Social and critical gerontologists, as well as literary and cultural scholars, have become increasingly interested in the artistic engagement of older people, and in how the arts may construct, perpetuate or challenge stereotypical views and existing models of the ageing process (Basting 1998, 2009, Small 2007, Lipscomb and Marshall 2010, Mangan 2013). Theatre is a particularly fruitful context for such explorations, not least because it is a cultural arena in which both ageing and older people are highly visible as audience members and as volunteers (DCMS 2013). In addition, older people feature strongly in the theatrical cultures of many countries and eras, both as performers and characters. Yet, although some plays present complex meditations on ageing, it is also true, as Mangan (2013: 23) argues, that ‘theatre and performance has always made extensive use of stereotypes and stock characters’, and these include caricatured old men and old women. Similarly, many cultural institutions, not just individuals, tend to hold stereotypical and deficit views of what older people are or are not capable of and will tend to write off, or ignore, their contributions to their communities and localities in cultural as in other arenas (Cutler 2009). Despite many valuable critiques, the role that older people play in making theatre—in both professional and non-professional contexts—is poorly understood or researched, as is theatre’s potential to develop individuals and communities, and its role—or potential role—in fostering intergenerational relationships. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is threefold: first, to look at how ageing and older people have been—and are currently—represented on the professional stage; second, to describe the evolution of older people’s theatre groups in various contexts; and, third, to examine what the existing research evidence tells us about older people’s experiences of theatre-making. It concludes with suggestions for a number of areas that cultural and critical gerontologists might like to explore further.

**Representing age on stage**

Although theatre is in some respects inherently intergenerational, its representations of older people and the ageing process have often been partial, incomplete or based on stereotype. While some of the oldest surviving plays of the Western tradition, such as Aeschylus’s *The Persians* (472 BCE), feature older men and women in prominent roles, the New Comedy of Menander developed performative stereotypes and polarized its treatment of age into the young and the
old whereby ‘one generation would be represented with white hair and beards, and the other with dark hair and no beards’ (Marshall 2006: 129). Similarly, later European theatre’s tendency towards non-realist performance styles meant that casting rarely depended on the age of the individual actor. The protagonist of Shakespeare’s King Lear (c. 1605–6), still a central text in theatrical culture’s meditations on ageing, was originally played by Richard Burbage (b. 1568), then in his late thirties, while a century later, in 1709, Thomas Betterton (b. 1635) played Hamlet when he was in his sixties.

As Mangan (2013: 45) notes, ‘“How to act old” is less common as a feature of actor training today than it once was’. However, greater naturalism has not always created more roles for older actors or more nuanced treatments of ageing and old age. Until comparatively recently, the position of older men and, especially, older women within the theatre industry was often uncertain, with roles drying up or becoming less interesting as actors hit middle (for women) or old (for women and men) age. Notwithstanding these problems, some plays have engaged directly with the process of ageing and have questioned realist approaches to theatrical age: examples include On Ageing (Young Vic, London, 2010), a devised piece based on interviews with older people but performed by a group of children (Johnson 2011), and a radical revision of Shakespeare, Juliet and Her Romeo (Bristol Old Vic, 2010), starring the 76-year-old Siân Phillips and the 66-year-old Michael Byrne. Nonetheless, scholarship has hesitated to deal critically with the precise details of the ways in which age is represented in dramatic works. As Small (2007: 5) writes, ‘Remarkably little of the vast literature on King Lear says much or anything about old age’ (see also Martin 2012), and many studies—Small’s included—have had little to say about dramatists other than Shakespeare and/or Beckett. In addition, where representations of ageing and old age in drama have been discussed, many analyses have uncritically adopted deficit models of old age. Taunton (2007: 82), for instance, argues that in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century literature ‘the only way one can grow old in a seemly fashion is to adopt attitudes embodied in an amalgam of biblical precept and stoicism. An old person’s only recourse is to accept old age as a misfortune that cannot be avoided’. Similarly, White’s (2009) monograph, Beckett and Decay, begins with an epigraph from Beckett’s ‘Tailpiece’, ‘who may tell the tale of the old man?’, and successive chapters treat ‘The Body Infirm’ and ‘Old Age: The Dictatorship of Time’.

