (or might have been) taken of them between 1952 and 1953. What were they wearing, perhaps mentioning a favourite dress, suit or pair of shoes from that time, and how did they wear their hair? Each couple prepared their photos, with a still pose and an accompanying memory. They were asked to place the real or imaginary photo somewhere associated with the time, for example, inside or outside their house, on the street, in the park, on the way to the shops, at work, or at a celebration.

Each pair showed their pictures to the rest of the group. One person was the commentator, describing how her partner looked, where the photo was taken and what was happening in the photo. The other person posed, adding additional details, as they occurred to her from her still position within the photo.

Some interesting results from this exercise:

Lots of people were pushing prams in their photos, so young motherhood would obviously emerge as a theme in the play.

Many people were alone with their babies in the photos, and commented that they were often lonely at that time of their lives.

A-line dresses and two-colour peep-toe shoes were mentioned.

Ralph (our only man) was in army uniform outside the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, reminding the group that the aftermath of World War II was still very much part of the lives of the group members, with boyfriends and partners in far-flung corners of the world.

2) A scene about my life at that time

The group were asked to change partners and to prepare a short scene, which would tell more about their life at that time. This could be shown to the rest of the group in mime or in a naturalistic way, or as a sequence of short moments (like film clips taken at slightly different times). If the scene required more than two players, the pairs were asked to plan how to involve others in the enactment. The scene could be a development from the previous photograph exercise, or it could be something quite different which they had remembered as a result of seeing other people's photo poses and hearing their explanations. They were asked to convey something of their remembered feelings at that time.

Some resulting scenes:

Margaret was bouncing the pram down four flights of stairs in her flat in Holloway. Her daughter Pat (aged about four) was "helping". Margaret remembered walking miles with the pram all the way up to Waterlow Park to show Pat the ducks and fill in the time. On the way back she'd call in at the shops, where Lil obligingly sliced bacon for her and she bought margarine and a loaf. A co-op tin check was mentioned and saving up for Christmas presents. Everyone watching the scene immediately remembered and recited their Co-op number.

Lil was watching the Charlton football crowds passing her house.

They even looked in through the window at the clock on the mantelpiece in her front room to make sure they weren't late.

Hilda was crying in her ground floor flat in outer London. She'd spent the day pushing the pram around all day, and she was feeling lonely, tired and bored. She'd only just moved there and didn't know anyone in the area. She was missing the family back in the East End, the closeness of the old community, the market life. In the scene, her husband (played by Eileen) arrived home late as it had taken him a long while to get back from work and he'd stopped off at his mum's house on the way. He was not very sympathetic with Hilda, telling her to make the best of it because they weren't moving. They'd only just come and they weren't going back now. This scene provoked discussion about how long it took to rebuild London after the war and how people were willing to move away from the bombsites into new homes on council estates miles away.

Eileen was also pushing a pram. Her husband Bill had come in for lunch and told her he was going to be late home again. He was working late a lot because he was saving for a holiday for the family at a holiday camp on the Isle of Wight, but this was meant to be a surprise for Eileen, so she didn't appreciate the sacrifice at the time. Eileen pushed the baby round and round the park and then called in to visit her Mum who lived just round the corner. They chatted over a cup of tea and then she hurried off to get Bill's tea. This scene stimulated discussion about Butlins and Pontins holiday camps and how families saved for an annual holiday which many of them had not experienced before the war.

Joan and Barbara combined their stories into one scene. Joan was indoors, very hot and heavily pregnant. She dragged herself to the park for a bit of exercise. She met Barbara who had a large dog called Sam, and her little daughter Anna with her. She told Joan she was longing to play tennis, but was a bit stuck for someone to take care of these two, so Joan (who always describes herself as the lady who can't say 'no') dragged the sometimes savage dog and the little girl around the park and Barbara skipped off to the tennis club. This apparently was where she spent all her waking

hours as club secretary, ruining her game in the process of "playing in" new members. This scene offered an unexpected and unusual slant on young motherhood and would probably have made it into the eventual play if Barbara had not become ill and had to drop out of the group for a while.

