

# TELLING STORIES IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

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**T**he Synapse meets pharmacist Anna Formosa who also happens to be an applied drama practitioner, and widely known for her creative community projects especially her latest intergenerational project 'Darba Wahda...'



## TS: HOW DO YOU RECONCILE YOUR WORK AS A PHARMACIST WITH DARBA WAHDA...?

I strongly believe that general well-being is a result of a healthy social, mental and physical well-being. The arts in fact are a key to well-being as creativity has been proven to provide meaningful creative expressions and connections. In keeping with this, various studies have proven that participation of the elderly in the arts contributes to better general health, less doctor visits, fewer medication usage and increased engagement in social activities. This, in turn, reduces the government's burden of healthcare costs. Engaging in a creative activity stimulates not only the mind but also the senses and provides a platform for social interaction and meaningful connections engendering a sense of self-esteem and meaning in life. To me, both pharmacy and my applied drama projects have the same aim, promoting health and well-being, one through giving access of medicines to patients, and the other through creativity. *Darba wahda...* is about using creativity to harness the strengths, potentials and achievements of elderly people, and the joy and youthfulness of children to provide a line of communication that transcends the generational divide.

## TS: HOW DID YOU DISCOVER THE WORLD OF APPLIED DRAMA PRACTICE?

I graduated in Malta as a pharmacist in 2002. Having always been interested in the theatre and having performed on stage

several times, I eventually decided to study for a Master's degree in Applied Drama at Exeter University, UK in 2004. I was most interested in the performance process which contributed to my personal development, hence my research revolved around the role of drama in education and as a social intervention tool, that is, how creative techniques can provide a positive learning experience in the context of education and personal development. The course was part theoretical and part practice-based, hence during that year, part of the fun was enjoying travelling extensively around the southern part of the UK to participate in projects, workshops, community theatre and youth festivals, and learning from different practitioners until I started my own projects.

## TS: WHAT SKILLS DOES THIS KIND OF EXPERIENCE REQUIRE, WHICH WILL EVENTUALLY HELP YOU DEVELOP ON A PERSONAL LEVEL?

I find that the greatest skills required are empathy and patience, skills which I find are also essential for healthcare professionals. Being creative and having the ability to involve others are another two important skills – as these will help you unleash the participants' creative potentials, see opportunities rather than problems and understand the group you work with. To be a good leader you also need to be well-organised, anticipating what could happen so you are well-prepared for any eventuality. One can develop these skills along the way and these are also transferrable skills.

You also learn to trust your intuition and the process itself, that by paying attention to little details and by being careful how to create the platform for this interaction, this will lead to a great outcome for participants, essentially a group of strangers, to create something constructive.

**TS: HOW DID *DARBA WAHDA...* COME TO BE?**

Along the years I have been involved in many projects, in education, with people with disability and in care homes. *Darba wahda...* in fact evolved from previous work with the elderly. The project was from my own initiative but was made tangible thanks to the Valletta 2018 Foundation. *Darba wahda...* is a Valletta 2018 project as part of the cultural programme. The project brings together the young and the elderly in a joint experience that allows them to share memories and create new ones via varied creative and sometimes unconventional forms of story-telling and other creative techniques such as drama, improvisation, painting, puppet-making, etc. *Darba Wahda...* attracts children aged 9-12 years and elderly persons of varying ages. Every season there are three or four projects in different locations. I usually work with local councils, schools, day centres and other community groups to promote the project and enrol participants. I manage the project and also lead the workshops and other artists involved in the project. There is a lot of work behind the scenes but people who attend the workshops give us really positive feedback and benefit on different levels from the project so it is all worthwhile.



Photos credit: Carl Farrugia

## DARBA WAHDA... MANAGES TO BRING TO LIFE QUITE A VARIETY OF NARRATIVES TO PRODUCE A UNIQUE LEARNING EXPERIENCE TO BOTH YOUNG AND OLDER PARTICIPANTS IN A FUN AND SAFE ENVIRONMENT

**TS: WHAT SORT OF STORIES DO YOU WORK AROUND WITH YOUR GROUPS?**

Old traditional stories, legends, popular verse and folk tales coming from participants and myself - Kuncett u Marinton, Fra Muđest or Ġaħan are perhaps the best known, but there are other less popular stories which the young would have never had the opportunity of listening to, if it were not for the elderly participants who still remember such stories from their own childhood days. We also work with stories from artefacts, such as old coins and petroleum lamps, and old traditional games, which always elicit a smile in the elderly as well as the children. Basically I create the platform and over the space of ten weeks, *Darba Wahda...* manages to bring to life quite a variety of narratives to produce a unique learning experience to both young and older participants in a fun and safe environment.

**TS: SO WHAT ABOUT YOUR WORK AS A PHARMACIST?**

I love it. I feel I am both scientific and creative so this combination is perfect for me. Pharmacy keeps me grounded while my projects, like *Darba Wahda...* allow me to be creative and give me the healthy break to keep looking at pharmacy with interest. I used to work as a community pharmacist but am now working in regulatory affairs with a leading pharmaceutical company in Malta.

**TS: WILL DARBA WAHDA... LAST FOREVER?**

With regards to intergenerational work, *Darba Wahda...* only touches the tip of the iceberg. There is so much work to be done. To begin with, *Darba wahda...* only caters for elderly and young people in the community, there are many more in care homes. So far we have had 13 projects in various localities around Malta and Gozo. The next season of workshops will kick off in October 2017. In 2018 *Darba Wahda...* will be celebrated in a surprising way and I hope that this work will continue the legacy started through Valletta 2018. ✂

### I READ THE SYNAPSE BECAUSE...

I keep abreast with developments in the healthcare scene.