More recent work is beginning, however, to demonstrate a turn to gerontological frameworks and what Gullote (2004, 2008, 2011) terms ‘age studies’. There are also signs that scholarship is starting to address, in greater depth, the specific techniques through which age is staged and the impact that representations of age might have on actors as well as spectators (Fries-Dieckmann 2009). Lipscomb and Marshall (2010: 2), for example, self-consciously position their collection as an intervention in age studies, drawing on the work of Butler (1990) to contend that ‘age as well as gender can be viewed as performative, in that each of us performs the actions associated with chronological age minute by minute, and that the repetition of these performances creates a so-called reality of age both for the subject and for those who interact with the subject’. Martin’s (2012) concerns are shaped by Gullote’s (2004) critique of gerontophobia, while Mangan (2013), in the most sustained study of this kind to date, devotes his first chapter to an overview of gerontology’s potential for the study of theatrical age. This developing area of research thus has the potential to become richly self-reflexive.

Senior theatre and theatre with seniors

A key development of the twentieth century has been the emergence of forms of theatre that focus on older people’s experience of ageing, involving them in their conception and writing as well as performance. The roots of these contemporary interests can be traced back through
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history and to the evolution of different forms of theatre including community, applied and participatory theatre; documentary and verbatim theatre; playback and forum theatre; and reminiscence theatre.

Reminiscence theatre is perhaps the genre of theatre most obviously allied with considerations of ageing and old age. It emerged as part of the growing recognition during the 1970s and 1980s of the importance of reminiscence and life review to the mental health and wellbeing of older people (Butler 1963, Bornat 2001, Webster and Haight 2002). A dawning recognition of the changing socio-demographic make-up of our populations and a gradual, but increasing, visibility of older people all provided a backdrop and impetus to the establishment of theatre groups such as ‘Fair Old Times’ in Devon, England, in 1978 (Langley and Kershaw 1981–2) and the internationally renowned ‘Age Exchange’ Theatre Trust in London in 1983 (Schweitzer 2007). Since then, reminiscence theatre has also become an increasingly accepted form with which to work therapeutically and creatively with people with dementia (Schweitzer and Bruce 2008).

While there is overlap and a shared basis in much theatre work with, and about, ageing and older people, Schweitzer (2007: 207) notes an important distinction between the UK, on the one hand, and North America and Europe on the other in that many groups in the UK initially brought older people together ‘as volunteers, greeting and sharing their stories’ rather than ‘with a view to performing’. By contrast, a desire to perform and a love of theatre were the motivating factors behind the remarkable growth of what is now termed the ‘senior theatre’ movement in North America. In her path-breaking book The Stages of Age (1998), Anne Basting charts the growth of this movement from its beginnings in the 1970s through to the first national Senior Theatre Festival in 1993 and beyond. A year after Basting’s book was published, Bonnie Vorenberg (1999), one of the pioneers of the movement, compiled the first directory of information, which included guidance on a range of things, from acting to funding; from academic programmes to playwriting and scripts. At this time, there were some 79 senior theatre groups in the USA but, by 2011, the ‘Senior Theatre Resource Centre’ had over 800 senior theatre groups on its database. Many of these groups are amateur, with just a few professional companies, and tend to be small in size, with participants usually staying between 1 and 3 years and leaving as a result of illness or other commitments (Vorenberg 2011). This means that refreshing and replenishing such groups is an ongoing challenge, although some of the key companies established in the early days are still very active indeed, such as StAGEbridge in California.

Over this same time period, Basting’s own TimeSlips project (founded in 1998), which she still directs, has become synonymous with innovative drama work with people with dementia. In contrast with reminiscence-based techniques, she seeks to stimulate the imagination rather than the memory and uses improvisation to develop plays, performance pieces and creative activities in various community and institutional settings (Basting 2009). Her most recent work has been on the Penelope Project, a professionally produced play staged inside a Wisconsin nursing home in March 2011, and inspired by residents’ discussions on the myth of Penelope from Homer’s Odyssey (see Mello and Voigts 2012).

In Europe, by contrast, where many countries have a strong tradition of community-based theatre, older people’s theatre groups and projects are often grafted onto existing organizations. The Grey Matters project is a case in point: over a 2-year period (2013–15), Bristol-based ‘Acta Community Theatre’ brought together five other European companies in Poland, Holland, Belgium, Germany and Slovakia to make theatre with older people. The intention is to share the work by touring each show to perform in another country and, at the conclusion, to bring together all six companies to share learning from the process. The growth of senior theatre companies and drama-based projects demonstrates the extent of interest there now is in theatre...
work with older people. Yet, despite this growth, theatre practitioners, researchers and academics still lament the lack of attention paid to what participation in theatre-making means to older people and what benefits may be derived from it.

