THE CARAVAN

A practical guide to using culture with seniors to support community development

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WORD

During the last 2 years, and due to the conditions that many of our elders faced during the pandemic, society has become aware of a great problem they have endured. Our elders have felt highly isolated for the months that the restrictive measures have been (and sometimes still are) in place. It has been proved that during the pandemic, "social disconnection puts older adults at greater risk of depression and anxiety" (SANTINI, JOSE, CORNWELL et al., 2020). According to scientific research, "if health ministers instruct elderly people to remain home, have groceries and vital medications delivered, and avoid social contact with family and friends, urgent action is needed to mitigate the mental and physical health consequences" (ARMITAGE & NELLUMS, 2020).

It has been proven that "creative activity has been shown to reduce depression and isolation, offering the power of choice and decisions. Towards the end of life, art and creativity offer a path of opening up the windows to people's emotional interiors" (HANNEMAN, 2006) which is not only beneficial in a pandemic situation but can significantly improve the elders' quality of life in a regular context. Offering these cultural and creative activities outdoors, in open spaces, which are safer for elders (with regards to COVID-19, but also the common flu and other respiratory diseases), and with the advantage that the Mediterranean countries count on with regards to mild weathers that allow

for these activities to be developed, the idea of gathering groups o seniors to develop creative and artistic activities was developed.

The idea of the Travelling Caravan, where five seniors that have developed artistic and cultural activities travel to disadvantaged communities to create 1-day events where culture, art and civic values come together, is inspired by the Pedagogical Missions during the Spanish Second Republic and the "Barraca" theatre company founded and led by playwriter Federico García Lorca. During these missions, teachers, actors, a moving library, reproductions of paintings that could be found in the Prado museum in Madrid travelled to those villages where no other education had reached before, and therefore the communities were illiterate. This idea, which is later developed by Paulo Freire in the Pedagogy of the Oppresed, is the seed for this Caravan to support the development of underprivileged communities in processes that are led by the communities themselves. The idea is also combined with Northern Italy old tradition of Balera and Fastòn, wooden stages travelling from one villages to the others to celebrate traditional town fairs and festivals. In past times, for people living in small villages the arrival of Fastòn meant the chance to meet new people from other villages, to dance, to spend pleasant time together telling stories with ritual theatre or celebrations.

The general objective of the project is to offer seniors (+70 years old) with fewer opportunities (low income, low education and from rural areas) learning and participation opportunities in the outdoors to foster their inclusion and mitigate the isolation they have faced during COVID-19 while offering activities in safe spaces (COVID-19 and other diseases such as the flu are more easily transmitted in closed spaces and interiors).

33 seniors with fewer opportunities in each country participated in a learning and creative program to develop a Travelling Caravan that traveled to underprivileged communities to reflect on civic values through art and culture. To make this possible, the project partners organized preparation activities, held transnational gatherings, and shared the results of the project with adult educators.

THE TRAVELLING CARAVAN

La Barraca theatre company

This project is directly inspired by a series of initiatives and projects carried out in Spain at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, such as the Pedagogical Missions and the theater group La Barraca. These were cultural and educational projects aimed at bringing culture to rural and disadvantaged areas of a largely illiterate Spanish society that was plunged into a civil war initiated by a military uprising, followed by the post-war period and dictatorship, until the arrival of democracy in the mid-1970s.

The idea of the Pedagogical Missions has its origin in the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (ILE), a pedagogical experiment created in 1876 by the professor Francisco Giner de los Ríos at the Central University of Madrid. This project was inspired by Krausist philosophy, which refused to adjust teachings to the religious or political dogmas that prevailed in a Spain immersed in the monarchical restoration that ended the First Spanish Republic (1873-1874).

Despite the restoration of a constitutional, oligarchic, and cacique-dominated monarchy, the foundations established by the First Spanish Republic and the ideas coming from Germany through Krausism allowed the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (ILE) to become a successful project. This project had the support of a large part of the Spanish intellectuals committed to the renewal and reform of an education anchored to religious dogmas.

The influence of the ILE was decisive in many areas of society, such as the arts, science, and education. Organizations such as the National Pedagogical Museum, the Board for Advanced Studies, and the Student Residence were created, where some of the brightest minds in universal art, such as Salvador Dalí, Luis Buñuel, and Federico García Lorca, were trained.

Following the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939) and the fall of the prevailing monarchy, social, cultural, and educational changes accelerated, particularly in the early years with the proclamation of the 1931 Spanish Constitution, one of the most progressive constitutions in European history, where culture and education were central pillars.

It was during these early years of the Republican government that the theatrical company La Barraca was created with public funding, under the direction of Federico García Lorca and Eduardo Ugarte. This traveling group aimed to bring Spanish classical theater, in an avant-garde manner, to rural and isolated areas where access to culture was limited.

From 1932 to the end of 1935, they traveled across wide regions and villages of Spain, making this initiative a

resounding success that positioned the Republican government as a guarantor of the educational and cultural development of Spanish society, and even beyond its borders. Despite the success of this itinerant company, the La Barraca project was labeled as mere socialist/communist propaganda by the Republic's detractors.

With the military uprising of June 1936 and the subsequent assassination of Federico García Lorca by Falangists in August of the same year, the group disbanded. Public funding was cut off due to the severe situation faced by the legitimate government and the loss of one of the most prominent figures in universal theater and the founder of the company.

The fundamental ideas of La Barraca endured during the dictatorship, when other theater groups were created to fascistize the population they reached. Today, the impact that La Barraca had on a very backward and illiterate Spanish society is undeniable and represents a milestone in bringing theater to the people and the experience of living it directly.

Members of La Barraca (1933), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, España

Community education

Calypso has been working with community and social theatre since 2006, with different target groups and different contexts. Community theatre with seniors was one of the first projects for Calypso trainers, in 2007, with the purpose of creating a show about an old celebration of the river Ticino, in Pavia. At the same time, this initial phase of collecting memories and materials (old articles and newspapers, pictures, props etc) about the celebration works as a phase of connecting people, in order to start a group to imagine and plan the performance. As a matter of fact, in community theatre the purpose is to facilitate a process where individuals and small groups can share their stories, memories, ideas, visions, dreams. To agree in having a final result is the launching moment for the participatory process. It's at this moment that the facilitator can propose the group to set the rules together: in this frame, each participant agrees to cooperate with others for the final results. The negotiation among members of the group is essential for the result to be representative of all the different perspectives and memories. As Bernardi (2004) says:

"*During the workshop phase, the building process of each person and the group is not completed if it's not tested, shared and communicated. The (mandatory and consequential) relationship between process and result turns out to be totally polluted by the equation result=show, either professional rather than amateur ones.*"

In this way, the process of creating a final event is the same democratic process that Calypso uses in community development projects: gathering people around some common interest and experiencing a shared decision making process. In community theatre projects, Calypso tends to find (or to create) connections between the group and the context: it could be traditional stories or habits, music, dances, monuments, legends or landscape and environment. This is meant to strengthen the bond among participants and to make them feel entitled to take action in real life about what concerns them, in a transformative dimension.

THE CARAVAN

Working with seniors

Working with seniors is essential for addressing social isolation, which has been significantly exacerbated since COVID-19. As discussed in a recent article by Nivestam, A. et al. (2023), there is a trend of decreased well-being in older age due to increased disease risk, but maintaining well-being can positively impact health and increase survival. Supporting activities that enhance well-being in older adults is crucial. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines well-being as a positive state focused on quality of life and meaningful contribution. As stated by Chia, J. L., & Hartanto, A. (2021), in a society where an activity-oriented, work-related lifestyle is a standard of well-being, older adults may experience dissociation when they can no longer conform to this standard. To address this issue, older adults should adjust their lives to include various "productive" roles. The theory suggests a positive relationship between participation in social activities and life satisfaction, acknowledging that psychosocial needs persist despite physical decline. Therefore, older adults benefit from engaging in group and community activities, though these opportunities are often hindered by social norms such as forced retirement.

A recent example of work with seniors by Roes Cooperativa is the "Seniors in Arts" project, which developed best practice guidelines for training seniors in expressive arts. The project provided local and transnational learning opportunities, including creating a virtual cultural circle for seniors to connect and share art, offering local workshops, and training educators. Key activities included developing motivational guidelines, transnational training, blended mobility for learners, local arts workshops, and extensive dissemination. Impacts included enhanced senior participation, self-confidence, and skill development, along with strengthened European cooperation and community benefits through cultural preservation and social inclusion.

Working with seniors presents several challenges. Many seniors, particularly those from low-income, low-education, and rural areas, face heightened isolation, making engagement difficult. Physical and cognitive decline can limit participation in activities, requiring adaptations and additional support. Overcoming the stigma around ageing and encouraging seniors to step out of their comfort zones can be challenging. Communication barriers, such as hearing or vision impairments, also need to be addressed. Sustaining interest and participation over time requires continuous effort and innovation.

Combining these insights highlights the need for tailored and adaptive approaches to effectively engage seniors in arts activities to promote healthy ageing. Engaging seniors in arts and theatre helps them explore issues like isolation and health, fostering self-

expression, trust, and community. Participatory activities, in general, bring up emotions and memories, providing seniors with a voice and enhancing their sense of belonging. As described by Noice, T., et al. (2014), a review of scientific literature on enhancing healthy ageing in older adults through active participation in the arts notes improvements in memory, creativity, problem-solving, everyday competence, reaction time, balance, gait, and quality of life. Additionally, the article includes a Supplementary Appendix with examples of arts engagement for training and cultural activities that boost seniors' self-confidence, skills, and sense of connection, empowering them as active community participants and promoting civic engagement.

