

Joyful actors: Aging futures and the potential of intergenerational theatre

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Abstract

By examining a verbatim theatre performance that brought together older (aged 60 and up) and younger (aged 18–25) adults, this article finds that staging intergenerational theatre generated intergenerational joy: a collective, interdependent experience not devoid of struggle and challenge that prioritizes the here and now while also envisaging more promising futures. The actors in this project thus challenged normative neoliberal attitudes that suggest that the old have nothing to offer the future, and that the young have little to offer the present. The stress involved in undertaking a community-based theatre project was not an obstacle but a gateway to joy, as it produced (and even demanded) a level of interdependence and solidarity not found in other intergenerational relationships commonly structured by hetero-normative family relations. Moreover, the play offered a structure through which actors could challenge societal norms that isolate generations from each other and encourage intergenerational antagonism.

Keywords: pleasure, aging, intergenerational, theatre, joy, youth, old

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Introduction

James has had enough. As a 70-something actor in a research project that brings older and younger adult community members together to create and perform in a play, he is tired of rehearsing in a university classroom with a broken clock. One of the facilitators has told him that they just need to file a work order with the school. But tonight James takes matters into his own hands. Producing a clock battery from his pocket (he went out and bought it earlier in the day), he pushes a table up to the wall, climbs up onto it, swaps out the batteries, sets the clock to the present time, and then jumps off the table after rehangng the clock.

Reactions are varied. The director (Dotto, the second author) cringes while James stands atop the table. James is sure-footed, but a slip and fall could cause serious harm. Some of the older participants remark that they would never attempt this themselves. The younger participants look on, amused or even impressed by James' initiative. When James jumps off the table, some of us even applaud. Many of us are relieved James didn't get injured. James is relieved to have a working clock.

This minor act was performed with a frisson of youthful energy but contained a display of initiative and expertise connected to older age (the younger actors may not know how to set a clock and generally rely on their phones to tell them the time). Done for the good of both James himself (he was getting quite irritated by the broken clock) and the collective, James' act brings us into the current moment, quite literally. In such a way, it manifests a moment of shared, mundane, embodied, present-facing intergenerational joy.

This episode took place in a small East Coast city during rehearsals for an intergenerational community-based play based on qualitative interviews Allain (the first author) performed with older male hockey players and curlers (Allain 2020, 2024). In fall 2023, Allain and Dotto began recruiting participants to be part of the process of creating and performing in the play, with the only requirements being age (young adults aged 18–25, or older adults over 60 years of age) and an ability to attend rehearsals. This work brought together these groups not only to stage Author 1's research, but to answer the research question: what happens when old and young play together?

During their first months together in the winter of 2023/2024, the group of twelve participants (five younger adults and seven older adults) and the research team gathered weekly to play drama games, build comradery, and workshop short scenes created verbatim from Allain's (2020, 2024) research. By February 2024, Dotto finalized a script and all participants agreed to commit to the performance. In turn, they were guaranteed a role, each of which involved substantial stage time. *Winter's Tales: A Play About Hockey, Curling, and Old Age* featured eleven scenes weaving together Allain's (2020, 2024) research participants' stories about their childhood sport experiences; disability and injury; hockey violence; and the communities created by aging hockey players and curlers. Framing the play was an "interviewer" (an avatar for Allain) presenting on and interviewing the participants and talking about her own research journey. We staged two free community performances at the university theatre, drawing in audiences of more than 100 people per performance.

Our workshops, rehearsals, and performances were structured to create opportunities for intergenerational recreation (in this case, between younger adults in their late teens and twenties and older adults aged 60 and up), to build our understandings of intergenerational activities and relationships – particularly those that occur outside the traditional family structure – and to explore how young and old people embody characters of different ages within an intergenerational environment. The focus on intergenerational connection emerged from the conviction that a future-facing neoliberal hegemony limits not just the ways that the old and young think of themselves but also the ways that they relate to each other. This orientation positions the old as existing in the past and threatening the future (Sandberg & Marshall 2017) – particularly the future of the young, whom neoliberal ideology produces as pure potential, entirely oriented to the future (Laurendeau & Konecny 2015; Little 2014). Little (2014) describes this neoliberal mode of thinking as "generational politics" (p. 37): "the reductive narrative that young people's parents are robbing them of their future" (p. 35). On a more general level, as Ahmed (2010) points out, referencing Durkheim, "An attachment to the future would mean to be missing something, unable to experience the past or the present as something other than hasty, as something we have to get through, rush through, in order to be somewhere else" (Chapter 5, para. 1). Within

this framework, the value of both young and old to the present and to each other is deeply diminished.

