

a generation game

Sharing memories, ideas, and feelings is something we usually do with friends. What if you were asked to do it with a stranger? And what if that stranger was 'from a different time'? Active Age – Intergenerational Dialogue project creator **Charlotte Stafrace** has the answers.

Anyone who has worked in the arts will tell you that a touch of creativity can see you achieving everything you set out to and more, albeit in a potentially roundabout way. The arts encourage people to break away from habit, explore new areas of experience, and learn. This ethos inspired the Theatre Anon Arts Foundation while engaging with the Maltese elderly community.

Active Age was a pilot project that motivated older adults to move their bodies while sharing their life experiences. We noticed that fun tends to slip away from our day-to-day lives when we're not looking, so improvisation games and props like flowing scarves and balls encouraged playfulness. This translated into a willing openness when it came to contributing to the 'memory boxes' created along the other side of the project. While looking through the mementos and telling stories, everyone in the room connected.

Through *Active Age*, many of our participants realised their potential to make a real difference in others' lives. It was then that we decided to broaden our horizons, and expand the borders of the conversation to include young people. This is how *Active Age – Intergenerational Dialogue* came to be.


BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

Intergenerational dialogue is often spoken of as if it were a reaction needing a scientist to place the elements together in a very controlled environment,

which is not entirely inaccurate. There seems to be a gap growing between people of different ages. Project participant Nenu (82) said 'We have become people that others are not happy to see or talk to. We are seen as slower [...] We get in the way.' Maria, a student, echoed this sentiment, saying that 'To me, they [older generations] are separate, they have another life.' This mentality could result in a fragmented community: one that loses touch with itself as the years go by.

With *Active Age – Intergenerational Dialogue*, we sought to recreate the connections developed in the pilot project, but this time across generations. To do this, we sought out a number of collaborators. Spazju Kreattiv provided a platform. The Active Ageing and Community Care Directorate helped us get the word out. A number of day-care centres and homes gave us the space we needed to conduct the sessions. Education institutions MCAST, *Aġenzija Żgħażaġh*, and masters students from the Department of Gerontology (Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta [UM]) also came on board.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

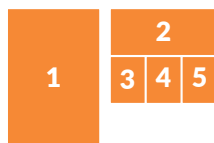
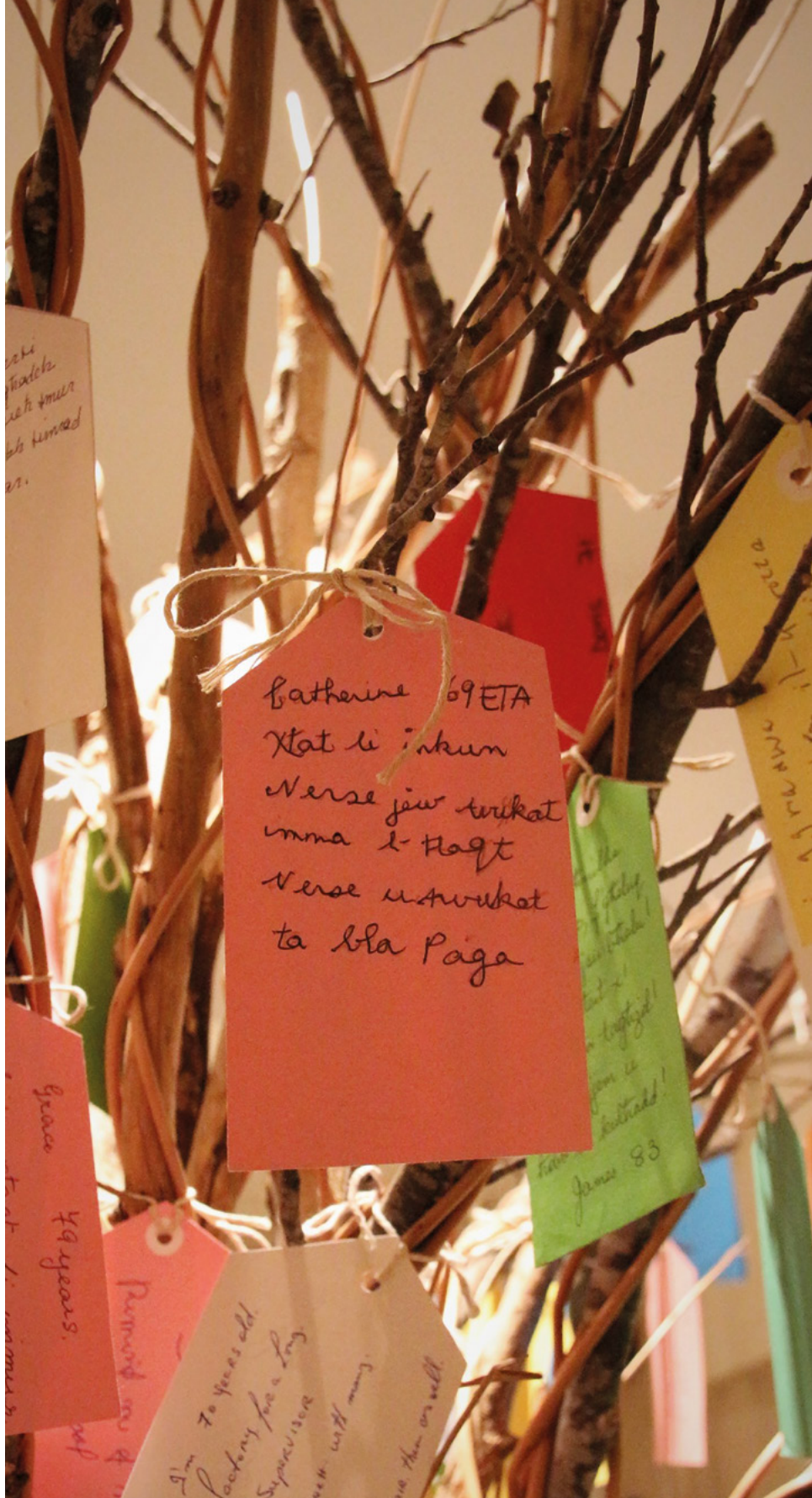
The process created a cycle of meaningful exchange, including skill-sharing. The UM's Gerontology students attended a workshop on creative skills which they then put into action during the sessions we conducted—120 in total. The team also learnt a lot during the research 