To engage seniors effectively, programs must be designed inclusively, taking into account the physical needs and leveraging the strengths of older adults. Tailored training sessions can help seniors update their skills, especially in areas like technology and modern communication tools, empowering them to contribute more effectively (Fang et al., 2018). Moreover, establishing mentorship programs where seniors can share their expertise with younger participants can be highly beneficial. Such programs not only help mentees but also give seniors a sense of purpose and achievement (Smeaton & White, 2016).

Where was The Caravan implemented

Oltrepò Pavese, Italy

In Italy the Travelling Caravan was supposed to take place in the Oltrepò Pavese. This is the southern wide area of Pavia's district, where the hills turn to mountains.

Oltrepò Pavese is one of the main wine districts of northern Italy, characterised by beautiful landscapes, small villages with ancient ruins and monuments like castles, churches, monasteries, hiking and bike trails, woods, streams and thermal baths. Notwithstanding its many resources, Oltrepo' Pavese hasn't still been able to assert itself as a famous tourist destination in Italy. At most it can be a daily or weekend destination for people living in a range of 100 km, or for people who have their family houses here and come back for holidays. Apart from the main valley (Valle Staffora), in lesser valleys and places, infrastructures and facilities can be very bad and there's a substantial lack of net among the local enterprises both in the wine field and in hospitality. Many of the lesser villages are now almost depopulated, people have been leaving since the 1970s, because of the lack of possibilities for employment and the very bad connections with cities where to work and study, as well as the distance from them. Agriculture, which is the main economic activity of the area, employs mostly foreign seasonal workers. Some families coming, for example, from Romania, Egypt, India… have settled down in Oltrepò to work in agriculture, contributing a little to the repopulation of the area.

Cultural stagnation as well characterises the area: in the summer (mostly July and August) there are some organised events such as concerts, theatre plays, open air cinemas, but during the whole year the district is characterised by a general cultural and social stagnation, with a lack of offer for people living there above all for youngsters and seniors, that is to say the most fragile people who have difficulties of movement to bigger cities. There are few public programmes run by local city councils, dealing with social inclusion and culture. Most of the work is done by a small number of NGOs who decide to invest their work and human resources here.

Calypso's travelling Caravan, called NonDimenticarBalera, was performed in four places in Oltrepò Pavese. Municipalities which gave us hospitality were though slightly different from those we thought about when writing the project.

Oliva Gessi, Arena Po, Zenevredo, Rea Po and Santa Margherita Staffora were replaced by Oliva Gessi, Bosnasco, Barbianello and Santa Margherita

Staffora. Relations with some municipalities were in fact quite complicated: for example having taken place during local election time, or having been delegated by the mayor to local ProLoco. These are associations of volunteers very typical and widespread in Italy, above all in small municipalities. The calendar of events of a ProLoco is generally set many months in advance, and being run by volunteers it's difficult to involve them in new happenings which weren't programmed by themselves.

Oliva Gessi is a small village (158 inhabitants) on the hills, only 40 minutes of driving from Pavia. Both old people and some new families, who recently moved to Oliva thanks to its closeness to bigger cities, live in Oliva Gessi. Despite the very small dimensions of the municipality, Oliva has a lively cultural life and it's traditionally tied to theatre, thanks to a troupe which was founded in 1974, still exists and takes care of the local 100 seats theatre. Oliva Gessi gave hospitality to our Balera on Easter's Monday, which is public feast in Italy.

The second village where the travelling Caravan - NonDimenticarBalera - took place was Bosnasco (about 600 inhabitants). Unlike the very picturesque Oliva, often the destination of Sunday day trippers, Bosnasco is placed in the flat part of Oltrepò Pavese nearer to the province of Piacenza than to Pavia's and it's not a popular destination. The main

attraction of Bosnasco is Cardazzo Village, a sports complex where also dancing nights are usually organised, which the mayor figured out as the best place to welcome our event.

The third place of the Balera was an hamlet of Barbianello (about 870 inhabitants). This hamlet - San Re - is characterised by a wide historical farm, with the closed courtyard typical of Lombardia farms, and an ancient oratory. The Balera held here, thanks to the warm hospitality of the owners, was the occasion to invite people to a place which usually cannot be visited, being private property, and most of all to renew an old community ritual, that of the feasts on the farmyard.

The municipality of Santa Margherita Staffora (about 400 inhabitants) invited us to perform the travelling Caravan in Pian del Poggio (1700 m above sl), probably the most distant hamlet. It is in the mountains (about 2 hours driving from Pavia) and hosts a skiing resort. In Summer also it is a popular destination both for elders and for families with children, despite its distance and its bad roads.

The fifth NonDimenticarBalera took place in Pavia, in the popular neighbourhood called La Scala. This choice was due to the group of elders whom eventually we collaborated with. Placed in the northern outskirts of the city, La Scala is a district where Calypso

has often worked, characterised by public houses complexes and inhabited by many old people and by many migrant families. We devised the Travelling Caravan with a group of old ladies who have their meeting centre in this district (most of them also live there) and so it was a natural consequence to answer their desire to have a dancing celebration for their community.

Siberia Extremeña, Spain

The events took place in the region of Siberia Extremeña, a Spanish region totally isolated from big cities, with villages that were very isolated from each other too, and with very unfavourable climatic, geographical, demographic, educational, and economic conditions.

These characteristics are shared by all the municipalities in the area, and that's why UNESCO recognized LA SIBERIA as a Biosphere Reserve in 2019 in an attempt to promote the conservation and protection of biodiversity, as well as the economic and human development of these areas, research, education, and cultural traditions.

Despite being a very extensive region, it had a sparse population that was highly concentrated in small population centres. This region survived throughout the centuries by basing its economy on

agriculture and livestock, but it was during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco that the region became poorer and lost more than half of its population, which went from 50,000 inhabitants to 25,000 today, spread over 17 municipalities.

Up until the writing of this guide, The Caravan was implemented in the municipality of Fuenlabrada de los Montes. This is a village in the region of Siberia, with a population of 1793 inhabitants. Within this region, it is one of the villages with the greatest economic, social and touristic impact, due to its close relationship with honey production, extensive livestock farming and popular festivities. Despite this, only a few are dedicated to these economic activities, making this municipality one of the poorest in Spain in relation to its gross domestic product.

These days, Fuenlabrada de los Montes suffers from a constant loss of population to the big cities, a negative vegetative growth as well as a geographical isolation that makes access to public and health services difficult.

Kalamata and Athens, Greece

Kalamata, the vibrant capital of the Messenia region in southern Greece, is renowned for its rich history, picturesque landscapes, and cultural

heritage. While the town itself offers a plethora of cultural and educational opportunities, the surrounding villages often paint a starkly different picture, especially for the senior population residing there.

The villages around Kalamata, characterised by their serene and traditional way of life, often lack the infrastructure and resources necessary to support cultural and educational activities. For many seniors in these areas, the absence of such opportunities significantly impacts their quality of life. The lack of accessible transportation options further exacerbates the problem, as travelling to Kalamata for cultural events or educational programs becomes a daunting task for elderly individuals who may already be dealing with mobility issues.

In these villages, cultural activities are often limited to local festivals and religious celebrations, which, while important, do not offer the same breadth of engagement as the diverse cultural offerings in Kalamata. Libraries, if they exist, are typically underfunded and understocked, limiting the access to a wide range of reading materials. The absence of organised educational programs means that seniors have fewer opportunities to engage in lifelong learning, which is crucial for mental stimulation and overall well-being.

Furthermore, the digital divide is pronounced in these rural areas. While the younger population might have some access to the internet and digital learning platforms, many seniors do not have the necessary skills or resources to benefit from online educational opportunities. This technological gap further isolates them from the wealth of information and cultural experiences available online.

Community centres in the villages, which could potentially serve as hubs for cultural and educational activities, often lack the funding and support needed to offer regular programming. As a result, the seniors are left with limited options for social interaction and intellectual engagement. This isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness and depression, which are common issues among the elderly population.

The absence of cultural and educational opportunities also means that seniors miss out on the benefits of social learning environments. These environments not only provide intellectual stimulation but also foster social connections and a sense of community, which are vital for emotional health. In contrast, the urban centre of Kalamata thrives with clubs, societies, and organisations that bring people together for various cultural pursuits, leaving the village seniors on the periphery of such enriching experiences.

Efforts to bridge this gap are often hampered by financial constraints and a lack of coordinated policy initiatives. While there are occasional outreach programs from Kalamata's institutions aiming to include the village populations, these are sporadic and insufficient to meet the ongoing needs of the seniors. Sustainable solutions require a concerted effort to decentralise cultural and educational resources, making them more accessible to the rural elderly population.

In conclusion, while Kalamata flourishes with cultural and educational opportunities, the surrounding villages tell a story of disparity, particularly for the senior residents. Addressing this imbalance is crucial not only for enhancing the quality of life for these individuals but also for fostering a more inclusive and vibrant cultural landscape throughout the region. By investing in infrastructure, technology, and community-based initiatives, it is possible to ensure that the elderly population in the villages around Kalamata can enjoy the same enriching experiences as their urban counterparts.