This project looked to challenge these normative attitudes, examining how old and young can come together as bodies capable of joy. We found that the stress, anxiety, and chance involved in undertaking a community-based theatre project were not obstacles but gateways to joy, as they produced (and even demanded) a level of intergenerational interdependence and solidarity not often found in age-siloed neoliberal society, nor in other intergenerational relationships commonly structured by hetero-normative family relations. Moreover, the collective, embodied, and live nature of theatre make it uniquely well-positioned among various recreational or artistic activities to produce intergenerational joy.

We will begin this article by examining the extant literature on intergenerational activity, intergenerational theatre, and joy. We will summarize our research methods and then discuss how the participants themselves produced intergenerational joy that was varied, collective, challenging, and deeply interdependent. We will discuss how the temporality of this joy challenged the future-facing orientation of much of the research on the young (Laurendeau & Konecny 2015; Messner & Musto 2014), and the focus on the past/present in much of the research on the old (Sandberg & Marshall 2017). This approach demonstrates how interactions between old and young produce new social positions and ways of knowing. It will disrupt aging tropes that produce the old as having no future and potentially inform other intergenerational leisure practices.

Intergenerational Activity

Although social science scholarship is slowly expanding its examination of intergenerational activities, especially in critical aging studies, this work exists largely within the fields of health (Murayama et al. 2014; Zhong et al. 2020), psychology (Cadieux et al. 2019), education (Berčan & Ovsenik 2019), and gerontology (Atkins 2018; Gualano et al. 2018; Lytle et al. 2020; Park 2014). Scholarship on intergenerational relationships frequently aligns with disciplinary regimes of aging related to neoliberalism (see Foucault 2008). Scholars mainly focus on decreasing ageism and increasing the well-being of the old (and sometimes the young). These

are laudable goals, but the state, health authorities, the public, media and even some scholars conceptualize the old as having no future, compelling them to demonstrate individualized care for themselves, with all meaningful (rationalized) activity directed at staving off age-related decline (see Sandberg & Marshall 2017; Shimoni 2018). These studies rarely focus on how these relationships can bring pleasure to those young and old.

With some notable exceptions (e.g. Allain 2020; Monaghan 2001; Phoenix & Orr 2014; Pringle 2010; Throsby 2013), scholarship on pleasure comes from health promotion and is aimed at the neoliberal goals of aiding unruly subjects in leading a healthier life (Jallinoja et al. 2010). However, research on intergenerational mentorship within Indigenous and LGBTQ+ communities finds that intergenerational activity plays an important – albeit sometimes contested (Goltz 2013) – role in creating spaces of resistance to normative understandings of pleasure, which privilege youth, heterosexuality, able bodies, and the reproduction of the bourgeois family (Sandberg & Marshall 2017). Researchers have also argued that intergenerational mentorship can challenge colonialism (Chazan & Whetung 2022) and the marginalization of queer folk (Burkholder et al. 2024), and that it can create new paradigms for understanding aging and futurity (Chazan 2020; Chazan & Whetung 2022; Goltz 2013).

This research illuminates the disruptive potential of pleasure (Phoenix & Orr 2014) sustained through intergenerational theatrical play. Moving away from examining intergenerational learning as a panacea to so-called social crises, it centres the possibilities of the fun, joy, and happiness (Fincham 2017) produced in creating intergenerational relationships (Burkholder et al. 2024). This work will explicitly value the social positions that the participants occupy, examining the young not as budding adults (Laurendeau & Konecny 2015), and the old not as former adults with no future (Sandberg & Marshall 2017), but rather considering both groups as actors who structure and enrich the presents and futures of each other.

Intergenerational Theatre

The literature on intergenerational theatre has grown over the last several decades, focusing largely on a diverse group of community-based theatre projects that have as one of their chief aims the bringing of generations together. One of the most notable forms of intergenerational theatre is

reminiscence theatre. As developed by Schweitzer (2007) at her Age Exchange theatre company, reminiscence theatre usually involves younger people holding “reminiscence sessions” on a given topic with old(er) participants, then molding these reminiscences into a verbatim play – with input provided by the old throughout the process – before performing these plays in both theatres and community spaces, especially those where older adults live and/or congregate. Reminiscence theatre attempts to redress an “unequal relationship” between old and young, by offering a more “reciprocal” experience where younger people receive the gift of stories from the old before returning the gift to them as “an original piece of theatre” (p. 25). Indeed, much of the literature on intergenerational theatre focuses on the educational benefits accruing to the young (e.g. Bremner 2020; Petherbridge & Kendall 2012), and when it does address the benefits to the old, it frames them as a return to or of something – as opposed to the creation of something new. Wang’s (2006) work on the Uhan Shii Theatre Group of Taiwan specifies that the company “recover[s] and perform[s] the ‘buried memories’ of the variously marginalized elders” (p. 78).