All of this created a wonderful atmosphere and helped foster a shared identity as a community.

process from previous projects. We looked into the local context and tried to determine what would work and what would not. It is not easy to ruffle feathers, or to get people to move and have fun when they have not been encouraged to do so for years. But the results proved immensely positive.

We created a safe space where participants could have fun and laugh out loud. Through reminiscence activities we gave our older adults and youths an opportunity to explore the things that tie us together as human beings. While going through photos, an older woman told her younger counterpart, 'Once upon a time, I had a body like yours and I had energy to waste [...] no one could ever stop me.' Another lady pointed out how they did not have the same freedoms younger people enjoy today. But even so 'we had loads of fun; we ran, we danced. When I see you I see so much of me, how I was before...'

As the sessions went on, we implemented themes such as love, fashion, music, and entertainment to keep everyone engaged and inspired. We would ask participants to bring in items related to the theme: images of their wedding days, old games, old perfume bottles, and recipe books. Some days we would find music from their favourite decades and sing and dance. All of this created a wonderful atmosphere and helped foster a shared identity as a community.



1. Active Age tree installation
2. Active Age activities, Siggiewi
3. Active Age activities, Bormla
4. Active Age activities, Paola
Photo by Charlotte Stafrace
5. Charlotte Stafrace
Photo by Pierre Stafrace



All these items provoked discussion, always highlighting common interests and differences. In care homes, the conversation and connection would sometimes go on beyond the confines of the workshop. Participants would invite me into their rooms to see their personal belongings.


From week to week, as new challenges were introduced, we observed changes in attitudes and an increased willingness to participate. In care homes particularly, when sessions came to an end, participants would ask about what would happen next and if they would see us again.

THE GRAND FINALE

The project did not end there. It continued through an interactive exhibition at Spazju Kreattiv, which included images and works from the sessions. The centrepiece was a tree-shaped installation covered in notes which the older adults wrote, sometimes with the youths' help, answering the question: What would you tell your younger self?

The result was a very poignant piece full of tales of lost dreams, opportunities, and heartbreak, with stories of encouragement, happy times, and cherished memories sprinkled throughout.

It also worked to encourage further dialogue as visitors themselves took the opportunity to read the replies and add their own.

It is truly rewarding to see the diversity of positive effects created by *Active Age - Intergenerational Dialogue*. This also applies to us as the Theatre Anon Arts Foundation. We had the opportunity to meet and explore in depth the needs of a part of our growing ageing community. We learnt new creative skills that helped us connect with this community. We increased awareness, defied stereotypes, and after this, we look forward to more open, collaborative projects. The future looks bright! 

Charlotte Stafrace is a creative arts practitioner, project manager and facilitator for Active Age Malta. Active Age - Intergenerational Dialogue is a Theatre Anon Arts Foundation project funded by the Malta Community Chest fund foundation, with the collaboration of the Active Ageing & Community Care Directorate, the Critical Institute, Spazju Kreattiv, and the educational institutions: MCAST, Aġenzija Żgħażaġh, Gerontology Department (Faculty for Social Wellbeing, UM).