Ralph was standing alone in the Olympic Stadium in Berlin (where he was on military service) thinking back to the 1936 Olympics and all that had happened since then. He remembered standing near the dais from which Hitler addressed the crowds. Following this scene, which Ralph presented as a solo, the group talked about the newsreel footage they had seen in the cinema at the time.

Kitty's was remembering a time shortly before she was married, when she was still living with her uncle and aunt in Deptford. Uncle Albert was chopping firewood in the garden and Kitty was chatting to him and putting the wood in a sack to take to her grandmother in Rotherhithe. This was a weekly trip she did on the bus, so Ralph obligingly played the bus conductor with full ticket collector's sounds and actions, naming all the right bus stops en route to everyone's amusement. When she got to Gran's house (a funny and spontaneous performance here by Eileen who played according to Kitty's instructions) they had home-made bread pudding and Gran had a spot of snuff. Kitty then left, promising Gran her usual two shillings from her Peak Freans biscuit factory pay. This was a delightful story, but it was difficult to see how it connected with the rest of the material or could "stand for" a common experience of the time.



Olive was in the desert in Bahrain on the Persian Gulf. Her scene was set on the terrace of the Club House, overlooking the desert where their menfolk were employed developing oilfields. She

described the greenery on the terrace, the cool of the evening and watching shooting stars ("like a firework display"). The women were drinking, gossiping about the latest scandal and speculating about a naughty woman being sent home to England ("always the women, never the men").

The group played out this scenario, imagining from what Olive had said how it might have been. First the group performed all at once, then we watched a few performers at a time in small conversation groups, so that Olive could listen to them and comment on each idea. This prompted many more memories, so she corrected and embellished what the group had devised.

Some of the women were thinking of their children at boarding schools in England and writing them letters. There were lights on the terrace and music was playing on a gramophone in the background: a song released around that time with a reference to the Nile in it, so some of the group hummed that as a background.



Olive improvising her desert experience with the group

3) Discussion

We all agreed that Olive's scene had potential and was interesting because it was different. It also represented Britain's world-wide industrial development interests in the post-war period and the many families who were stationed abroad as a result. Olive told us that many of these families moved around a great deal in the

middle and far east, and never really settled back in England, hating the weather and deploring the austere quality of life back home.

The running theme of young mothers pushing prams around was clearly an item to be included in the play. Several of the group talked about loneliness and long days, loss of independence and missing the companionship of work mates and quite a lot mentioned tiffs with husbands.

The first rehearsal had yielded a tremendous amount of material and everyone felt very cheered. They had been worried that the early 1950s was a boring period when nothing much happened in their own lives or the outside world, but now everyone was keen to look up photos and songs and stories of the time.

Rehearsal Two

1) Mothers and babies

Everyone was asked to work individually, pushing an imaginary pram up and down the room singing a favourite song to their baby. They were asked to try to recapture their feelings at that time and think about where they went with the pram and what they were like as young mums absorbed with their babies.

First they did this all at the same time, so no-one was watching anyone. It was delightful for me to hear all the different songs at the same time and to watch how the women related to their imaginary babies in the prams. Then they worked in two groups so that each group could take a turn watching and listening to what the other half remembered. Then they were asked to repeat the exercise, but this time they came in one at a time and everyone joined in the song and the mood of the latest mother (sleepy, jolly, etc) so it made a medley of songs of the period.

Songs to emerge:

One two three four five, once I caught a fish alive

Bye baby bunting Daddy's gone a hunting

How much is that doggy in the window?

Singing Lulla lulla lulla lulla baby

Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy

Go to sleep my baby, close your pretty eyes

2) Discussion

Everyone agreed that the "motif" of mums pushing prams could work well and that the songs they remembered would give a strong sense of the period. Someone then spontaneously sang a popular 1950s song about babies, "Twenty tiny fingers, twenty tiny toes", and everyone remembered it, and agreed that it would round the medley off perfectly and we could devise appropriate actions to go with the song.