In Athens, the bustling capital of Greece, seniors often find themselves marginalised due to the city's fast-paced, modern lifestyle, which caters predominantly to the younger, working population. The rapid tempo and urban sprawl can be overwhelming for older residents, particularly those facing health issues and living on low incomes. Educational and cultural opportunities, while abundant in the city, are frequently inaccessible to these seniors due to physical mobility constraints and financial limitations. Consequently, many elderly Athenians experience isolation and a lack of engagement, missing out on the intellectual and social benefits that come with cultural participation. This marginalisation not only diminishes their quality of life but also exacerbates feelings of loneliness and neglect in a city that otherwise teems with activity and opportunity.

As a result, in order to maximise the social impact of addressing these issues, the Caravan program was implemented in seniors' social structures in both Athens and Kalamata, Greece. The Caravan program aimed to bring educational and cultural activities directly to where seniors live and gather, thereby overcoming the barriers of transportation, health, and income, and fostering a more inclusive and supportive community for the elderly.

SETTING UP A GROUP WITH SENIORS

Finding and selecting participants

How we did it in Italy

Calypso had clear in mind from the beginning the idea of working with the elderly through the language of dance. In Italy, in fact, dancing is a particularly welcome activity for many seniors and practised at least weekly in many meeting centres for older people.

In the month of November, we therefore looked for a recreational centre for the elderly that had dancing among the activities routinely offered to its members and identified it in an association in a small town not far from Pavia.

On their premises they have two dance floors one outdoor and one indoor, where dance events are held at least twice a week. After an initial contact, they invited us to participate in a dance event to present the Caravan project. The people were very kind and welcoming to us, showed us dance steps and shared their stories with us. We then gave them an appointment for a later afternoon in which to reason more precisely about what we could do together. At the first appointment, however, no one showed up. We tried again with a second appointment, but the few people who did show up pointed out that they were short on time and did not want to engage in a new activity that, moreover, would have outcomes outside their village. This "negotiation" took more than one month and a half.

At the beginning of 2024, we therefore decided to return to a group of elderly people with whom Calypso had worked before, who moreover responded better to our target audience of frail people, with lesser opportunities and in need of socialisation activities.

The association Salvo d'Acquisto has its seat in a suburban district of Pavia, named La Scala. This association has seen the number of its members decrease over the years, due to the gradual ageing and to the death of many of them. Currently the association has about 30 members, but only about ten of them meet every afternoon for a couple of hours, mainly to play cards, while occasionally they have lunch together. Most of them are ladies. In the past they were much more active, organising dance parties and doing drama workshops, for example. Our proposal to meet at least once a week to think together about the implementation of The Caravan project was enthusiastically accepted: on the one hand, the ladies have known us for a long time and there was no need to build a relationship of trust from scratch; on the other hand, some of them are really fed up with having only the card game as an option to spend the afternoon and have looked to our proposal as to a nice novelty.

People who have decided to collaborate with us, attending the weekly Wednesday's workshop are five

ladies (Piera 88 y.o; Miriam 75 y.o; Primina 91 y.o.; Palma 82 y.o.; Maria 87 y.o.) and a man (Giuseppe 91 y.o).ladies (Piera 88 y.o; Miriam 75 y.o; Primina 91 y.o.; Palma 82 y.o.; Maria 87 y.o.) and a man (Giuseppe 91 y.o).

Four of them live alone, one with sons and grandchildren, one with a caregiver. Four of them live in the district of La Scala. Three of them attend daily the seniors' recreational centre, one only occasionally, living far from this suburban area; the last two also occasionally, not being interested in playing cards.

Despite age-related problems (mobility diseases, deafness, heart diseases…) most of them have an exceptional memory, especially for past events. Most of them live in modest economic conditions.

Four of our participants were born in Pavia and moved to the district la Scala in the 50s-60s when actually this neighbourhood came into being, mostly to accommodate people who then worked in the city's factories

One of the ladies was born in Germany and moved to Italy after marriage; another one moved to Pavia from southern Italy.

We had an initial meeting with our participants to explain The Caravan project and its objectives. The

participants immediately liked the idea of working through the language of dance because before the lockdown dancing was an activity they practised periodically. Due to their age, most of them no longer feel able to dance, but they accepted the idea of organising a dance feast for others. To understand what elements could be put into this party, the group agreed that it was necessary to start from the memory of past festivals ("balere") and we decided to meet once a week. The workshop lasted from January to June, the first meetings were for brainstorming and organising, the last for verifying the work as it went on.

How we did it in Spain

In Spain, a selection of participants was carried out focusing on a region, La Siberia, which, due to the nature and characteristics of the project, perfectly aligned with its initial objectives.

From the start of the selection process, we had the collaboration of the local council of Fuenlabrada de los Montes, located in the La Siberia region. The project and its benefits were promoted by the Department of Culture. Additionally, one of the FOCO coordinators is from this region, which facilitated dissemination through contact networks, filling the town with posters and announcements about the project, its characteristics, and the planned activities.

The registrations were numerous, with more than 15 people aged between 70 and 86 showing interest from the early stages of dissemination. In an effort to make this project as inclusive as possible, participation requirements and barriers to the workshops and activities were eliminated. FOCO, an organisation that bases much of its activities on theatre and the performing arts, decided not to require theatrical experience or previous training for participant selection, only the willingness and desire to participate in the creative process and skill acquisition.

Non looking for participants with previous acting skills is particularly relevant for a population group with limited access and contact with the cultural resources and non-formal education promoted by the organisation. Once the registration period ended, we held a meeting with all interested parties where we explained the project's objectives, timeline, and the different activities that would be carried out. Additionally, several group dynamics were conducted to get to know each participant from the early stages, their behaviour in group work, and their conflict resolution and creative abilities.

How we did it in Greece

In Athens, we connected with local community centers and local cafés, focused on the region of Pagrati, as we know seniors are gathering in the square, to spread the word about our free learning program for seniors. By talking to staff and visitors, we asked them to tell their friends and family about us. However, we faced obstacles such as some seniors being hesitant to join due to mistrust or lack of understanding about the program. Despite these challenges, we found some seniors who lacked education and cultural opportunities due to health and income problems. We invited these seniors to join our program.

In Kalamata, we visited local cafes, markets, and community centres, talking to people about our program. These conversations led to people telling their neighbours and friends about us. One obstacle we encountered was the remote location of some villages, making it hard to reach seniors living there. Another challenge was the initial reluctance of some community members to participate due to concerns about leaving their daily routines. This word-of-mouth spread helped us find seniors in nearby villages who rarely took part in cultural activities because of health and financial issues. With the help of their neighbours, we invited these seniors to join our program.

Ice-breaking and teambuilding

Before starting to work with a new group. Making sure that the participants ease into the methodology used is a key factor. This is specially relevant when working creatively, having to devise theatre from scratch and with a target group with no prior experience with the methodology.

To bridge this gap, we propose three teambuilding sessions that can make your group more relaxed with the work to come, and more in tune with each other. Spending some time doing these sessions will be rewarded further on as the rest of the phases of the process will run more smoothly.

The song that I am / collective biography

Objectives:

- Getting to know each other
- Getting familiar with being on stage, in front of an audience
- Stimulate curiosity about other people in the group
- Creating a shared context with music

Materials and space:

- One chair for each participant
- Paper tape to define the stage
- Speakers for music
- A microphone
- Long paper roll to stick to the wall
- Markers
- Sticky notes

Description of the activities:

This could be the opening session. Facilitators have prepared some tea and snacks to welcome the group. As they arrive, each participant is given a small piece of paper: *What song are you?* Facilitator can take some minutes to explain it's not about a song that you like, but more a song that looks like you. In the meanwhile, participants are invited to take some tea, chat with others and in the meanwhile think about the song. When they know it, they can go to the facilitator and tell the title, so that a playlist can be created. The operation can take some time. When the playlist is almost ready, one facilitator will prepare a kind of stage with paper tape lines. Participants are invited to take a seat in the chairs placed on three sides of the stage, in just one row.

Facilitators explain that the song will be played one right after the other, without interruption. When each participant recognizes the song that he/she is, is invited to stand up and go on stage, and stay there without doing anything else but taking eye contact with the audience, while the song is played. When the song finishes, another one will start and somebody else will go on stage. When every song has been played, the whole group will go on stage and will stand still in a line. Little by little, everybody can start making a movement on the spot. The movement grows bigger and bigger and people start to be dragged in the room by this movement, until they decide to stop in a statue. The activity ends when everybody is standing in statue all around.

After a short break, the group can start with the second part of the session, **collective biography**. In the middle of the room there's a microphone. Participants are invited to que by the microphone. When it's somebody's turn, this person will get on the microphone to tell a very big and extraordinary venture they had - it should be something incredible and unbelievable,

and completely made up, fake.

In the second round, people are invited to tell the microphone an important year in their lives, also telling why. Eg: when I was 21 I learnt to drive a motorboat. When they finish, they can write on a sticky note the year and a keyword (or facilitator can do it for them) and stick it on the poster on the wall.

For the third part of the activity, participants will walk in the room to a music, and when they want they can go and pick a note from the wall, and read it on the microphone. The rest of the group is invited to suddenly stop and then start walking again, changing direction. If the rhythm is good, it can sound like a kind of collective oral poem. When there are no more readings, participants can hold still in a collective statue.

Getting acquinted

Objectives:

- To get to know the group
- To introduce the group to theatre methodologies
- To present the method of work

Materials and space:

- A room with space to move around. Ideally, The room should be divided into two parts, one open space with no objects, and the other part with a circle of chairs.
- At least one chair per participant and for the facilitators.
- Papers.
- Markers.

