

# **Sociodrama with Seniors - Ron Wiener**

“Age is opportunity no less  
Than youth itself, though in another dress,  
And as the evening twilight fades away  
The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day.” - [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow](#)

## **Introduction**

Headlines in newspapers about older people make grim reading

*Even elders get the blues* (1)

*No country for old men* (2)

*People over 65 are most at risk of suicide* (3)

We need to deal with institutionalised ageism

*Britain’s elderly are being neglected, poorly treated and marginalised by the country’s health system* (4)

This phenomenon is not unique to Britain

*“I have been troubled by the national dialogues on aging taking place here in the US that have been dominated by a decline perspective of aging...that senior-hood is a time of loss ... often implies that seniors are a national problem rather than a resource to be treasured. “* (5)

But there are more of us oldies than ever. The Office for National Statistics in the U.K. recently announced there are now more pensioners than children under 16. More of us now live longer which means that we need to revise our concept of the ages to include: the young old 60-80; the middle old 80-100 and the oldest old 100-120 (6)

*“There is no denying the many difficult aspects of the aging process and, as a society; it is of legitimate concern, the financial impact of large numbers of people moving from revenue producers to revenue consumers. What is troubling to me is that there has been no place for the issue of development in our dialogues on aging. What would*

*it look like if we approached this vast reserve of social capital as a source of human development?” (7)*

Someone who is sixty now has over 20 years of living left. Most older people don't want to be shut away or parcelled off to day centres to while away the hours. The third age should be a time for new skills, for development and change. Growth is too important to be sold solely to the young.

Drama here has a number of important roles to play – skills development and retention, role training, social communication and support, understanding societal problems, receiving positive feedback and having creative fun.

### The Work

I run an ongoing weekly group for the over 55's at a local theatre in Yorkshire. The group has produced 2 improvised, rehearsed but unscripted plays and is now working towards a number of sketches about issues, such as sex and health, to do with ageing.

I see my work as a series of circles or open systems. In the inner circle are the group members. We are concerned with:

- i) having fun, being spontaneous and creative - *it keeps your brain and body buzzing – (group member)*. This is done by warm-ups (to the physical self, the room, the group and the subject matter), group songs and improvisations based on events that have happened recently to group members.
- ii) having a sense of achievement – *it makes me feel alive (group member)*-. This is done by developing the unscripted but rehearsed quality performances. The unscripted part takes away the difficulty of learning and remembering lines while encouraging spontaneity and the quality side increases the positive feedback loops that many people lose on retirement. Adam Blatner (2008) describes well the need for Belongingness in a recent talk (8) and how that can be more difficult to have met as one ages.

- iii) developing group cohesiveness where members have a sense of belonging to a group which helps to counter the isolation that many elders experience – *it gives you a reason to get up (group member)*
- iv) my own development in the role of director in terms of skills and staying emotionally alive.

In the next circle are the friends, families and networks of the first circle. Here the issues are:

- i) the possibility of recruitment into the first circle
- ii) their involvement as active audience members in the performances. We try where possible to have plays where there are spaces for the audience to become temporary participants by for example suggesting alternative endings that the actors have to improvise. In one play, the Spare Room, there were half a dozen different options for which of the characters (husband, wife, daughter, son-in-law) had most right to use this room.

The last circle consists of all the people and organisations that effect the life of the participants in the first circle. These include the attitudes and behaviour of: legislators, health professionals, educators, planners, housing providers, the media etc. While some of these have positive attitudes and policies towards seniors, many are still stuck with outdated stereotypes. The way we deal with this are:

- i) by exploring scenes in which the participants have experienced discrimination. A typical one is a visit to the doctor where the person is told “what do you expect at your age!” This exploration can be therapeutic and then sometimes, via role training, people can develop strategies to handle specific situations better. These short plays can be taken out to day centres and lead to group discussion of the issues portrayed.
- ii) Through taking scenes about discrimination to the organisations so that they can see the effects of institutional ageism. One scene tackled negative attitudes by the young, towards the elderly and their right to an active sexual life. This also gives the audience the opportunity to talk directly to the actors in the roles they play in the scripts or as themselves as senior citizens.

Each weekly session has a warm-up, an enactment and then some sharing – a typical sociodrama sequence. The work we do comes from the group and is owned by them. We don't actively explore the group dynamics though these are important in building an ensemble. Group members see themselves developing through the challenge of improvisation and then public performances.

In terms of roles – group members explore their own role repertoire in the group work and gain an understanding of the different roles that older people have in society through sharing and performance – *it is a kind of therapy (group member)*.

Through enacting situations of discrimination they have been involved in, there is an opportunity, via role training, to develop new roles

*“a generation (the baby boomers) that brought that much change to the world should be able to tap those forces now and make the world even better. I come from that era and was active in radical street theater with people who are now “seniors” and I still believe in those people and their ability to bring about change and to make others aware and think. It’s what we did then and there is no reason it can’t be done now.”*  
(9)

### Bibliography

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- 6: Guy Brown: The Long Game, The Guardian 10/9/08, Page 1 Society Guardian.
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- 9: Paul Ellis: (U.S.A. community theatre director) personal communication

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