The group were making connections between the end of the war and the "baby boom". The men were coming home from all over the world. We considered songs of the period, especially songs about men returning from war. Some were tried out, for mood and feel, and to see what most people remembered from that time. Everyone liked: "Coming home my darling, Coming home to you", but we were not sure how to fit this in. The theme of men returning was associated by the older members of the group with the end of the war and by younger members with the end of their fiancées' National Service.

The group spoke about settling back into home life and having children and women giving up their wartime jobs. Somebody said that the early 1950s was a time when everyone closed their doors, suggesting that the strong community spirit of the war years had come to an end. Others agreed, saying that the emphasis was on home-building and acquiring possessions and labour-saving devices. The women remembered that there was pressure from advertising to buy the latest thing. But all agreed that they could not make any decisions about spending money without their husband's consent. They remembered being given a set amount of house-keeping money and having to manage on that.

The Festival of Britain in 1951 had come up briefly as a topic for discussion. People remembered the Guinness clock and the tree-top walk in Battersea Park, and a big steel spear called the Skylon on the South Bank. However, most people drew a bit of a blank and there was no excitement around this subject so the group agreed to exclude it from the play. A more lively discussion followed on the Ideal Home Exhibition, where the women all went to see the latest gadgets. It was agreed that this would be explored further in the next session: "Not buying, just looking".

Rehearsal Three

1) Ideal Homes

After a warm-up, the group worked in twos and threes preparing scenes about household gadgets or bargain offers they had bought from door-to-door salesmen, catalogues or newspaper advertisements. These scenes were played to the rest of the group, triggering many more memories of ill-fated purchases and things which were not really affordable.

Emerging stories:

Hilda's Hoover salesman came to demonstrate. She was mesmerised by his sales talk and desperately wanted the Hoover. The salesman came back that evening to convince her husband and get him to sign the agreement to pay in instalments. He tipped dirt over their rug and vacuumed it all up, to Hilda's great delight. But the husband was unimpressed and said they didn't want it, even though they could buy it in instalments. She said she could have killed him. This scene gave rise to discussion about HP or Hire Purchase. Margaret said her husband refused to ever get anything "on tick". One time she got a dress from a catalogue and this caused a lot of problems between them, and she had to go out to work cleaning to pay it off herself.

Lil's Hoover came from Barkers. Her scene showed her and her husband seeing Cyril Lord carpets advertised on the opposite page in the newspaper to the Hoover vacuum cleaner, so they felt they ought to go for both. "If you have a fitted carpet you can't shake it in the garden." They even decided to pay an extra pound for the

delivery, as it would have been a terrific business to get such a bulky item home on the bus. Lil and Joan (playing her husband) unpacked it with great excitement, showing how all the bits fitted so nicely into the box. Together they put the plug on and assembled it, both very excited and trying out all the different attachments.

Hyacinth's mattress dirt sucker cost a fortune. In her scene, she showed her horror when the salesman showed her the clouds of dust which came out of her mattress and how she bought it at huge expense and only used it once. This was also a funny scene with sales talk like "such a pretty face, just like my mother", etc. Hyacinth said she even fell for buying an upgrade later on (lighter and better) and she never used that either!

Margaret's encyclopaedias and the difficulty of saying No. This scene was about high pressure salesmen and how they talked you into buying by suggesting you weren't a good parent if you didn't provide for your children's future. Olive played her husband who came home at night and copied out pages and pages for their son before telling her to return it when the man called back and when he was out. The two salesmen came back and turned "very hard" when she said she didn't want the encyclopaedias. The only way she could get rid of them was by saying she had a tummy ache and pushing them out. The older women from the group playing the salesmen were very funny and everyone wanted to keep that part in.