Description of the activities:

Activity 1 - What we have in common

Participants sit on the chairs in a circle. Standing up in the middle of the circle, the facilitator says a statement. Participants for whom this statement is true have to switch chairs. An example of a statement is "This is my first time doing theatre". After a couple of rounds, the person in the middle will try to sit down in one of the chairs that becomes empty. The person left without a chair stays in the middle and its their turn to say a statement.

Activity 2 - Switching places

Still in the circle of chairs, participants are asked to secretly signal each other to switch spots without the facilitator noticing. The facilitator quickly sits on one of the empty spots. So, someone else ends up in the middle, watching the group take risks before they can get a free chair.

Activity 3 - Giving instructions

Participants are divided into pairs. Each person is given a sheet of paper and a marker. In each pair, one of the participants will be A and the other one B. Participant A will draw a shape on their sheet of paper. Shapes should be somewhat complex (a star, a cloud, a house…). Participant B cannot see what A is drawing. Then, participant A will describe how to draw their shape without giving it away, providing clear instructions on how to draw it (ex. make a horizontal line, draw a square on top of the line…). Once they are finished they show each other the drawings and switch roles. At the end, reflect on how precise they were when giving directions, and what instructions were particularly clear for them when drawing.

Activity 4 - Directing each other

Now, in groups of three, participants will direct each other. In order to do so, one will be the director and the other two actors. The director will give alternate directions, first to one actor and then to the other. The directions must be clear. The directions should go as follows:

- A, do something
- B, do something
- A, do something
- B, do something
- …

After a few minutes, switch roles until everyone has been a director.

Reflection

After the end of the session, collect feedback from the group and present the work methodology.

Sources

- ON&OFF et al., 2020, p. 90

Unhatting Heads

Objectives:

- Building Trust and Rapport Among Team Members
- Improving Collaboration and Cooperative Problem-Solving
- Enhancing Communication and Interpersonal Understanding

Materials and space:

- Post-it notes
- Hat (to hold post-it notes)
- Black hat
- Yellow gold hat
- Chairs
- Spacious session room
- Casual coffee area

Description of the activities:

Activity 1 - Name Game in Circle with Singing and Narrating the Story of Our Name

Participants shared their name along with singing a favorite song/music. Each participant narrates the story behind their name.

Activity 2 - Pantomime Game "I Say One Thing, I Do Another"

In a circle, participants mime an action while stating a different, unrelated action. The next person continues the ame by playing pantomime the statement of the previous person.

Activity 3 - Improvisation Storytelling Game "The Magic Hat"

Random words on post-it notes are used to continue a story started by one person, with each participant taking turns.

Activity 4 - "Cartoons"

One participant holds the tv control and describes an imaginative scene with a specific structure in narration: Subject (Subject is supposed to be a non living object), Verb and place/situation, and another participant, as a cartoon on TV, embodies the object and improvises based on the description.

Activity 5 - Sharing Circle on Feelings and Session Reflection

Participants share their thoughts and feelings about the session in a circle.

Activity 6- Energy Shower

Participants gather in a circle, one participant stands in the center wearing the yellow hat, and the rest unhat them and provide a light, playful massage, followed by a rapid refreshing movement tha cleans the aura of them.

These activities are focused on building a cohesive team by encouraging participants to share personal stories, engage in creative improvisation, and develop empathy and understanding through collaborative exercises.

UNLEASH YOUR CREATIVITY

THE CARAVAN

# Painting to the music

Objectives:

- To experiment with a creative activity
- To practise a simple manual activity and re-discover one's own ability
- To discover connections between different artistic languages

Materials and space:

- Selected music
- Watercolours and brushes
- Sheets

Description of the activities:

After spending a whole session remembering old songs, listening to them and recalling memories linked to those songs, we made a selected playlist which we used in a second session proposing a creative activity to the members of the group. We proposed to the group simply to listen to the music and in the meantime to paint with watercolours whatever the music suggested to them, with no rush and no expectation as to the outcome. They could use as many sheets as they wanted. At the beginning, there was no lack of protests: the ladies said they were not capable, that their sight was weak and their hands unsteady, but soon they were amazed at the ease of the medium (watercolour) proposed to them and in the end they were all very
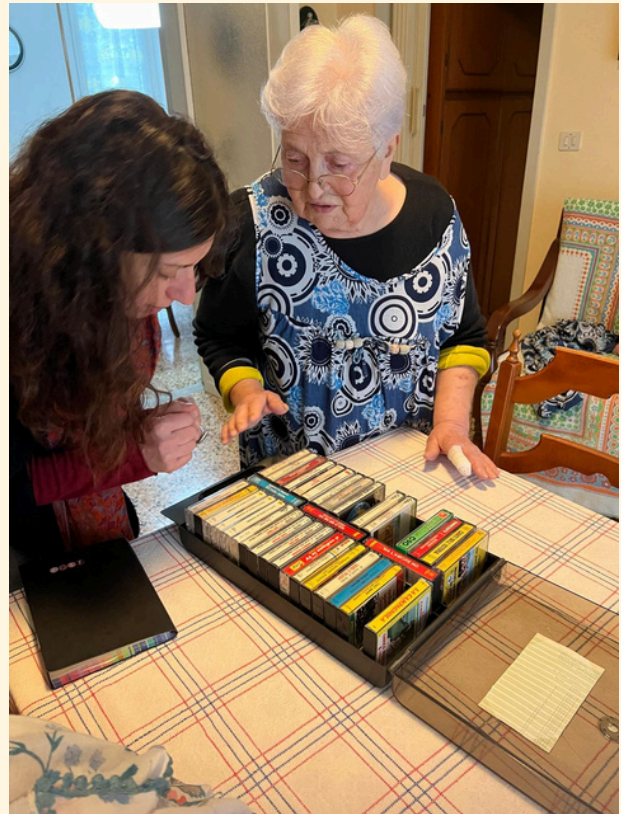
satisfied with the result they achieved, which they described in great detail and said they had indeed been greatly helped by the music they were listening to.

Key objects
Pictures
Tell my story!

Objectives:

- To unleash creativity
- To gain emotional distance from one's own stories
- To put oneself in the hands of others and create a climate of trust

Materials and space:

- Old pictures brought by the participants

Description of the activities:

Objects are never just objects. They are a door that opens to release our emotions. Objects tell stories and some more than others. Photographs, for example, have the great power to fix moments of our lives forever and can hide stories of hate and love, encounters and special days. At the same time, looking at old photos can be a very nostalgic or emotionally involving moment. We wanted to hear the ladies' stories about their photos, but before doing so, we wanted to put some distance between the participants and their materials through a game. So we asked each of them to choose their favourite photo from those they brought and entrust it to the companion they thought they knew the least. The entrusted person had 10 minutes to look at the received photo and make up a short story about it. We made it clear that we were in the realm of invention and play and that afterwards each person had the chance to tell the real story of their photo and also show the many others they had brought.

Collective Storytelling

Objectives:

- To create a safe space where to share stories and to boost the group cohesion
- To explore the possibility of telling and dancing a story
- To collect some stories on a specific topic, in order to transform them in a collective one

Materials and space:

- A big room
- One chair for each participant
- Candles
- Music (live or with speakers)

Description of the activities:

One person walks around the interior of a large circle of people. He/she is asked to tell a story about one specific topic, something he/she has never told to anyone before and that happened when he/she was young. This person walking has a lighted candle and he/she is told to pass it to another person when he/she has completed the story. As the candle is passed, the facilitator can put on some music (even better if there is a live musician improvising with the person's movement) and the new person walking with the candle can feel free to move along with the music. The second part of the activity is in smaller groups, and those who haven't told the story before tell it to the person sitting next to them. The ending of the activity is with people dancing softly with music and candles.

Further development: The facilitator can take some notes and the session after the group can propose the group to work on weaving a collective story from what was shared, with some given elements (characters, situations, actions) who are inspired by the stories but changed enough to protect the intimacy of the storytellers.

Sources:

- Ross, 2007

Improvising

Objectives:

- To explore performing in front of an audience
- To acquire improvisation skills
- To start exploring themes that can be used for the devising process.

Materials and space:

- One chair per participant
- A room where participants can move freely
- Pens
- Small pieces of paper

Description of the activities:

We start the workshop with a warming up activity. Participants sit in a circle of chairs and they are given alternatively a fruit: orange, apple and banana.

The facilitator stays in the middle and will call out one of these fruits. Participant's whose fruit is said have to switch places. Once they have gotten used to this dynamic, when the facilitator calls out one of these fruits, and while they are moving, will attempt to sit in a chair, and therefore one of the participants will be left without a chair.

The person without a chair will call the next fruit and will have to sit in a chair as well. Once they have explored this dynamic for a few minutes, or when a participant is stuck in the centre, the facilitator will introduce a new instruction.

When the facilitator says "tutti frutti" all of the participants have to switch places.

Then we continue by exploring what an improvisation is. Participants write some titles for the improvisations that they will do later on. The titles can be of any kind and the more they write the better, so that the facilitator has a wider range to choose from.

The facilitator collects them and asks for two participants to take the stage. Then reads one of the titles out loud and the participants start improvising. During these first improvisations we can share the main rules they need to follow:

1. Don't say no (accept your partners ideas and make them grow)
2. Don't ask questions but offer suggestions (as you will put your partner in a tight spot)
3. Present who you are, what are you doing and the where and when right at the start.