Some of the most promising and novel projects in intergenerational theatre seek neither to minimize nor reify generational divides, but instead to work within differences and problems. Kazubowski-Houston’s (2017) dramatic storytelling project with a Romani Elder in Poland found that the “paralyzing silence” that surrounded their sessions was in fact a “well of radical action” founded on mutual struggles towards understanding (p. 418). Similarly, Foster (2020) notes that “engaging difference as a dynamic, generative tool” during an intergenerational theatre project enabled him to “identify the ‘gap’ not as an implied challenge but more of an essential artistic resource” (p. 152). Finally, Basting’s (1998) study of New York City’s Roots & Branches Theater found that the intergenerational troupe “seemed to bond much more” in the face of logistical challenges during performances (p. 98). Indeed, the ability of difference and conflict to produce intergenerational joy is a key theme in this article going forward.

Generating Joy

Developing out of the affective turn in various social science and humanities disciplines, recent scholarly focus on joy attempts to address the

abundance of negativity in scholarly literature, particularly when discussing populations on the margins. One of the most important theorizations of joy comes from the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who defines joy as a movement from passivity to “shared and affective encounters” creating “harmonious synchronicities with other bodies” (Nicholson 2014: 337) and increasing one’s ability “to affect and be affected” (Montgomery & Bergman in Wright & Burkholder 2025: 759).

Scholars have attempted to distinguish joy from other pleasurable emotional states such as happiness and ecstasy (Johnson 2020; Roberts & Appiah 2025). Roberts and Appiah (2025), for example, view happiness as a stable state associated with “life satisfaction” (p. 1) while establishing joy as a more fleeting experience marked by brevity and tied to social connections. For them, the state of joy adds purpose to one’s life and actively combats social divisions and hatred. Johnson (2020) points out that joy is often combined with other emotional states, even those thought to be unpleasant, such as sorrow. He confirms that joy is also deeply embedded in states of play – something we have also concluded through our own research – making a theatre performance about sport a prime space to locate intergenerational joy. In the words of Johnson (2020), “Joy attunes us to being open to new possibilities for relating to our circumstances and perceiving them in a new light” (p. 6).

Sara Ahmed’s (2010) work on happiness (perhaps more suitably aligned with the definitions of joy above) also emphasizes its collective and interdependent nature. Ahmed (2010) flags the role of chance as a vital part of joy, pointing out that “the etymology of ‘happiness’ relates precisely to the question of contingency: it is from the Middle English ‘hap’, suggesting chance” (Chapter 1, para. 3). The tenuous nature of happiness means that it is always intertwined with anxiety, particularly when one’s happiness or joy is comingled with the joy and well-being of others:

Caring is anxious – to be full of care, to be careful, is to take care of things by becoming anxious about their future, where the future is embodied in the fragility of an object whose persistence matters. (Ahmed 2010: Chapter 5, para. 60)

The idea that happiness (in Ahmed’s case) or joy (in ours) are found in risky and uncertain care for each other is anathema to neoliberal thought, which relies not only on an ethos of individual responsibility

over social connection, but also on a telos of progress and growth that is much too important to leave to chance. More recently, neoliberal-tinged definitions of happiness emphasize it as “stable” set of “stocks” earned by the ideal neoliberal subject (Heady & Wearing cited in Ahmed 2010: Introduction, para. 22). By contrast, Ahmed (2010) insists, “The happy future is the future of the perhaps,” describing the intertwining of interdependence, chance, happiness, and care for others as a “hap care” (Chapter 5, para. 93).