2) Ideal Home Exhibition

The group were asked to imagine that they were making their way to the Ideal Home exhibition in twos and threes. What were they hoping to see? Did they go with something in mind to buy? When they arrived they should go from stall to stall looking at products, trying them out and making choices. Everyone performed at the same time, so a great buzz of excitement was created. People picked up on each other's ideas and all sorts of memories came back.

Emerging stories:

Hilda and Kathy took free wine samples, "and one for my friend please".

Joan demonstrated "oasis", a new material for keeping flowers fresh, to Lil, but she thought it was too expensive if you had to buy the container as well.

Olive and Ralph played out getting exhausted walking round, and then back home having an argument over a sandwich maker they'd bought which didn't work "the toast's burnt and the egg's raw".

Margaret and Barbara saw an apple corer, and discussed apple recipes. "Don't let's buy it now, cos it'll be cheaper later. They'll be giving them away."

Joan demonstrated a non-drip sauce bottle but you had to twist your arm in a certain way to make it work!

Lil saw an elaborate cutter which made decorative shapes out of radishes.

Margaret and Hilda loved the shiny hard chairs and tables in formica.

Eileen and Kitty played out Eileen's memory of buying a "make your own chair kit" with loads of instructions. "Letter A goes here, and B goes in there." Her husband couldn't get it right and they ended up having an argument, with Eileen wobbling in the wonky sideways chair.

3) Discussion

Everyone agreed that the demonstrators made the gadgets look so easy to operate, but when they got them home they found they were pointless and fiddly, if not impossible. "You got the things home and had no idea how to work them". Having everyone in the scene together worked well, but when it was repeated everyone fell over each other with their ideas, so the answer was to script it, but to try to keep the energy and speed of the event in the playing. "Busy music" underneath the dialogue helped this feeling, and the suggested song was "Magic moments" which was popular in the early 1950s and which reflected the rather magical feeling of going to the Ideal Home Exhibition.

Rehearsal 4

1) *Fantasy and reality*

The rehearsal started by looking at advertisements of the fifties in order to bring back memories of what everyone wanted to be or of the dreams they had. Everyone noted how sexist the adverts were, for example; "so simple, a woman could do it", and everything revolving around pleasing the man.

Everyone was asked to start with an everyday life activity and then switch into fantasy mode and explore dreams of what they might have been or still wanted to be. They were asked to play out the humdrum experience of sewing, cleaning, washing, etc, in a naturalistic way, but to exaggerate their playing when showing their fantasy self, so they were "larger than life". This worked well, especially when all were playing simultaneously. It was harder for group members to maintain this heightened playing style when acting alone.

The whole sequence was then replayed without words, in order to concentrate on enlarging the performances and 'physicalising' the transformation as much as possible. This helped. The next stage was to keep the action silent in the household tasks sequence (as this would be self-explanatory) but add speech to each fantasy as the individual took the limelight.

The song "Dreaming" was suggested to go with this scene. Everyone liked the mood of the song and the opening, "Dreaming, just idly dreaming, Dreaming and scheming of what I might have been", but some of the words did not fit too well. It was agreed that the dialogue of daydream could go across these less suitable sections and the group would sing the words again on the last lines: "There are millions just the same, Who are dreaming of what they might have been".

Resulting scenes

Barbara stopped doing the laundry to admire her imagined gorgeous image in the mirror, getting ready to go out, singing 'lovely to look at, delightful to know and heaven to kiss'.

Margaret stopped cleaning windows to pose in a shop window advertising silk stockings in a short skirt and with incredibly beautiful legs.

Lil was exploring the Rocky Mountains, pointing at things with her camera and reproducing sounds of rare birds.

Kitty was the star turn on the dance floor.

Joan (who cannot swim) was the greatest of divers: "I'm wearing a beautiful red swimming suit, everyone is looking at me, and then I dive with a double flip and enter the water without a ripple."

Olive wanted to be an opera singer but decided to go for dancer. She was spinning around with arms over her head.

Eileen dreamed of being on the back of a motorbike with a handsome fellow, her hair streaming out behind her and a silk scarf flying.