**Older people’s experiences of theatre-making**

Lipscomb (2012: 131) argues that more than a decade after the appearance of Basting’s (1998) *The Stages of Age*, ‘this branch of the arts remains woefully under-researched and under-theorized’. Such lack of scholarly attention means that cultural gerontology has to build its knowledge-base by drawing on a combination of practitioner-knowledge and experience; on existing small-scale evaluations and research projects; and from the writings of academic colleagues who may not necessarily identify themselves first and foremost as (cultural) gerontologists.

In the UK, for example, experiential evidence from the work and writings of important practitioners such as Schweitzer (2007, 2010) suggests that theatre and drama work can have multiple and far-reaching benefits for all involved. In her description of the work of The Good Companions—the first group in which older people enacted their own memories—she observes how ‘the more they performed, the more confident the older people became’ (Schweitzer 2007: 209); how ‘it was noticeable that people’s communication and memory skills improved’ (209); how they were enabled to see ‘connections between very different parts of their lives’ (212); and how exciting it was ‘watching the older people in this group, most of whom had never acted before, develop into a team of people who were first class communicators’ (255). Theatre and drama work, she argues, has social, physical and emotional benefits for the individuals involved; it also has positive effects on intergenerational relations and on the wider community. These themes recur in the practitioner literature about the senior theatre movement in the United States (Basting 1998, Vorenberg 2011) and in evaluations of the work of arts organizations such as ‘Magic Me’ in the East End of London (Magic Me 2009).

However, other than such commissioned evaluations, research-based studies of older people’s experiences of theatre-making are few and far between. A recent UK review of the impact of participatory arts on older people, conducted by the Mental Health Foundation (2011), cites just three UK studies (Pyman and Rugg 2006, Hafford-Letchfield et al. 2010, Johnson 2011). Like the Magic Me evaluations, the Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2010) study demonstrates that working with older people through drama activities enhances intergenerational learning, enabling (young) participants—in this case social work students—to think outside their established views of older people. Similarly, Johnson’s (2011) evaluation of *On Ageing* highlights how the devising process helped create positive impressions among children of older people as active and fun. Meanwhile, for older participants, there is evidence from Pyman and Rugg’s (2006) qualitative study of community theatre members—the only one to include interviews with both performers and production crew—that theatre and drama engagement results in enhanced skills and learning ability; improved confidence and self-esteem; new social connections and friendships; and a sense of individual and collective enrichment, achievement and ‘community spirit’. They also note that, for recently bereaved people, having ‘a reason to go out and a welcome when you arrived’ was particularly valued, while performing a role on stage could provide a temporary distraction from grief (2006: 568).

Other existing research, notably from North America, derives from the remedial use of the arts and tends to be couched within therapeutic and/or health and wellbeing frameworks. In this context, the oft-cited studies by the late Gene Cohen (2006, 2009) and his colleagues (2006, 2007) were instrumental in establishing the physiological and psychological benefits of arts participation for older people and confirming that creativity is essential for a healthy and
meaningful old age (Kastenbaum 2000). Similarly, the systematic review of creative and performing arts programmes conducted by Castora-Binkley et al. (2010), which includes music, singing, visual arts and dance alongside drama, highlights positive impacts for community-dwelling older adults in terms of both physical and mental health. More recently still, the review of Noice et al. (2013: 10) of ‘wellness studies’ shows how seven studies exploring theatre and drama with older people produce ‘converging evidence of cognitive/affective benefits’. The Noices’ own research over 25 years also demonstrates that theatrical-based interventions improve older people’s cognitive skills because drama requires participants to be active rather than passive, to engage mentally, physically and emotionally at a high level, and to take part in problem solving (Noice and Noice 2008, 2013, Noice et al. 1999, Noice, Noice and Staines 2004). They also observed significant increases on a personal growth scale and on tasks of daily living. As Mangan (2013: 169) concludes, their work ‘gives good experimental and empirical reason to think what many have long suspected: that acting is good for you’.