Then participants will continue doing improvisations with different variations such as:

- Copying movie styles
- Jump ahead and backwards in time
- Traveling from and to different places

Creating scenes

Objectives:

- To create scenes using improvisations
- To reflect on the creative process
- To share feedback

Materials and space:

- A room where participants can move freely

Description of the activities:

This workshop describes one of several workshops dedicated to creating the play, that followed a similar structure

Before starting one of the creation workshops that we did, we always begind with a warming up activity. We recommend the following books and manuals to find several Warming Up activities:

- *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (Boal, 2002)
- *Projecting YOUth* (ON&OFF, et al., 2015)
- *Drama for youth work* (ON&OFF, et al., 2019)

Once the group had warmed up both physically and intellectually, we would start with the process of creating each of the scenes. In order to do so, we followed these steps:

1. Improvising the situation of the scene.
2. Providing feedback.
3. Re-improvising the scene by keeping the aspects that worked and improvising the rest of them.
4. Reflection and looking for the end.
5. Rehearsal. Practicing the same scene several times was key so that it could be settled in the participants' memory

After the creation in the workshops, we would type the scene in a document so that we could print and give the participants the script as well as for doing some dramaturgical changes to ensure the play as a whole was consistent.

Rehearsing

Objectives:

- To practise the play
- To feel ready to perform in front of audience
- To build up self-confidence

Materials and space:

- Space where the participants can move freely
- Props and materiales needed for the play

Description of the activities:

In these workshops we would initially rehearse scene by scene and slowly start working on the whole play. We would rehearse a scene and then comment and what improvements need to be made.

Eventually we would rehearse two scenes at a time until we could rehearse the whole play. We included the transition between the scenes as part of the work they needed to do, remembering when and where to move the props.

Portraits in action

Objectives:

- To stimulate creativity, quick thinking, and improvisation skills
- To enhance teamwork, empathy, and understanding of social issues
- To highlight positive traits and foster appreciation for admirable qualities
- To practise storytelling, active listening, and understanding different perspectives
- To reflect on the activities, share insights, and provide feedback

Materials and space:

- TV remote control
- Hat
- Slips of paper
- Chairs
- Papers with labels
- Writing materials (pens, pencils, markers)
- Optional props (e.g., tables, personal items, etc.)

Description of the activities:

The cartoon game is used as a warm-up. One participant holds the TV remote and describes an imaginative scene with a specific narrative structure: subject (which is supposed to be a non-living object), verb, and place/situation. Another participant, acting as a cartoon on TV, embodies the object and improvises based on the description.

Based on the words or phrases from the previous session, a theatrical sketch is created. Participants are divided into two groups, and each group selects a word or phrase from a hat that represents a social obstacle. The groups then present their sketch, and the other group tries to guess the key word or phrase.

Similarly, groups prepare and present a theatrical sketch based on words or phrases that express why someone is admired, with the other team guessing the key word or phrase.

Following this, a circle is formed, and the activity begins under instruction. Person A sits on the central chair, where a paper labeled "I narrate" is placed. A starts the story of a person, addressing the speech to someone in the circle holding a paper that says, "I hear your personality." A then discusses the obstacles the chosen personality faced, addressing the speech to the person holding the paper labeled "I hear their obstacles." Afterward, A talks about the personality's achievements, addressing the speech to the person holding the paper that says, "I hear what (your personality) achieved." All members take turns participating in this sequence.

Sources:

- Boal, 2002
- Campbell, 1949

From mirror to portrait

Objectives:

- To clarify session structure and goals for seamless role integration.
- To promote self-exploration and creativity through interactive activities.
- To refine roles and performance through embodiment and collaboration.

Materials and space:

- Chairs
- Objects and props (related to performance preparation)
- Colorful items
- Hat(s) (e.g., yellow and black hats)
- Post-it notes or papers
- Paintings/artworks
- Music/songs
- Coffee area

Description of the activities:

The session begins with a coffee and a discussion about the importance of journeys as a way to develop out-of-the-box thinking. Afterward, participants move to the session room.

A conversation is held to inform participants about the structure of the day's class, as the chairs and objects are arranged in specific positions according to their roles in the upcoming performance. Further clarification is provided regarding preparations for the presentation of the workshop.

A warm-up activity based on colors is conducted. Person A closes their eyes and names a color. The rest of the group must then find and touch the color in the room. The last person to touch the color becomes Person A in the next round.

A "getting to know us better" activity follows, where one chair is removed from the circle, leaving fewer chairs than participants. Person A says, "The sun pours light on those who…" and shares a true fact about themselves. Anyone who shares the same fact must move to a different chair. The person left standing in the center becomes Person A.

A storytelling activity is then performed. Person A wears the yellow hat and shares a story about overcoming a significant obstacle. Participants close their eyes and visualize the person who caused the obstacle. They then share with the group who this person is. A volunteer wears the black hat, stands in front of Person A, and becomes Person B. Person A opens their eyes and shares observations from their shared experiences, related to the obstacle, and expresses their feelings. Finally, Person A makes a request of Person B, who then improvises a response, leading to a new scene.

The session then moves to a break, where participants explore an exhibition of paintings at a nearby café. Each participant selects a painting that

resonates with a condition, feeling, or reality they have experienced as Person A. After the break, they share which painting they chose and explain why.

In the second part of the session, participants continue the activities while embodying the personality they have chosen for the performance. They play the chair game and share "The sun pours light on those who…" in the role of their character. The same approach is taken for the yellow and black hat activities, leading to new dialogues and scenes for the performance. Participants also use objects and music connected to their roles, which they were asked to bring from a previous workshop.

The session concludes with a sharing circle, where participants reflect on their feelings and thoughts about the day's activities.

Sources:

- Barton & Hamilton, 2014
- Boal, 2000
- Rosenberg, 2015

Rock 'n' Roll portraits

Objectives:

- To foster connection, loosen up physically, and integrate performance roles.
- To physically explore and express personal challenges, enhancing character development.
- To address anxieties, foster group cohesion, and ensure everyone feels supported and heard.
- To practice conflict resolution, empathy, and dynamic character interaction.
- To finalize the performance, share logistical details, and reflect on personal experiences and emotions.

Materials and space:

- Chairs
- Black hat
- Writing materials (pens, pencils)
- Coffee and refreshments
- Props and costumes

Description of the activities:

The session begins with a warm-up activity called "Embodied Greetings." Participants start by walking neutrally around the room, and when they encounter someone, they greet each other using their bodies to introduce themselves. They play rock-paper-scissors using body movements and then introduce themselves as the roles

they have developed for the performance.

Next, participants engage in an activity called "Embodying Challenges: The Rock Statue." They embody the sense of a rock, symbolizing the difficulties in their lives as they relate to their roles. This embodiment gives each participant's body a unique posture. Building this posture slowly, like a statue, they begin to present their monologues one by one.

In the midst of the process, a "Mid-Process Discussion and Constructive Dialogue" takes place. One participant expresses her concerns about the performance, particularly her anxiety about how interesting it will be for the audience and how comfortable the group will feel if the audience is disinterested or if someone disagrees with what is said on stage. The group then engages in a constructive dialogue, and with renewed energy, they return to the process.

The session continues with a "Narrative Role Play: Encountering Difficulties." During the narration of the life of their role, the narrator shares an observation where a specific person introduced a difficulty into their life. At this point, a new person, Person B, enters the scene. One participant wears the black hat and plays this person. The role then responds to Person B by expressing feelings, stating needs, and making a specific request. Person B responds, leading to a new scene where both characters try to satisfy their needs.

Finally, the session concludes with a "Final Monologue and Reflection." Participants share their final monologue upstairs, followed by coffee. In a circle, they discuss practicalities about the upcoming performance and share their feelings about the session.

Sources:

- Chekhov, 2012
- Horton, 2012

DEVIS
ING...

Introduction to devising

When talking about devising we refer to the creation of a performance or theatrical result without an existing script at the beginning of the process. This creation process is done by working collaboratively in a creative process and thus devising is often also referred to as "collaborative creation" (Hedden & Milling, 2006).

These are some key characteristics of devised theatre:

Ensemble

Rather than a company with fixed and strict roles, when devising, a common working structure is the ensemble. In an ensemble, members share the responsibility over the end result (shared ownership) and decisions are made collectively.

Collaboration

Devising involves the entire ensemble contributing to the creation of the material. Everyone in the group can offer ideas, dialogue, movement, and other elements.

Improvisation and experimentation

he process often involves improvisation, where actors and creators use games, exercises, and discussions. The improvisations are later refined.

Diverse starting points

Unlike plays where there is a prior script, in devising the starting point for the creation process can be very varied. From a theme or an idea to poems, paintings, pictures, interviews, songs, recordings...

Work in progress

Because the process is highly organic, the material can constantly evolve, even during rehearsals or performances. The devised work might change based on feedback, new ideas, or further exploration and is therefore always in progress.

Devising pieces with seniors

Following the journey of the Italian group

Our workshops with the seniors group started at the end of January 2024. The ritual of sharing tea with biscuits opened each of our meetings. The first meetings were devoted to brainstorming on the topic of our interest, namely dancing and which elements were present in dance parties of the past and which could be repurposed in a community party today.

We quickly discovered the importance of having "key objects", that's to say objects that could help to bring out memories and develop the storytelling. Those keys opened doors and set emotions free. Material things contain memories of us and of our experiences. Encouraged by us, it was the ladies themselves who were happy to bring to the workshop such objects as pictures, clothing and accessories, music tapes and records and we built some workshop sessions around those objects.