As joy is connected to chance and “the possibility to see things otherwise” (Wright & Burkholder 2025: 759), it is particularly pronounced and important when expressed by those on the margins. It is thus unsurprising that the scholarly turn towards joy began with Black studies scholars, who envisaged Black joy as a collective experience containing both negative and positive emotions (Johnson 2015; Sobande & Amponsah 2025), existing beyond “a dialectic of Black enchantment and Black tragedy” (Stewart 2021: 4). Black joy trades in a stance of Black resistance to racist oppression for a wholesale “refusal to entertain the white gaze” (Stewart 2021: 9) by foregrounding the relationships between Black people. The concept of queer joy has followed, with Wright and Burkholder (2025) asserting that queer joy “is a tool to imagine more just futures” (para. 4). Like Black joy, one of the key aspects of queer joy is its inherently “relational” nature (Ramirez 2025: 782); although joy is experienced within an individual psyche, it is generated by and through a communal, shared experience. The communal nature of intergenerational joy is implicit in the word “intergenerational”; it is not possible for any single individual to be intergenerational in and of themselves. Thus, intergenerationality only emerges within the context of the group, among but not within individuals. This intergenerational joy, generated on the margins of power and in the margins between people, disrupts notions of doom and neoliberal ideas about aging and the life course.

While the concept of intergenerational joy is not present within academic literature, there is a small and growing body of work on the transformative potential of intergenerational environments. This work builds from scholarship by queer and racialized scholars (e.g. Ekpe et al. 2023; Hayashi 2019; Wright & Burkholder 2025) and shows that intergenerational community-building can create disruptive moments of joy or

critique that displace neoliberal common-sense ideals around the future, which tend to view the old as doomed and futureless, unless they align with neoliberal notions of aging well (Katz 2005; Sandberg & Marshall 2017). For example, Nicholas et al. (2025) found that despite generational schisms in the Australian LGBTQ+ community (i.e. conflict around trans-exclusionary attitudes), older queer folks expressed “joy in seeing other generations expand ideas of gender and sexuality” (p. 839). Goltz’s (2013) examination of multigenerational responses to gay journalist Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” campaign found that despite the campaign’s various shortcomings, it nonetheless made space for queer folk to provide intergenerational mentorship for high-school-aged students, disrupting a logic of no/doomed futures by demonstrating the multitude of ways that queer futures can manifest.

Burkholder et al. (2024) also document the possibilities of intergenerational queer communities in their examination of a series of intergenerational art-making workshops. They find that being together in joyful intergenerational space helps remind us that queer communities have carried on despite historic moments of “queer panic” (p. 17). Similarly, Chazan’s (2020) intergenerational storytelling project found that stories shared by changemakers of various ages demonstrate “how knowledges about aging and intergenerationality are held in bodies, land, water, cosmos, ancestors and generations to come” (para. 10). For Chazan’s participants, these stories were especially powerful in disrupting age-siloed communities where intergenerational experiences are limited, resisting dominant and troubling ideas about aging and futurity. Finally, research by Chazan and Whetung (2022) involving multigenerational populations demonstrated the value of imagining futures “extend[ing] beyond hetero-reproductive and human-centric generativity” (p. 3). Aligned with the work above, our research demonstrates how intergenerational play can challenge neoliberal aging ideals that posit that old and young are troubled bodies, instead producing disruptive moments of intergenerational joy. More specifically, intergenerational *theatrical* play has particular potential because its “liveness” demands interdependence and foregrounds the bodily expressions of both the actors and the characters, thus bringing aging subjectivities into the spotlight, and into conversation with the bodies and subjectivities of younger folk.

Aging on Stage

This work is based on previous research interviews Allain (2020, 2024) conducted with aging male athletes playing winter sports. The interviews, which took place between 2014 and 2019, examined how men's sports practices *and* their expressions of masculinity changed over the life course (Allain 2024). This work highlighted its participants as important models of masculinity for the young, particularly those existing in sporting spaces marked by troubling expressions of misogyny, homophobia, and abuse (see Allain 2022). For these reasons, the authors partnered to facilitate a project that would be both popular knowledge mobilization *and* a research project in and of itself – specifically a verbatim theatre performance, written by Dotto. As an often-political form of theatre developed in the second half of the 20th century, verbatim theatre turns the spoken words of real people (obtained via interviews, court transcripts, etc.) into a play, with dialogue and monologue that preserves the hesitations, tangents, imperfections, and idiosyncrasies of everyday speech. Dotto and Allain brought young and old together to see how the insights gleaned from Allain's original research (i.e. that expressions of gender change over the life course) might translate in this setting, and to observe the merits of intergenerational leisure spaces. Furthermore, they were excited by the opportunity to make the university environment more intergenerational and community-focused.