**Theatre, ageing and later life: potential avenues**

Theatre is, by its very nature, both inter- and multi-disciplinary. It thus holds out the promise of fruitful explorations and convergences in a number of areas, both between disciplinary perspectives and in practical terms. Some scholars with backgrounds in theatre and performance studies, such as Basting (2000) and Mangan (2013), are highlighting the connections with age studies; likewise, some gerontologists are engaging with the narrative and performative turn evident in the social sciences and adopting tools more commonly associated with the arts and humanities to co-create outputs with older people, to disseminate research findings, and to provide a bridge between different disciplinary traditions.

In terms of theatre and ageing, Lipscomb (2012) suggests three potential avenues for researchers interested in combining critical, narrative and performative approaches: first, analyses of plays featuring older characters, and their production and staging; second, analyses of play scripts specifically about ageing and issues encountered in later life: works intended to effect social change; and, third, closer examinations of the older people who act and are involved with theatre groups. A striking example of the second of these suggestions can be seen in the transformation of Feldman’s doctoral study on widowhood into a script—Wicked Widows—by well-known Australian playwright Alan Hopgood (Feldman et al. 2011). Performed by three professional actors, it has been seen by over 6,000 people across the state of Victoria. Responses to the performances affirm that, among other things, the years that follow a spouse’s death are ‘much more than just a time of depression, negativity, and prolonged sadness’ (Feldman et al. 2011: 896), and lead the researchers to conclude that theatre of this kind is an important medium for engaging older people in meaningful discussions about their lives.

To Lipscomb’s three possibilities for research, three others can be added. First, there is substantial scope for comparative work. It would be instructive, for example, to see theatre and drama work with older people compared and contrasted with other (community-based and collective) art forms, such as music-making, dance and singing, exploring the ways in which different artistic practices and traditions facilitate and support people to age in ways that they choose and which give meaning to their lives. Second, theatre and drama can deal directly with pressing practice and policy issues, such as age-related discrimination in different arenas, the absence of services or the plight of carers. Allied to this, cultural gerontologists have the potential to contribute a much-needed critical perspective to the existing disjuncture between ageing policies and arts policy. In the UK at least, these two policy arenas are yet to be brought into one field of engagement.
Third, and finally, Lipscomb’s (2012: 136) call for interdisciplinary collaborations involving ‘a broad spectrum of academics and professionals’ is to be endorsed. She cites Basting’s Penelope Project as ‘a bold move in this direction’ (Lipscomb 2012: 136). In similar vein, the Ages and Stages project in the UK has also attempted to take up this challenge (Bernard et al. 2014). Begun in 2009, it is a continuing collaboration between a research team comprising a social gerontologist, humanities scholars, a psychologist and an anthropologist, working together with theatre practitioners from the New Vic Theatre in Newcastle-under-Lyme and with older people who now constitute the Ages & Stages Company. To date, the project has examined historical representations of ageing within the Vic’s ground-breaking documentaries and docudramas; explored contemporary recollections and experiences of older people who are, or have been, associated with the theatre in different ways; devised and toured three research-based and contrasting performance pieces; and developed, delivered and evaluated a pilot inter-professional training course. At the time of writing, company members are being supported to co-explore and co-research their experiences of the last four years and to articulate, through live performance, the cultural value of what they have been engaged in.

Conclusion

Readers familiar with the wider literature and research around creativity and ageing will have been aware of many parallels and resonances with the material and developments reviewed above. Indeed, the work on creativity undertaken by the late Gene Cohen and his colleagues was fundamental to scholars’ attempts to articulate more precisely what the engagement of older people in the arts adds to their lives. Theatre and drama is not exceptional in this respect, though it differs from some other artistic forms in its inherently collective and communal qualities. This dimension makes it particularly important, in that engagement in senior, intergenerational or community-based theatre groups has the potential to address pressing social concerns such as isolation and loneliness, as well as contributing to physical and mental health and wellbeing. However, although theatre and drama is a (presently under-utilized) medium for conveying positive messages about growing older (Feldman et al. 2011), it is much more than this: it can also add meaning to people’s lives through its ability, when sensitively handled, to open up and address a range of other issues in a safe and supportive environment. Theatre’s potential lies, therefore, in its ability to help us move away from a narrow focus on health and wellbeing, and on deficits and problems, and articulate what else might be achieved by bringing theatre and drama to bear more directly on the concerns of (cultural and critical) gerontologists and others interested in our ageing population. This challenge is a demanding, but exciting, one.

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