With the help of key objects, some workshop sessions dealt with collecting stories. Our participants recalled memories of the dance parties of their youth: at which age they started dancing, where, in which situations, what the rituals were: the clothing, the approach to dancers they liked; what the music was.

The group then considered which elements from the stories they would like to re-propose in the Caravan Balera. They agreed that a tout court re-proposition of a party from the past would make little sense, but that through a theatrical staging, we could bring those memories back to life and could put a 'fictional' distance to make the experience enjoyable for an audience of many different people.

The elements that the group wanted to emphasise in setting up the Balera were: music, clothing, hats and storytelling.

1- MUSIC. The group made a list of old songs and asked the musician who would animate the Balera to play some of them. Among those they chose about twenty "songs to save". During the NonDimenticarBalera a performer has a basket with some lines of each song printed inside. The performer asks the audience to pick up a leaflet to save an old song. (the person can also listen to the song thanks to a QR-code printed on the leaflet). Then people are asked to write down in The Caravan notebook which is the song they want to save. This simple game is of course a pretext to talk to the people and create a first community sharing, using a topic - music - of interest to almost everyone.

2- HATS. Some ladies told us that once, on special occasions, there was the possibility of renting a hat. The group decided to build a performance around this tale. We procured some funny hats for both women and men. The audience

during the NonDimenticarBalera is invited to try them on, to mirror themselves, to take photos and if they wish to, to have their future predicted by a performer according to the hat they choose.

3- CLOTHES. Clothes played a very important part in the stories and memories of the ladies: the group would therefore like these to be present in the Balera, in a similar way to hats. But in practice, to have clothes that the audience could try on and play with was quite complicated. So we decided that at least the performers would try to reproduce in their clothing a dance look from another era.

4- STORYTELLING. The dimension of storytelling played such an important role during our workshop sessions. It became a kind of ritual during the meeting to come back to some tales and recall new details. We would have liked ladies told some of their stories also in front of the audience but we had to face two difficulties: elders weren't sure if they could be present at all the Travelling Caravan events and, willing to protect the intimate dimension of the stories, we were not sure that the context of the Balera was the right one to express them. Therefore, most of the participants wanted to make videos. During the central sessions of our workshop, the group worked with a videomaker. The local library was the setting, stories to tell were carefully

chosen and rehearsed and 7 videos were recorded. They are very short and of course deal with Ballroom stories. Ladies were so happy with them: first of all wanted their relatives to watch them and then agreed to have videos loaded on You Tube and of course shown during the travelling Caravan.

Moreover, each short story ends with a question or a call to the viewer, a kind of score, which is another pretext to make people gather and know each other better: the final sayings of the videos being, for example, "if you liked my story go and invite someone to dance"; "if you liked my story, go and introduce yourself to someone you don't know"; "if you liked my story, go and tell someone a secret"

Another aspect we discussed with the group was the need to collect feedback from the audience during the Balera. We decided to use a kind of old fashioned instrument, namely a cassette player and recorder. On the microphone, people from the audience, prompted by a performer, left not only feedback on the evening spent but also their dance-related stories.

The last part of our workshop sessions was dedicated to setting up the Balera, the whole organisational part was shared with the group: the choice of locations as well as the difficulties we encountered in dealing with some of the municipalities. We studied together

strategies and, after each appointment of the travelling Caravan, possible improvements and adjustments: for example, various hypotheses for the showing of videos. Finally the group strongly asked to have a date of the Travelling Caravan in their neighbourhood, because there they could easily participate.

Italy's travelling Caravan is called NonDimenticarBalera (Don'tForgetDancinghall). It's a live music event, where people can listen to the music and dance (and even sing if they like) and be entertained by some performers who propose simple activities to them: save a song, find your hat, leave a recorded testimony, collect the invitations proposed in the ladies' videos.

We chose to re-create a Balera because it's a very common way of calling an outdoor dancing venue very popular during summer, especially from the 50s to the 90s. The only name - Balera - it's enough for Italian seniors to recall a wider experience: a specific music genre and way of dancing it -*liscio* - a specific dance floor with some unwritten rules to invite or to be invited to dance and so on. It was something very typical for towns and villages during summer and every age group was welcome. In this dimension, the choice of the Balera was also a way of re-creating a kind of village celebration, where everybody could feel like

participating and maybe give some support in the preparation, or just take part when the event is on and enjoy the music and the community gathering.

Following the journey of the Spanish group

The creation process with the group of seniors took place through intensive workshops over seven months, from November 2023 until the official performance date in May 2024 in the municipality of Fuenlabrada de los Montes.

From the early stages of the project, during the selection of participants, group creation techniques and basic theatrical skills were developed, despite some participants already having some experience with theatre and other performing arts such as dance or music.

During the first workshops in November, the theatre facilitators focused on acquiring these skills, bringing the group together and establishing the basic abilities needed to carry out the performance at the end of the process in different municipalities in the La Siberia region. Ice-breakers, theatre games, and improvisations formed the basis of the workshops.

In December 2023, after the work was done with the group, we focused on deciding what type of performance we wanted to present. The participants

decided to create a comedy with a script, a script that would be created through their own improvisations and completely based on collaborative theatre.

This decision was unanimous and addressed the community's desire and need to come together through laughter, meaning that the theatrical piece should have a restorative and welcoming effect on the audience and be enjoyed by anyone, regardless of age or socio-economic or educational level.

During this period, we also decided on the central idea of the play, a comedy based on the theft of a very valuable object for a rural community and the struggle of a village that unites to recover this object as a symbol of unity and pride.

We began the process of improvisations to create the different scenes of the play. Here, the participants expressed their life experiences, desires, and concerns, and managed to create very meaningful and symbolic scenes for the community. This had a direct impact on the audience, who felt highly identified, and was one of the keys to the success of the show.

The different improvisations were recorded on video and written down by one of the playwrights and facilitators of the creative process during rehearsals,

making dramaturgical adjustments to achieve the necessary coherence and rhythm. The creation of the different scenes through improvisations was complemented by the work of specific theatrical techniques that supported the production process, such as vocal technique activities, character creation, physical theatre, etc. All these techniques were developed in the first half of the workshops, leaving the second half for the creation of the scenes.

From February to May, various workshops were held where we finalized the script. We had the opportunity to read it aloud on numerous occasions, which helped in its understanding and memorization, as the participants were between 70 and 86 years old, so repetition and memorization work was fundamental.

We continued with the rehearsal process, setting and correcting all the created scenes and solidifying them. At the same time, we began preparing the set and costumes, all in a collaborative manner where the participants shared their ideas and created most of the set. The facilitators took care of selecting and creating the sound and lighting for the performance.

In May, the final rehearsals took place, and additionally, a workshop for the town's children was held with the project participants, connecting and

creating a intergenerational activity. In total, 52 rehearsals were held with the group of participants, each lasting two hours, amounting to a total of 104 hours of theatrical work, skill acquisition, physical work, and community building.

Following the journey of the Greek group

Our journey began in late March with an informal gathering over coffee. We shared our backgrounds and experiences, which helped to build a sense of community and trust among us. Through open conversations, we learned about the purpose of the workshops and the activities we would undertake. We presented ourselves in a unique way by dancing the sound of our name, referring to our favourite music and by storytelling on the story behind our name giving. So, initial exercises included sharing our names through music and narrating the stories behind them. These activities helped us become more comfortable with each other, improving our communication skills and laying the groundwork for deeper interactions.

As we moved into April and May, we engaged in various theatre improvisation and pantomime exercises. These activities challenged our cognitive flexibility and encouraged imaginative thinking and led us to our first moments on stage. We played games that required us to think

divergently, enhancing our ability to collaborate and build on each other's ideas. We did a brainstorming on personalities that inspire us. We built original monologues by: visualising our personalities in action, recognising their needs in life and the way their body behaves, which inspired and motivated us.

Our storytelling sessions further developed our adaptability and quick thinking by integrating random elements into our narratives. Through these creative exercises, we not only improved our storytelling abilities but also fostered teamwork and boosted our confidence. We brainstormed factors contributing to social exclusion, increasing our awareness and empathy towards these issues. This phase was marked by a significant improvement in our creative expression and narrative skills.

In the final phase of the workshops, from mid-May to mid-June, we focused on integrating our newfound skills into a cohesive performance. After visualizing admired figures and incorporated their stories into our narratives, we practiced structured storytelling, highlighting obstacles and achievements, and used improvisation to create dynamic scenes. We also built original scenes for two actors, by improvising on imaginary meetings with people that made their life difficult. This phase also included emotional exploration, where we shared

personal stories of overcoming significant obstacles. These activities fostered resilience and self-reflection, promoting a deeper understanding of our strengths. We prepared for our final performance by practicing the delivery of our stories, discussing potential audience reactions, and ensuring we felt comfortable and confident on stage. We created a structure of the presentation of the monologues and the scenes.

Afterwards, we did rehearsals of the presentation parts in pairs, and as a group and finally atechnical rehearsal for the performance. The day of first performance came and we did our warmup and moved to the spot and gave the performance. The culmination of our efforts was a series of inspiring and creative presentations that

 showcased our journey and the skills we had developed. After performance we discussed on our experience of the presentation and made an interview on our whole experience participating in the Caravan.

Through these workshops, we developed a wide range of soft skills, including communication, creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and leadership. The supportive and empowering environment allowed us to explore and express our creativity, resulting in a transformative experience that highlighted our resilience and potential. The journey not only equipped us with valuable skills but also strengthened our sense of community and mutual support.