To do this work, the research team recruited post-secondary students 25 years and younger and older adults at least 60 years old. We posted recruitment materials on social media (e.g. on Facebook groups for local theatre), at two local universities, and in public locations such as cafés and the public library. We also spoke in numerous university classrooms about our research. Based on these efforts, we recruited five individuals under the age of 26 and seven over the age of 64. In the younger cohort, three participants were undergraduate students, one was a graduate student, and another was a college student, with four identifying as women and one as a man. Of the young participants, three were white and two were racialized international students. Of the older adult participants, all but one was retired from their primary careers – although two participants, a couple, had recently begun a business and another was working in immigration consultation and served on the municipal council.

Of these participants, four were women and three were men. All participants in the older cohort were middle-class and white, with two married couples participating. All the older participants had grown children. Many of the research participants were new to acting or had not participated in theatre in many years. Two participants in the younger cohort considered themselves to be more experienced actors, with one having completed a college program in theatre (Arjun) and the other describing herself as a “theatre kid” (Hanna). In the older cohort, only one participant had theatre experience. James, who had been employed in the Canadian Armed Forces, explained with great pride that during his service, he had organized theatrical and musical performances for the military.

The research team did not restrict participation by gender and invited folks of all genders to participate. Verbatim theatre is generally not concerned with realism in casting and often practices multiroling, where one actor will play multiple roles, often of various ages, genders, and social positions. Inviting folks of all genders to participate was also practical; we wanted to cast as wide a net as possible.

This project is within the rubric of performance ethnography: using theatrical techniques to explore and disseminate anthropological and sociological understandings of certain cultures, groups, or experiences. Performance ethnography has a unique emphasis on the entire body, using physical performance to build embodied understanding among and across groups (Jones 2005). Embodiment is important when exploring experiences of aging (Gilleard & Higgs 2014), as aging is both a social and embodied performance (Basting 1998). Furthermore, because “embodied, affective, imaginative, and creative knowledge” tend to be marginalized, performance ethnography is an excellent tool for working with those in the margins (Culhane 2016: 7), including the young and the old. Fuchs (2016) argues that placing aging bodies onstage challenges a “decline” narrative of aging characterized by “the denial of personhood” (p. 152). Indeed, Basting (1998) describes the aging performer as “thick with potential, thick with time” (p. 9). Theatrical performance is thus a particularly meaningful medium through which to explore aging and foreground aging bodies.

Over the course of these workshops and rehearsals, members of the research team (the authors and one undergraduate research assistant) video-recorded and kept detailed research notes on theatre activities and

participant interactions. After the performances, Allain conducted interviews with ten of the twelve cast members and met informally with the remaining two. Allain also debriefed this project with members of the research team, transcribed all the interviews verbatim, and thematically coded them using *NVivo 14* software. She then met with Dotto to review the thematic coding and determine the relevant themes for this research article.

The research team's thematic analysis followed the advice of Nowell et al. (2017), aiming for trustworthiness in its analysis. The authors established familiarity by triangulating the ethnographic data with the semi-structured interviews and other informal conversations. They read the interviews multiple times looking for recurrent codes. Allain documented these codes using *NVivo*. The two authors then generated themes related to the codes, and reviewed, defined and named these codes. Although this article will mainly focus on the formal interviews with research participants, the ethnographic notes and other research data help to ensure the trustworthiness of these findings. This work thus represents one small piece of the analysis of this performance ethnography. Subsequent scholarly publications will use theatre and performance theory to more explicitly explore the theatrical aspects of this project.

Intergenerational Connections

Research participants universally described the experience as one that brought them joy. For 19-year-old Reese, the general lack of experience of her fellow castmates made the experience more enjoyable, releasing the "pressure" and "tension" she might have experienced with a more seasoned group of actors. "It was really nice to go in there and be like, 'Okay, these people haven't done this kind of stuff either'. We're all learning together," she explained. Josephine, a well-loved older participant, gushed that she "enjoyed it so much!" John, an immigration consultant and local politician, simply stated, "Well it was fun. A lot of fun."

In their seminal article on aging, physical activity and pleasure, Phoenix and Orr (2014) document the radical and transformative potential of pleasure (an aspect of all positive emotions including joy) for the old, stating that it can "offer a different dimension to ageing embodiment that goes beyond the narrative of decline" (p. 103). Relationships formed in

the free time afforded (to some) in old age can be an important source of such pleasure:

Post-(re)productive free time ... created conditions for new relationships in later life that differ from those in earlier periods in life, and ... these conditions can have formative power over relationship choices and be conducive to very positive relationships. (Bildtgård & Öberg 2017: 1513)