Kathy wanted to be an air hostess in a smart uniform strutting up the aisle: "We are landing in twenty minutes. Would you like some ice in your champagne?"

2) *Discussion*

This scene was more difficult to pull together and slightly different from the rest of the play in feel, concentrating on what didn't happen, rather than what did. It was an attempt to reflect two factors present at the time in their lives: first that they were subject to pressures from advertising to be perfect wives and mothers and to look slim and smart and sexy all at once, and second, that they spent a lot of time away from adult company and conversation, doing repetitive household tasks and had plenty of opportunities to compare their lot with that of the "special people" in adverts and on the "silver screen". On the whole, the group were happy to include this piece of dreaming in the play and thought the change of mood could be helpful.

Rehearsal Five

1) *Playback fantasies*

As Hilda had missed the previous session, the group showed her the fantasy/dream scene tried out in the last rehearsal. This was an opportunity to remember and to elaborate the dreams more and to explore other ways of playing. One person at a time quickly reminded the others of her fantasy. She would then sit back and watch while all the rest of the group acted out her dream simultaneously, turning to her at the end in a frozen position. This was a helpful device, as each person was presented with a range of actions they could choose or borrow from.

2) *Radio Days Discussion*

Following discussion about radio programmes and theme tunes from the period, Joan and Eileen remembered the announcement on the "wireless" of the death of King George VI. Hilda remembered that she'd been looking for some music on the radio to help her through a big pile of ironing and there wasn't any, so she was quite upset. She hit the wireless set to try to bring it to life, but only got a "boom boom" sound. Then she heard the announcement that the king had died. As everyone remembered where they were on that occasion, we decided to try out a "big scene" with everyone in it.

3) *The King is dead*

Barbara, Lil, Kitty and Kathy were the guards of the coffin which was lying in state in Westminster. They were positioned at the four corners of an imaginary rectangle with backs to one another and holding a halberd (later altered to a sword when someone remembered more accurately).

Hilda relived her wireless and ironing experience. At this point, Richard (a professional actor and Playback Theatre expert who was observing and participating in the rehearsal) took the role of the radio announcer. Ralph was away for this rehearsal, but we all felt he could do this part very well, especially if we could track down the actual words of the broadcast. The four ladies kept their positions round the imaginary coffin. First Eileen and then Joan

passed by one at a time. Eileen said that she was sad and felt she had to come to say goodbye. Joan said that the king would be missed: "He was one of us". We broke out of the improvisation to note how important it must have been if two out of such a small group had gone to Westminster in person to pay their respects and Eileen said people came from all over the country and you had to queue for ages to go by.

Margaret remembered her husband bringing home three newspapers with black borders and the news: "The King is dead. Long live the Queen". All the last scenes were positioned on the right hand side of the "coffin". The left side represented faraway places, so that Olive in Bahrain and Hyacinth in the Caribbean could give their stories. Olive remembered that the club was closed and that she and her husband were the only ones with beer ("Tom had a crate delivered yesterday. Come quickly or it will all be gone!") so everyone came round to her house to talk about the news. Olive felt a bit irreverent telling this story on stage, but it had a real ring of truth about it and emphasised in a humorous way the fact that British people all over the world were affected.

Hyacinth was in Barbuda in the Caribbean. She remembered how sad she was about the news, but a little bit happy too because everyone had a day off: "I'm sad and I'm happy. Don't forget he was my king too." Everyone in the group was moved by this speech which demonstrated in a simple way the significance of the Commonwealth at that time.

4) *Discussion*

This scene just fell into place naturally and everyone felt good about it. The four ladies just standing representing the King's Guards round the coffin were very moving. Olive found just the right piece of music, a Chopin Nocturne, to play gently underneath the opening and closing of the scene while people got into position.

Joan suddenly remembered that the same year as the King's death, there was a terrible smog in London. She'd been in hospital having her baby and lots of the other "Dads" had not been able to

get to the hospital to visit, but her husband had managed to come because he lived near. Everyone else then remembered it and how long it lasted and how many people died because of illnesses caused by the smog.