ENCOUR AGING DEBATE

Facilitating debate during a creative process

How we did it in Italy

The elderly with whom Calypso worked are people whom the trainers have known for many years, with whom we had run theatre workshops in the past (it happened almost ten years ago), but with whom we had not worked since before the pandemic. These people were happy to spend time with us, but we had to come to terms with the fact that some of them had grown very old and therefore the modalities used years ago were no longer suitable.

In working with a group of elderly people, one has to take into account that time must be stretched, it is necessary to propose a few activities to them at a time, and not challenging ones, so as not to arouse any sense of frustration. The trainers have to put themselves in the position of facilitators and listeners. In a relaxed and confident climate it's easier to tell stories; the theatrical experience of the trainers suggests techniques that foster the recalling of stories as well as their creative transformation.

Trainers have not to fear repetition, allow the possible return to the same topics and activities to create a sense of security and familiarity.

It can also be very important to include small rituals in the workshop setting: each of our sections began with a tea and biscuits, and ended with the announcement of the next appointment and the topic we were going to discuss, giving participants small tasks, such as bringing key objects, which they never failed to do.

They brought us old clothes, photographs, music tapes, or invited us to their homes when the objects could not be brought directly to the workshop, so as for portraits hanging on the wall, record players...
From our side there was curiosity for the objects, from their side the curiosity was for the creative activity we would have proposed starting from the objects they brought us.
The activity of sharing stories brought the group through personal and very intimate memories, not always pleasant to remember. What facilitators tried to do in these situations was to reconnect single episodes to the bigger frames, in order to make the participants feel part of a community and not isolated cases with their own pain. In some situations we took advantage of the distance they used to tell the story to help them to look at the situation from a different, long term perspective. In some others, the very different perspective about some important social issues allowed us to use some of the stories also as a way to activate reflections within the group.

One of our bigger concerns was whether to perform or not with the participants, from the moment they told us they didn't feel like performing in front of an audience. In community and social theatre this could be quite common, so our group's aim shifted from creating a performance to organising a performance in which the participants would have been involved in a slightly indirect way. Thinking and then shooting videos with them giving some invitations for the audience to realise during the Balera looked like a way to have their (indirect) presence and perspective to inspire the whole event.

It was also a strategy to connect people related to distant social bubbles, that still share the same living area: in an era where intergenerational situations are few, the participatory dimensions of the Balera wanted to re-create some of these connections - and also to erase the line which separates spectators from the performers. Nicolas Bourriaud, the theoretician of relational art and aesthetic, identified political conscientiousness and social change as aspects of this form of art, from the moment that artists and participants learn to inhabit the world in a better way experiencing in these kinds of microtopias new connections and possibilities.

Leaving a trace is generally important in any group involved in creative work, but with a group of older people even more so: videos were the best trace they could wish for. For some of the participants in the group, this was not the first time they had acted in a video (some of them had previously starred in awareness-raising short films on social issues). It was nice to catch up on that experience and encourage those comrades who had not yet done it. However, not all participants wanted to record their stories and we respected their choices. For those who recorded the videos, it was also an opportunity to brush up on past theatrical skills, without the live acting that would no longer be possible given their age and their physical conditions.

How we did it in Spain

The complicated matter of creating a play collaboratively presented a challenge in our group, one that had to be treated with patience and flexibility. Our group felt they did not have the skills to come up with an idea and see it through and thus we had to divide the process in small steps that seemed manageable at each time.

In order to do so, we used theatre as a tool for creativity, followed up by long debates and discussions based on where we wanted to take the play. At the beginning of the process the group agreed that they wanted to do a play in the classical sense to it (with its plot, characters, conflict...) and it had to be a

comedy since it is what they felt their town needed.

We started improvising situations in which a community would come together to solve an injustice and afterwards we debated about which of the improvisations they felt had bigger potential.

We continued with this format during the whole process, since having something specific to talk about, what they are creating, after they have seen it, avoids the feeling of discomfort they shared when debating about "ideas" they feel unsure they can carry out but rather improvised scenes that they have already created and can be improved.

How we did it in Greece

During the workshops, our activities primarily centered around discussions that often sparked debates. When we identified keywords associated with "marginalization," we delved into conversations on controversial topics, including death, women's emancipation, the definition and boundaries of bullying, and issues related to the #MeToo movement.

Facilitating debate with the audience

How we did it in Italy

During the Travelling Caravan's devising workshops, we often wondered about the best ways to actively involve the audience. The setting of the NonDimenticarBalera involves small performing activities to be offered to the audience with the aim of engaging people, talking to them and getting them to get to know and talk to each other.

Music, memories, playful activities, as well as the help request in carrying out a task (saving the songs), the small challenges proposed at the end of some videos in which someone in turn put themselves at stake by telling their story, are the urges that encourage people to be activated and give them the impression not only of participating in an event but of sharing an experience with others. This experience will remain in the memory of the community, as a reference point and touchstone for future experiences.

The NonDimenticarBalera is easy to take part in. Everyone can choose the degree of involvement they want to have. It is possible to listen to music: the basic playlist is made of the old songs suggested by the working group: it is nice for older people to listen to them again and for younger ones to discover them. There is room for songs requested by the audience, who is, of

course, invited to dance. The involving small activities proposed by the performers helps people to socialise with others. This very free atmosphere and the possibility of different levels of enjoyment predisposes people positively. At the end of the experience they willingly leave feedbacks or even decide to record a small personal story at the microphone of the cassette player.

As for the feedback, to document the impact of such an artistic process is always connected to the different criteria you choose for the evaluation. The caravan project partners set a quality board to define objectives and ways to measure satisfaction of the participants and of the audience. However, asking the question "How was it for you" that we ask as to the the participants and to the audience at the end of each Caravan events, it's very depending on subjective experience and on the frame that people participating use for the event: their background and expectations about the day can be very different. For this reason, a participatory event like the Balera needs a structure that is both very open and very tight at the same time, so that everybody can find his/her own way to enter this experience. The set up of the Barlera needs to be very peculiar too, in order to make it very different from ordinary dancing event: more a live performance (where the

audience itself can perform as well, with no need for rehearsals or interpretations) than a show to be seen and understood.

In conclusion, the debate with the audience has to be driven from the inside with a language that is familiar for participants, in order to make people feel part of The Caravan and not somebody called to give an opinion on the event as a kind of customer. This could also bring new opportunities to enlarge the community and to create new connections with local stakeholders.

How we did it in Spain

The audience in Spain was quite big, and thus it was complicated to engage them in a dynamic debate. As we foresaw this, we proposed two activities based on the "expanded programme" concept, which includes other activities around a theatre play.

The first activity we created was a children's theatre workshop which had the plot of the play as the central idea. This lead to a debate amongst the group of participants about the concept of community and a reflection on what issues bring them together in school, in their family, in the town...

Secondly, and as a self-reflective tool and to increase the international aspect of the event, we proposed to the

members of the audience to write a postcard with their impressions to later send to the participants of the Caravan in Italy and Greece.

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How we did it in Greece

During the performances, we engaged in two activities that are well-known in the field of lifelong learning and non-formal education.

The first activity, called "Neutral Zone," involves participants and audience members standing in a line, one behind the other. The facilitator shares statements that emerged from the workshops and the characters' monologues, such as:

- *"No one can challenge authority."*
- *"It's difficult to take control of your own life."*

For each statement, the audience and participants are asked to move either to the right, meaning they agree, or to the left, meaning they disagree. The more steps they take, the stronger their agreement or disagreement, moving away from the initial line, which represents the neutral zone. In the second step of the process, they are asked to defend their position in the space with as many arguments as possible to convince others to join them, no matter how far they have placed themselves, whether they agree or disagree with the statement.

The second activity, a debate, where all participants, along with any members of the audience who wanted to join, took part in the "Privileges Path." This time, they stood in a horizontal line and listened to statements from the facilitator. For example:

- *"As I was growing up, my parents supported me in my studies."*

In this activity, if you feel that a statement reflects your experience, you take a step forward; otherwise, you stay in your position. At the end of the process, after 10 statements, you can see how far you've advanced and where you stand in relation to others. This allows everyone to recognize each other's privileges. Participants took this journey while embodying their characters, as seen in their monologues, while others responded based on their own lives.

We did this once while holding balloons, and at the end, we struck a pose symbolizing liberation and victory, reflecting on what we've accomplished so far in our lives. This debate was highly effective, with the tool being to take a physical stance in space. In contrast, the previous activity focused more on discussion and argumentation.

CULTU RIZE IT

Preparing the cultural events

How we did it in Italy

The proposal for the realisation of a cultural event in a small municipality can be a very delicate matter. While it is easy to get in touch with mayors and administrators and get an appointment quickly and even informally, it is also necessary to take into account those people who are already involved in the 'cultural' life of the villages. In Italy, small municipalities often have associations of volunteers who take care of organising a few festivals during the course of the year and animating local social life, often by proposing wine and food events. It is with these associations that one must relate as well as with administrators.

On one side, the gratuity of the travelling Caravan, its characteristic of being an easy and traditional musical event, the assurance that all organisational and promotional aspects would be taken care of by us are facilitating elements. On the other side the local associations have a calendar of events already established several months in advance and which often recurs the same from year to year, so inserting a new event can be complicated because it requires an additional amount of work from the volunteers.