The participants agreed that intergenerational interactions and relationships were key to their enjoyment of the process. The older participants loved working with the younger ones, with Josephine commenting that she otherwise hung around “mostly with older people,” but found her interactions with the younger participants “sweet. ... I got into the habit of calling them the young’uns.” John said that the play had made him realize that “maybe we don’t give [young people] credit, or we don’t recognize the value they can bring to any situation, not just the play.” Vera, a retired social worker, saw value in the intergenerational group dynamic. She commented that she often saw intergenerational divides in local nursing homes: “I see who visits their relatives in nursing homes. It’s usually a sister, brother, yeah. But [it doesn’t filter] down to the children.” Similarly, many of the younger actors commented that they appreciated the presence of the older participants, particularly in the absence of their own grandparents. Emily, who had moved around her whole life and had “never had much time around [her grandparents],” said that being around “other people’s family” had made her realize “how nice it is to have those people [around].” Reese said, “All of my grandparents have passed ... so it was nice to have, like, someone older ... a mentor figure.”

Despite these framings, the relationships formed in this extended intergenerational network did not merely conform to “tropes of intergenerationality as ‘passing-down’ knowledge from older to younger” (Chazan & Baldwin 2021: 77). In their study of alternative aging and queer futures, Chazan and Baldwin (2021) found instead that participants valued “deeply held commitments to and practices of learning, advocacy, and care, across ages in all directions” (p. 77) – what Chivers (2016) refers to as “multidirectional interdependence” (p. 228). We found similar diversity in the relationships amongst our group. For example, Arjun and John had developed a jocular friendship founded on masculine competition and

perhaps more typically associated with male peers of the same age, as Arjun related:

John became a really good friend. ... We were kind of competing with each other. He used to always try and tell me that he's old and he knows more than me. And I was like, "No, bro, even I know much more than you."

Reese's relationship with Wayne, an older participant, also did not fall into a traditional mentor/mentee binary; one of her favourite memories of Wayne involved the pair (mis)behaving like over-energetic schoolchildren:

I remember one, one rehearsal specifically. ... Wayne and I got kicked out ... because we were talking too much and so we got kicked into the hallway. And [the director said,] "You're not in the scene yet. Stop being distracting." ... So we went out there and we just talked.

Similarly, Hanna described some of the older participants as "still kind of like kids. Like they still act and behave as if I would act and behave with my friends." When asked what she learned from the older participants, Adriana balked at using limiting frames, saying that while she learned "a lot about different things," she did not mean it in "the romantic way, you know, like, oh I learned how to value things." Instead, she valued the "random stuff" she had learned from the older folks, like when James taught her "about an app [i.e. an application for her cell phone] that could like track [the balances] of all your [store loyalty] cards." Adriana was also quick to point out that these relationships did not need to involve learning, wisdom, or guidance to be meaningful, saying, "Sometimes you don't even need to learn or understand anything. Sometimes [it] could just be fun and relaxing."

The play fostered intergenerational connections among participants but also strengthened intergenerational connections between participants and their family members. The families of many participants supported them by helping them prepare, attending the performance, and engaging them in conversations about the project. James' daughter and granddaughter were "surprised" to see him as an actor, which was especially meaningful to James, as it opened a conversation with his daughter at a time when their relationship was fairly contentious. Josephine's son took an active role in her development as an actor, running lines with her.

She remarked that he likely knew the play as well as any of the actors. When Josephine's son saw her perform, he exclaimed, "Mom, you didn't miss one word!" Josephine observed, "He was so proud!" Younger members of the group remarked that the content of the play allowed them to have new conversations with loved ones. For example, Reese, lauded by several other participants for her excellent acting, remarked that she embodied her character by "copy[ing] whatever my dad would do in this kind of situation. ... The way he stands. The way he talks." On a ride home from rehearsals one night, Arjun told Reese's father what she was doing. Although this was awkward, it opened up conversations between Reese and her parents about her grandfather's life and his relationship to hockey. She explained, "It's hard to talk to my dad about some more personal things in depth. Just because, you know, like stoic, stoic, army man. ... But I got to learn more about my grandfather. [It was] nice." While many forms of recreation and artistic practice may offer opportunities for intergenerational connection, theatre is unique in offering the young the opportunity to consider the *embodied* experiences and subjectivity of the old by playing them onstage. In this case, doing so strengthened the connection Reese had with both her father and her grandfather.

These varied intergenerational relationships, among participants and between participants and family members, generated joy even as they did not conform to hegemonic notions of relationships between older and younger folks – and maybe even because of this fact. In this way, they challenged more traditional ideals that see the old as primarily functioning to pass support and guidance onto their children and grandchildren.