5) "A Foggy Day in London Town"

A new scene based on the memories of the fog was then tried out, at first in silence, with everyone on stage together. Then small verbal exchanges were introduced: "sorry", "do you have a torch?", "follow me", "Go to the church and then ask again". They were covering their mouths and noses with handkerchiefs and coughing. They walked very slowly, giving the idea that they could not see much. The scene was very effective, and the playing of it prompted many more memories.

Hyacinth then remembered first seeing the smogs and fogs in London when she came over from the Caribbean, and how cold she felt all the time. This gave us the opportunity to slot in the story of her journey to England and her arrival. In fact she came later than the early 1950s, but we agreed that a little artistic licence was required, since the early 50s was a time when many people came over to work in the health and transport services and we wanted the play to reflect that change in London.

Rehearsal Six

1) Finding a beginning

By now, we had amassed several potentially strong scenes, but were not sure how they would fit into a structure. It had been agreed early on that a scene around the coronation would form a suitable conclusion to this Jubilee play, but the beginning was very unclear.

Through group discussion, we decided that it would be important to put the group's experiences of the early 50s into their historical context. Seven years after the end of World War II, some items were still on ration, there was a shortage of suitable housing and an over-riding feeling of austerity. We decided to start with an up-

beat opening to show people's relief that the war was over and the men were mostly home again, but to follow this immediately with post-war queuing and shortages.

2) "Happy Days Are Here Again!"

This song seemed to typify the end of the war and we knew it would make a good opening, followed by reference to the ubiquitous street parties, represented by a sequence of "Knees Up Mother Brown". Going straight into a queue from these opening numbers was the perfect expression of the disappointment which group members felt when nothing much seemed to change on the home front. It was also very easy to choreograph with the group, by simply turning the opening line-up "sideways-on" so that they would 'read' like a queue to the audience.

The lines spoken in the queue came very naturally and remained more or less consistent from the first improvisation onwards. It was as though standing in queue formation helped the memories of fifty years ago to flow. Adding the "spiv" character selling black market goods was Ralph's spontaneous idea. At first it seemed hard to know how to incorporate Hyacinth's memory of queuing for sugar in the Caribbean ("which is funny as that's where the sugar comes from") but we decided that a bit of artistic licence could have her in the same queue. It was good to be able to show that there were problems of shortages all over the world in the post-war years and not just in England.

3) National Service

Eileen had a photograph of Bill, her late husband, in army uniform taken at this time, and we decided to use this as a cue for a story covering the return of the menfolk. This reminded Kitty and Joan about their fiancées returning from National Service a little later in the early 1950s. They both remembered receiving letters from the Far East which they had kept and they agreed to bring them along and read from them at the next rehearsal. Joan remembered that the



service was extended from eighteen months to two years because of the Korean war.

This in turn reminded Ralph that he had, by chance, been on telephone duty in Berlin in the British Army of Occupation when the first news came through that the Korean war had begun. This amazing co-incidence gave us a perfect sequence of public history into private experience. The group quickly came up with a popular song of the time to illustrate the women's emotion as they took in news of an extra six months of separation: "You'll never know just how much I miss you...." It so happened that the two actors in the letters scene had beautiful voices, so they sang the song as a duet which was very affecting.

4) Prefabs, a temporary solution?

Kathy told a story about living in a pre-fab and waiting years to be rehoused by the Council. Hilda, Margaret, Kitty and Eileen played back Kathy's story to her without any preparation, so she could see what they had made of it. She then gave a lot more detail and shared a very painful part of her private life. Including the story of Kathy's marriage break-up was controversial as some members of the group were worried about upsetting Kathy or the audience. But Kathy was a new member of the group and she wanted to include her scene. I personally felt that it was important to include darker stories and that divorce was an increasingly common experience in the post-war period and it should be reflected in the play. The fact that Kathy was an inexperienced performer meant that when she told her story the emotion was raw every time, even though she was struggling to remember what she should say.

