



Creative Ageing Writing Bursary 2022: *Creaking*

At forty seven, having been a professional actor since I was twenty one, I co-wrote my first theatre play *Postscript* with my friend Michèle Forbes, and performed in it. The play helped facilitate conversations around the right to identity for adoptees in Ireland. The response from audiences made me realise the powerful platform I had as an artist to highlight social issues that were personal to me and to people in my life.

Shortly after my second play *Foxy* finished its run in Dublin, I sat in my mum's kitchen and we talked about getting older. She was then in her mid-eighties. I asked her how she felt in her body and without missing a beat she said, *I'm creaking girl, creaking*, and laughed. *But what age do you feel in your head, as opposed to your body?* I asked. *Oh*, she said *I'm still in my twenties in my head*. That discrepancy between body and mind interested me and I began to work with choreographer Michele Cahill on a series of workshops for groups of older people across Dublin as part of the Bealtaine Festival.

With funding from the Arts Council and support from Pavilion Theatre Dún Laoghaire, I then began a collaboration with director Oonagh Murphy, to create a scripted movement documentary for theatre. We gathered a group of women and men together, whose ages ranged from sixties to eighties, and began a series of devising workshops facilitated by Oonagh and dancer/choreographer Emma O'Kane. Emma, who very sadly passed away in 2021, had a unique connection with the group of volunteers we gathered, and it is no exaggeration to say that she set the tone for this whole project. Her focus was on mapping the stories the volunteers held in their bodies and she brought absolute joy into the room and fused an extraordinary ensemble. She was an incredibly gifted artist and a deeply kind woman who will be forever missed by the artistic community.

The group were searingly honest about their feelings around ageing and societal attitudes to them as older people. Many of them said when they hit their fifties they each had that moment where they thought, *right, I can slow down now and*

say that's it, or I can find a new life to live. The volunteers also, without exception, answered the question, *what age do you feel in your head?* - as my mother had - with varying ages from sixteen to eighteen to somewhere in their twenties.

At the beginning of the project, I definitely had preconceived notions and some unconscious bias around working with older people. I thought they would tell long rambling stories, would be tired all the time and would have difficulty in or resistance to participating in aspects of the workshops, and would need endless cups of tea. Instead, apart from actually needing copious amounts of tea, they brought a full-on energy into the room. While I was exhausted by the end of each day, they put their coats on and headed to ballroom dancing, a swim in the Forty Foot or to spend time with grandchildren and families. They were fierce and wonderful and inspiring and yeah, a little scary sometimes. They were not afraid to speak their minds and were ready to take part in any of the physical and text-based exercises we set them. If they did have a mobility issue they said it, and Emma would give them a way to participate that took account of that. We filled hours of recordings with their stories and laughter and their unique perspectives on how the world viewed them in older age. As one character in the script of *Creaking* says, *'When you are older, people look at you too much or not at all.'*

Opera singer Cliona Cassidy would join us, when work commitments allowed, to explore creating a vocal scored landscape for the piece that now had the working title of *Creaking*. Oonagh and I noticed that when Cliona joined us – as with Emma – the participants would hang on her every word as she led them through vocal exercises. The creative process, particularly in building a devised script, is tricky and we used to laugh when we would overhear the volunteers discussing us at tea breaks, saying, *what the hell are they at and do they we have a clue what they are doing at all?* Clearly, the volunteers didn't know what Oonagh and I were doing, and sometimes we didn't either.

A showing of work to an invited audience at the Pavilion Dún Laoghaire gave me some idea of what we might do and, during a week at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Monaghan, I hammered out a first draft. The overall structure of the play would be from the point of view of one character, but the voices and input of the volunteers would be clearly heard too.

I wrote the central role for the wonderful Geraldine Plunkett, who I had worked with in the past, and I was delighted when she agreed to play the part of Doreen.

Programmed by the First Fortnight Festival and hosted by the Riverbank Newbridge, *Creaking* was presented as a rehearsed reading with Geraldine and all our volunteers. It was an incredible night, and the humour and pathos of the piece was enthusiastically received by an audience of varying ages. We knew a costly full scale touring production could not be realised going forward and decided instead that a staged reading would work really well.

With a small touring grant from Bealtaine/Age & Opportunity we planned a tour to five venues around Ireland with Geraldine, aiming to source local older volunteers to read the other parts on the night and would also keep our original volunteers for the Dublin venues.

We didn't know who we would be meeting when we rocked up to each venue around Ireland. Our only real requirement was that there had to be at least one man, who was crucial to the plot. The volunteers at the venues were extraordinary and all had one thing in common, they had never been part of any project like this before. In the afternoon, while rehearsing, they shared their stories and rose above their self-consciousness. Geraldine, always the consummate professional, and, like Emma, one of the kindest humans on the planet, helped the volunteers with tips on how to perform in front of an audience. We followed each performance with a post-show discussion which gave the audiences a chance to respond to the piece and to engage with the performers' experience of the project.

As a country we need to celebrate older people more and respect the lives they have led and are leading, and to value their contribution to society at every age. We can learn so much from them if we move away from prejudice and bias and the preconceived notion somehow that all older people are the same and one size fits all in terms of their needs.

My mother now has dementia and is in full-time care. She's ninety-four and, when I visit, I see her constantly helping the other residents because, as she says, *sure God love them, they are all very old*. She still does not see herself as an older person, refuses to use a stick or walker and still flirts with any handsome young men in the vicinity. Like so many older people her personality, her spirit, has not changed despite her ageing and illness.

I urge anyone who is considering working with older people, to just do it. It is a unique experience and ultimately so rewarding. It changed me as an artist and

changed my attitude to getting older and the kind of person I want to be in older age.

Noelle Brown
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*Noelle has been an actor since 1987 and became a writer and theatre-maker in 2013. As an actor, she has worked extensively in theatre, film, television and radio. Drawing on her own experiences of being an adoptee, she co-wrote her first play *Postscript* with Michèle Forbes.*

Postscript, in which Noelle also performs, toured all over Ireland, played at the Centre Cultural Irlandais Paris, at the Abbey Theatre (Peacock), and the London Irish Centre. It was nominated for the Fishamble New Writing Award and the Bewley's Little Gem Award at the Dublin Fringe Festival.

Foxy, her play about prejudice towards the Travelling Community, premiered at Project Arts Centre, Cube. Creaking, a play about older people, toured Ireland as part of the Bealtaine Festival. In 2018, she became a stand-up comedian, gigging all over Ireland and at the London Irish Centre. Recently, she was Lead Artist and Curator on the Abbey Theatres Home: Part One. Noelle is also a campaigner for Adoption Rights in Ireland.

<http://noellebrown.com/>