Present Future and Future Present: The Temporal Rupture of Intergenerational Joy

Common sense tells us that the value of the old and young to the present is tenuous. Indeed, childhood and old age are wrapped in "cultural ideas" (Shanahan 2007: 408) that mystify this time of life. According to neoliberal ideology, the young are to avoid risk, with an eye to a fruitful and productive future, while the old are to live intensely in the here and now by investing in the self (Shimoni 2018), as their future is either limited or non-existent. These ways of being impair the ability of both the young and

old to fully orient themselves to each other and to the three dimensions of past, present and future.

We found that for both young and old, the here and now became an important part of intergenerational joy, connecting both to present *and* future in ways that defied neoliberal ideals focused solely on individual investment. For example, Emily was debating doing a study year abroad and was weighing the pros and cons during our rehearsal process. The older members of the group “were just like, ‘Oh no, just go. ... There’s no reason not to.’” She reasoned, “I think that’s because they lived and sometimes they have regrets and they just see it as, you know, I have the ability.” Engaging in the here and now, ultimately Emily decided to take the trip, concluding, “I have this time to go now.” Vera remarked on the debates about Emily’s year abroad as well, commenting that “everybody at the play was like, go for it! Travel!” Vera’s husband John piped in, “Travel! Enjoy! Yeah!”

While the old were happy to advise the young, they also claimed that the young provided their own forms of mentorship. Breaking with age chronology, this sometimes positioned the old as young. For example, John commented on the ways the young changed and challenged his engagement with the theatre workshops and performances. He stated that the young participants “had energy, enthusiasm. They weren’t afraid. You know, their inhibitions were less than mine.” Vera continued, “They brought more, some good ideas about things as we went along with the play.” James noted that the younger participants “make me feel younger. I think it’s the, it’s the spirit that they have. The energy. It’s all about energy.”

As observed by Gallistl and Wanka (2023), “Time is essential in aging research” (p. 1). The work here illustrates the “multi-dimensionality of time in later life (but also in early life), highlighting how aging is constructed in relation to not just one, but multiple forms of time” (Gallistl & Wanka 2023: 1). In our work, intergenerational joy shifted age-related temporalities from a future orientation for the young and a reminiscent past for the old, producing instead multiple temporal locations.

Aging Futurities

For the old, intergenerational joy challenges notions that they are “standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of future” (Port 2012: 3). Here participants were importantly connected to aging

futures. For example, the participants, both old and young, adopted new social and artistic identities because of the play. Many proudly took on the new mantle of being “theatre people,” sometimes literally – as in the case of James, who added “actor” to his LinkedIn profile after the play. For James and others, being in the play provided an experience not accessible to them in the past. James said that he “fell in love with theatre” decades ago but couldn’t justify leaving a well-paying military career to pursue it. However, he remarked that this experience “reinforce[d] the fact that theatre would have been a ... good career choice.” Similarly, John said that “as a guy that grew up in high school and college, you know, bouncing a ball ... I, I had never, ever participated in something like this.” While being in this play did not change what had happened in the past, it proved that there were still new futures for the participants in which they embraced new identities and new experiences. John now had aspirations for future theatre experience, acting in a community theatre production several months after *Winter’s Tales* closed.

The idea that old age is a time to try on new identities and experiences is not anathema to neoliberal aging futurities. However, the emphasis is generally on old age as a time of individuality, adventure, and self-reliance (see Hayes & Allain 2025). By contrast, the pride generated by inter-generational joy in our project was collective and even service-focused. Indeed, many of our participants were most proud of the fact that the play had made certain populations and people feel seen and understood. John admitted that while he had his doubts about the subject matter at the beginning of the process, he now believed the content was “enriching.” He saw the project as part of a “broader context” that was preserving the “wisdom and knowledge ... in older individuals and seniors” that would otherwise be “wasted.” Josephine reported that two older curlers had stopped her after the last show and were “just beaming” as they told her how much they liked it. One of Allain’s original research participants had also attended the play and was in tears hearing his words and story onstage. Arjun remarked, “That is great and that is an achievement.” However, Arjun interpreted this achievement not as individual but as collective, attributing it largely to “the older people ... in our play,” whose performances he felt had more authenticity than those of the younger participants. Adriana poignantly pointed out that their achievement lay

as much in acts of attending, witnessing, and listening, as in moments of performance:

All of this was about listening because we started with parts of interviews that [Author 1] did. Those interviews weren't going to be available if you didn't have the ability to listen. And to communicate [with] the person you were interviewing, right? ... At the end we kept doing that the whole time. We kept listening to each other but also to what has been listened to before. So it's a fantastic chain of people that care about what someone else has to say.