Kitty also told a story about how she got her flat and how a neighbour turned her nose up at having council tenants in the street. The story turned out to relate to a later period and it was not taken up for dramatisation.

This process of hearing stories and choosing whether or not to develop them needed sensitive handling. However, there were always far more stories offered than could be included and the play

had to be shaped out of the best and most relevant. This was largely arrived at by consensus, but the devising process depended on a high degree of trust between the cast and the director. Every time the Good Companions work on a new show, they say that they cannot imagine how it will change from a set of unconnected stories into a structured play. Making this happen to everyone's satisfaction is a big responsibility, when the stories are so personal and mean so much to the tellers.

Rehearsal Seven

1) Adding detail

Kitty and Joan had brought in the letters from their fiancés referred to in the previous rehearsal, with detailed references to tattoos up the arm, scorpion bites and drinking bouts with the lads.

This brought the National Service theme to life and we reworked the song "You'll never know" around the letters to everyone's satisfaction.



2) Finding an ending

As the play was definitely going to be performed at the Jubilee celebrations, it was obviously a good idea to end with memories of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Everyone remembered where they were on this occasion and we decided to include more than one version of the day. Some of the group had seen the royal coach pass by and we wanted to represent this. It was much easier to play the waiting and applauding crowd than to represent Queen, carriage and all, so we went for enthusiastic flag-waving, leaving the audience to imagine the full panoply. However, most of the group had watched the coronation on television. This gave us a chance to include the arrival of TV and its tremendous novelty at the beginning, with neighbours gathering round the one set in the street

to watch the big event. When we played this out, people remembered how you had to get the picture more or less right and then leave it. "Adjusting" it at the last minute could be disastrous, ending up with a "snowstorm" effect. Again, showing the cast as an enthralled audience facing the TV was more feasible than trying to present the coronation itself, but we decided to go halfway towards the latter by having the group follow the actions described by Ralph as he sees them on the imaginary television.

Hilda's coronation memory was of misery and marital strife and at first sight did not seem to be the right story for the end of the play. However, her way of telling the group about her full scale row with her husband who was "in the pub all day, dancing with a little blond tart in a funny hat" was so funny that it became a scene we had to include. A domestic tiff in an East End pub brought the play back to earth and to the personal experience of that day remembered fifty years on. Again, this inclusion was controversial, but we took the sting out of the ending with a community song of the period to round off the day.

3) A Structure to work with

By the end of this session, we clearly had a set of stories and a basic structure to work with. Everyone felt that the scenes could be linked together to create a strong sense of life in the early 50s which would be recognised and enjoyed by others. From now on, we would need to go back over every story, agree a final script, choreograph the songs and make sure the scenes flowed easily from one to another and learn the script. One feature of scripting from improvisation with the group was that extra bits of remembered detail came up with every playing. This meant that new lines had to be scribbled down and added in, so that the script emerged organically.

One worrying aspect from a directorial point of view was that the solo scenes of mothers alone with their babies in prams meant that people would have long monologues to learn and would have to maintain the interest of the audience over quite a long period. I felt this was a risk worth taking, as the truth of the remembered

situation was what mattered, and that I could help cast members by giving them physical journeys and actions to match the text and help them remember their own speeches. In the event, some of the newer members of the group had real difficulty learning their lines, and much rehearsal time was spent going over tricky scenes where three or more "characters" were involved and the sequencing was crucial. It was not until the opening performances that the lines were secure, and even then some people were "wobbly" and needed line-runs before every show.

The over-riding feeling with the Jubilee play was that it had "written itself". The ideas had flowed and the improvisations had yielded lively dialogue and strong visual images. "That should definitely be in" was a phrase we often used during the devising period.

The Play in Performance



It was very gratifying at the opening performances, which were held during the main week of Jubilee festivities, that the show hit a chord with audiences. People joined in all the songs and identified with the experiences on stage. We performed at Jubilee parties and for older people's groups all over Greater London, and every performance was followed by an informal discussion with the audience. At many of the events, the audience was racially mixed and it was a great advantage to have the Caribbean experience reflected in the play.