Another factor that complicated relations with small municipalities was the concomitance of the Travelling Caravan with the pre-election and election period in many townships, during which mayors were waiting to be replaced or reconfirmed.

Due to these concomitant factors, it was only possible to confirm the availability of two municipalities out of the five we had assumed at the planning stage. Finding the other two locations in Oltrepò Pavese involved numerous contacts and negotiations. As already mentioned, it was decided to replace the fifth location with the suburb of Pavia where the working group is based. In Pavia, the confirmation of the location is less left to personal relations and negotiations, instead it follows a more complicated bureaucratic path from applying for statutory permits.

Once a location and a date have been established, the success of the cultural event depends on the ability to involve the local community. So compared to a promotion that takes place mainly on social media and is aimed at a general public, an almost door-to-door promotion with regard to the inhabitants of small municipalities is very important, for example with the distribution of leaflets in the main social places and getting in touch with the key people of the village. Further to this specific point, in rural areas it makes a big difference to have some local connections, with persons, families, organisations that have a kind of leverage in the community and whose word of mouth or direct invitation has much more weight than an anonymous one.

For the logistic and practical phase of setting up the Balera the concern was to create something close to the aesthetic and the expectations of the potential audience, nevertheless without giving up with the theatrical dimension, in which the performers and the performance itself open up a suspension of the ordinary life, in the realm of possibility. So we set costumes and installations based on what the elders told us, in the style and materials too - the hats, the paper patterns, the performers' clothes. At the same time, all these corners and small happenings unfolding during the event had a second level that would encourage the audience to actively participate.

How we did it in Spain

Organising the event was fairly easy. We worked very closely together with local government which facilitated the whole process, from the rehearsals space to the access to the local theatre, promotion...

We rehearsed in the cultural centre of Fuenlabrada de los Montes, which is managed by the local municipality. Since the same building also hosts the local auditorium/theatre, we could rehearse on the same stage where the play would take place.

A complicated matter in the organisation of the event was finding a suitable date. Since it was forecasted to be one of the main local events of the semester, it had to happen during a weekend when not other activities were planned.

Promotion was a shared effort between FOCO, the participants of the workhsops and local council. FOCO prepared the promotion materials, the council shared them through their channels (which work very well at local level) and participantes shared the event word to mouth,

How we did it in Greece

In preparing our cultural events, we aimed to make the location easily accessible to participants, minimizing any barriers to attendance. For Athens, this proved more challenging due to its larger size, whereas in Kalamata, a smaller town, it was relatively easier to engage the community.

Our outreach strategy primarily involved inviting people from local organizations, friendship clubs, and retirement associations, which are common gathering places in Greece. However, the most effective method of reaching our audience was through word-of-mouth communication. Personal recommendations and direct invitations carried significant weight in ensuring participation.

For the public performances, we also had to navigate various bureaucratic

procedures, especially in securing the necessary permits. This involved sending letters to the managers to obtain written permission for the performances. To promote the events, we used press releases and Facebook events. Overall, the audience responded positively to these activities. However, we faced a unique challenge in Kalamata. The initiative to perform in a café frequented by seniors was particularly difficult, as it was not easy to conduct a performance in a space where people had gathered for entirely different reasons.

In conclusion, despite the logistical hurdles and the challenge of engaging an audience in an informal setting, the events were well-received, highlighting the importance of strategic location choices and the power of personal connections in event preparation.

Bringing communities closer through cultural events

How we did it in Italy

Of the five Travelling Caravan events, we felt that two (maybe three) in particular fulfilled the task of bringing the community together.

Starting from those that were probably less impactful on community life: the first NonDimenticarBalera took place in Oliva Gessi on Monday Easter (holiday day in Italy). Calypso's event was included in the traditional feast that Oliva Gessi proposes for Easter Monday, which every year attracts many one-day tourists from all over the province. The people who come from outside on that day are more than the residents, so there is no real community participation. The day of the first Balera was also very cold and windy, so many people passed by but only stayed for a short time to listen to music and dance. During the first Balera we set up a free-access feedback station, but we observed that no one came near it, so for the following times we decided that this part too, like the songs to be saved and the hats, should be given to a performer.

The last NonDimenticarBalera took place in Pian del Poggio, a very picturesque tourist mountain resort in the Oltrepò Pavese, in the municipality of Santa Margherita di Staffora. The location is a long way from Pavia (about 2 hours) and the municipality is divided into numerous hamlets. Some elderly people from the hamlets actually went up to Pian del Poggio and it was an exceptional event for them because they hardly ever leave home; the audience was also made up of villagers from the small mountain resort. We cannot say that it was a real community event because there the community is fragmented and dispersed (with only the elderly still living in the municipality and the young people having emigrated to the cities).

The NonDimenticarBalera of Bosnasco was hosted by the Cardazzo Village sports complex, which already has a tradition of dancing nights. However, the community of dancers that frequents the complex is accustomed to Latin American music and has little interest in the "liscio" dancing proposed by our Balera. However, some dancers took part in the event with great enjoyment as well as people from the nearby hamlets and farmsteads for whom dancing is not a regular activity but a pleasant reminder of their past to be enjoyed whenever possible. This second group of people got together as a community around our event and halfway through the evening activated in proposing that we organise a Travelling Caravan date in a private courtyard that used to host dance parties on the farmyard in the past. In the following days we got in touch with these people, but unfortunately it was not possible to find a date that would suit everyone.

So, the two Travelling Caravan more successful as for bringing communities closer were those of Pavia and San Re.

The Scala disctrict in Pavia has long suffered from a lack of social venues and community events. Before the lockdown there was a tradition of community festivals in the neighbourhood's covered square at least a couple of times a year, with the organisational help of the seniors' association we worked with. Last year (2023) after three years of closure, the municipal neighbourhood library reopened as an active centre for events, book presentations, small concerts and so on; some local NGOs started to offer small activities again, especially for children in the neighbourhood. In addition to its work with the ladies at the seniors' recreation centre, last spring Calypso carried out a site specific theatre training for university students in the Scala district and promoted the organisation of a rap music workshop for teenagers.

Scala's NonDimenticarBalera, strongly desired by the working group, has thus come to take its place in this renewed cultural ferment of the neighbourhood. On the day of the Travelling Caravan, the audience was really large, formed by people of all ages, from families with children to the elderly of the leisure centre, even members who do not normally attend the association's activities. There were both residents of the neighbourhood and people who frequent it, for example because they use the library, as well as people attracted by the opportunity to spend an afternoon dancing. In the days that followed, we gathered a lot of positive feedback from people living in the neighbourhood who were very happy with the afternoon they spent and asked to have similar parties in the neighbourhood again, giving their availability for the organisation. We thus had the clear perception that we succeeded in creating an identity experience for the community that participated, which will remain as a point of reference for the realisation of new similar events. The risk, nevertheless, could be to disappoint people's expectations, for example allowing too much time to pass before the conditions for the event are created again.

The other NonDimenticarBalera which succeeded in bringing the community together was the one performed in San Re. This is an hamlet of the small municipality of Barbianello which owes its name to a big historical farm - its foundation dating back to the XIII century. The current owners of the farmhouse, in which about ten families now live, enthusiastically agreed to the proposal to have a Balera in their courtyard and created the logistical conditions for this to happen. San Re is private property so the event was an opportunity for part of the public to visit a place that is not normally accessible.

For the owners, for the people who live in the courtyard, and for many people from outside, the NonDimenticarBalera evening was a real plunge into the past, a chance to live again an experience, those of peasant festivals and informal gatherings on the farmyard, which used to be the norm in the past, but whose memory has been lost today, as people tend to stay in their own homes even when they live in community contexts.

How we did it in Spain

The focus in Spain was around the idea of bringing people together in a theatre. In order to do so, it was agreed to choose to do a comedy, since it would be more attractive to the rest of the community and so that they could build positive memories from attending the theatre.

But to reach a wider group of people we choose to organise a theatre workshop for children. This theatre workshop wanted to bring the project and the experience to a different target group that would not be involved in the theatre.

The workshop was held with the actresses/participants of the project and we kicked it off with some games in which young and not so young played together. Then it slowly developed into working around the plot of the play. This was interesting because afterwards, participants could compare if they had

solved the problem any differently than in the play.

How we did it in Greece

In Athens, our focus was on the Pagrati area, a neighborhood known for its gathering spots frequented by seniors. We collaborated with local community centers and cafés to spread the word about our free learning program for seniors. By engaging with staff and visitors, we aimed to generate word-of-mouth referrals. Despite our efforts, we encountered some obstacles, such as skepticism among seniors about joining due to mistrust or misunderstandings about the program. Nevertheless, we successfully reached out to seniors who faced educational and cultural barriers due to health and financial constraints, inviting them to participate in our program.

Conversely, in Kalamata, we took a more grassroots approach. We visited local cafés, markets, and community centers, engaging directly with residents to promote our program. This direct interaction proved effective as people began sharing information about our program with their neighbors and friends. However, we faced challenges such as the remote locations of some villages, which made it difficult to reach seniors living there. Additionally, some community members were initially hesitant to participate, concerned about disrupting their daily routines. Despite

these hurdles, our efforts to connect with seniors through their communities led to successful invitations for those who typically had limited access to cultural activities due to health and financial issues.

Overall, our experiences in both Athens and Kalamata demonstrated the power of community engagement and word-of-mouth in overcoming barriers to participation. By understanding and addressing local challenges and leveraging personal connections, we were able to bring cultural opportunities to seniors who otherwise might have remained isolated from such experiences.

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