Stressing Interdependence

Adriana's emphasis on the necessity of listening points to the uniquely and radically interdependent nature of both this process and theatre at large, where there is not only a constant give and take but also a constant reliance on others – to hear, to act, and more. There is no opportunity to retreat, or to take some time to figure things out for oneself, when one is onstage. An actor onstage is dependent on the other actors and technicians to do their jobs correctly – as those folks are on that actor. Theatrical performance is thus always and intensely interdependent, full of the “hap care” that Ahmed (2010) describes as the state of being wrapped up in the “fragility” of others (Chapter 5, para. 60).

The interdependence of the project generated discomfort for many participants, as they worried about failing their co-actors and themselves by making mistakes onstage. Joyce, an older actor who took a leading role in the play, noted:

I found it quite stressful ... it moves so fast ... I've taught different things and I've done different presentations for the province. ... So, I never had a problem doing this stuff ... [But] when you're up on the stage it's a totally different thing. ... All these strange people that close to me. ... I was quite stressed.

Adriana, an international student with several jobs, worried about letting the cast down when she also struggled to learn her lines. She remarked, “It was beyond hard. I am not a person that tends to have really good memory about specific [things].” She continued, “It's hard, hard, hard for me. [I worried] I would do a shit show.” James, on the other hand, feared that his inability to memorize lines might be a sign of cognitive decline, particularly Alzheimer's disease. He opined, “My big fear ... was memorizing

my lines, specifically since that was verbatim theatre and you wanted me to say exactly what was written. That was a struggle." He was particularly worried about "letting down the team." Arjun, on the other hand, worried that the amateurism of certain participants would affect the production's quality, asking himself, "Okay, this is what happens in a play?"

Ahmed (2010) points out, "There is nothing more vulnerable than caring for someone; it means not only giving your energy to that which is not you but also caring for that which is beyond or outside your control" (Chapter 5, para. 60). This vulnerable "hap care" produces joy for precisely the same reason it generates stress: it is interpersonal and interdependent, transitory and time-bound, succeeding (when it does) momentarily before facing further challenges, dissolution, and disconnection. The knife's-edge interdependence of live theatre created a wellspring of stress *and* joy for James, Arjun, Joyce, and other participants. When James, worried about his ability to memorize lines, offered to drop out so that the group could build toward a more certain performance/future, the group embraced hap care instead, and Dotto encouraged James to "stick to it." And when James missed a line in performance, Josephine adjusted to support him. Allain and Arjun described watching this incident unfurl:

ALLAIN: I watched James up there and he missed a line. And I knew he'd missed the line. And my heart started to kind of like. ... And Josephine just like, touched him in like, "I think you were telling me about it." And then he was like, "Yes." It was a lovely moment where I saw the cast –

ARJUN: Carrying each of us together. Yeah.

Arjun remarked that in that moment, Josephine showed a presence of mind typical of actors in "professional plays." Moreover, he stated that despite his doubts, the play itself "turned out to be much, much better than I was initially envisioning to be. So I, I proved myself wrong. Like all the people proved me wrong. So that was kind of a great experience for me." Josephine's ability to keep James on track demonstrates the joyful potential of interdependence that emerges in the radically uncertain time and space of theatre performance. In this sense, it was a moment of "hap" containing the anxiety and embarrassment but also collective support and triumph that cumulatively comprise moments of intergenerational joy.

Curtain Call

In this article, we examined how playing together in rehearsal and performance spaces produces intergenerational joy, prioritizes the here and now (in ways that can feel highly capricious and even risky), and produces alternative aging futures. This work importantly challenges ideas about the capacity of the old and young, demonstrating that coming together to play creates uniquely joyful and interdependent relationships that exist outside of commonsense notions of age. Notably, the young participants oriented to the older participants not as dispensers of sage wisdom accumulated over long lives, but as multifaceted individuals whose energy and presence they could enjoy in the present. The older participants also enjoyed their dynamic relationships with the young, whom they valued as competitors, co-conspirators, and even as teachers. Moreover, both groups learned to rely on each other, and found joy and purpose even in the uncertain hap of that reliance. In this way, they challenged a neoliberal hegemony that not only atomizes and isolates individuals and families but also degrades the value of the young to the present, the old to the future, and both the young and the old to each other.

Ethical Statement

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