The group have worked well together and the play's popularity has boosted their confidence and playing skill. There have been twenty-five performances at the time of writing with a further ten likely in the future, before our next production is ready. Performances have to be spaced so that there are recovery days between shows, without the gaps getting too long. A gap of more than a week certainly requires an extra revision rehearsal, and the performances are definitely better when the group have had a run-through beforehand, even though this is often difficult to organise.

The Good Companions reflect on the play:

Some of the Good Companions met after the show had been "on the road" for a few weeks. Readers may like to hear some of their reactions to making and performing the Jubilee show.

Joan The tension drives me up the wall. I take Rescue Remedy all the time, so I relax. But I feel so proud when I've done it! My husband sees me walking up and down with the script and he says, "I'm sorry, it's awful!" And another thing, I didn't know I could sing before. At home I just get "Shut up!"

Kitty: I like putting the play together. I think it's lovely because we all get together. We talk about everything and say, "Let's put that in! That'll be funny!", and then we end up practically on the floor, laughing and everything! But when we're performing, I'm thinking, "Oh my stomach! Am I going to do it alright?" Nearly every time we've done a show, I've had people come up to me, saying, "How do you remember all those lines?" And when we're away we have a wonderful time, don't we? I mean we have a laugh?

Margaret: I enjoy it. I like the workshops, and I like the leading up to it, you know, writing the script, talking. And I do enjoy performing it, but only when I've learned the lines. Sometimes, it seems as though the lines get

muddled up, or you have a mental block. You know it, and you're out there, and then all of a sudden, pssshhh! It goes!

Hilda: For me, it's not a problem of stage-fright. I'm raring to go. It doesn't bother me one bit. I'm not nervous. I can't wait to get there, and I enjoy every minute of it. And I love all the girls. And Ralph. We're like a family. We worry about each other. We all love each other. We wouldn't be here otherwise.

Kathy: I thought, "Yes, I could work with these women", and I've not regretted it. And when I had my accident and was stuck indoors, that phone didn't stop, and they rang and rang and rang. My sister was looking after me at home and she couldn't believe it. I think the worst part is learning the lines. Because otherwise it's fun. Beforehand, we all say "Look, let me just go over this bit again." You're all in it together. It's fun when we do it, it's fun afterwards.



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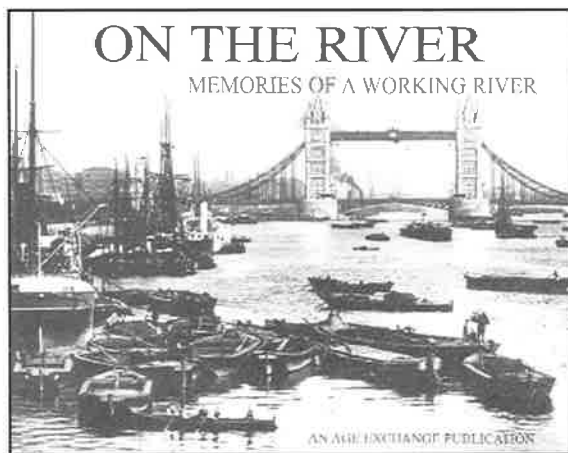
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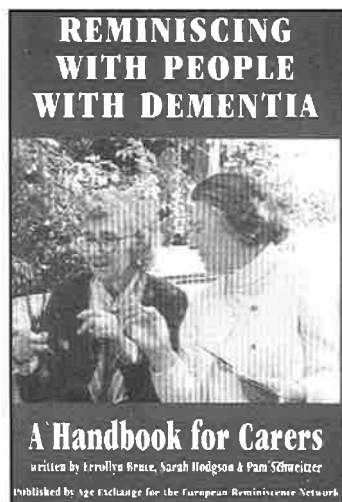
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