

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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Performing Ages

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Performing Ages

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Abstract

In the multicultural reality of worlds where people's diverse social and personal identities are often discouraged from meeting and are excluded from spaces of shared identity, various discriminations are born. Working with separate groups of adults 65+ and many more with teenagers, the time was right to create an intergenerational workshop, an initiative that was accepted and supported by the National Theatre of Greece. This project attempted to invite people of two different age groups and generations to equally participate in a creative process of renegotiating age representation on and off stage, also as a socio-artistic dialogue process on ageism matters. We applied democratic and participatory practices incorporating Intercultural values and pedagogical goals of Inclusion. Participants researched and staged questions such as: *Can art be a safe ground for co-creation and equal coexistence between adolescents and older people (60+)? How is ageism absorbed and reflected in staged and unstaged realities? How do age phases of life serve collective narratives and how do they create artistic spaces of expression? How is aesthetic and experiential pedagogical methodology combined with inclusive education, regarding managing the “gap generation” phenomenon?*

The workshop concluded in June 2025 with a performance and a video production aimed at promoting intergenerational culture and education. This presentation aspires to refer to “staged & unstaged” age stereotypes, ageism and wonder on possibilities of reforming and re-making social, educational and art spaces in terms of age visibility, participatory opportunities, democratic values and intergenerational views, suggesting the artistic and educational practice of *Performing Ages*.

Keywords: ageism, intergenerational theatre workshop, generations’ gap

Performing Ages

Despite the fact of multicultural realities and all of our trials to make a more inclusive world, people's diverse identities, social and personal, are yet indirectly or directly discouraged from specific interactions and even excluded from specific social spaces (Silver, 2019; Wilińska et al., 2018). Since a basic mechanism of making identity is the understanding when-how we are similar or different to each other, and when-how we meet or depart from each other (Sakaláki, 1996), these exclusions are highly possible to take place and stimulate various discriminations even before they are realised. One very interesting case is when these conscious or un-conscious “distastes” are based on a common characteristic of identity, that of biological age and thus, the phenomenon of ageism is born.

Ageism describes attitudes and behaviours of discrimination and exclusion that are built on the basis of the biological age of a person or some population, fuelled by stereotypes and prejudices about age which are equally met in microlevel to interpersonal relationships and in macro level such as in labour market, organisations or even governments (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer (Eds.), 2018).

In European and non-European cities, it is observed and witnessed that people of 65 and older age are not having the equal visibility and participation opportunities since the city life is mostly organised around to those who can use the space and services as full able bodies, also those who are familiar with new technologies and usually to younger ages (Rémillard-Boilard et al., 2020).

Even though lifestyles and abilities differ importantly from person to person, more obstacles based on the perception of biological age and age stereotypes take place. Indeed, we do not often talk about the 65+age group, its products or to-do-lists. “78 years old” might sound as “far away” from “our” reality or irrelevant. “84 years old” could even sound unfamiliar, unless they carry some groceries and struggle to walk. Exactly on those innocent pronouns of “we” and “our”, the phenomenon of exclusion and ageism is already present. The word “our” here indicates a society centralised towards the so-called “productive ages”, people who are considered as the workforce responsible for building economies. But since health and technology systems are developing fast and the opportunity of living longer lives is already happening, the percentage of older people is increasing. Therefore, “our” societies contain more and more citizens of 65+ and by 2070 they will represent around 45% of the population of Europe (European Commission, 2018), a fact that demands social changes on age perception.

At the same time, younger people and especially teenagers, even though offered more visibility and participation opportunities, still feel the impact of ageism in their social status and activities such as decision making or expressing their opinion in some environments.

But it is through socialisation processes that they absorb the values, attitudes, and perceptions of a particular society. Since adolescence is at the crossroads between the dependency of childhood and the independence of adulthood, the difficulty is that adolescents must deal with social roles of two different age types, that of childhood and that of adulthood (Giannaki, 2016).

Questions and verbal phrases of everyday life such as “*Are adolescents capable enough of taking part in decisions that concern their individuality or the social groups in which they participate? You are too young to know. Too young to decide*”, express this reality of declaring the incapability of acting in an equal or valid way, generating ageism's narratives.

It is interesting that the concept of “youth” or “adolescence” began to become a separate subject of scientific research only at the end of the 19th century (Giannaki, 2016). It is also interesting that theories on the experience of growing older are leaning of attending a more personal, deep and spherical approach, such as the theory of *disengagement*, as explained in Puşcaşu's article *New Roles in Old Age* (2020). Taking the above, it's necessary to find ways to perceive, understand, and respond to biological age and numerous age identities. Thus, the need to reflect on the social concept of age in Art and Education is crucial especially taking into account inter-generational terms to our strategies.

Figure 1

Intergenerational workshop of contemporary theatre, presentation performance titled phase 1661, Educational department, National Theatre Greece. (Xenia Tsilochristou).



To understand intergenerational views, we inevitably focus on the so-called generations. As Mannheim informs us (Pilcher, 1994) the notion of “generation” is widely used in the everyday world to make sense of differences between age groupings in society, as well as to locate individual selves and other persons within historical time. For example, we say “my generation,” “older generations,” “few generations ago,” “generation gap,” “the new generation.” Generations are defined by kinship relationships and thus connected with biological age. But also, we can speak of social generations that are defined by the social groups in which we are participating and by the historical, the economical, the political, and the social structures we are living in. Mannheim also reminds us that social generations are related with our social class position, which affect our social roles. Although recognising the influence of biological factors, Mannheim stresses the overriding and ultimate importance of social factors, so that biology is seen to be embedded within social and historical processes. There is a need to recognise social structures, to develop social interactions between generations. When there is no social interaction between human beings — when there is no definable social structure, there would be only birth, ageing and death (Pilcher, 1994). It is then obvious the democratic importance of the equal participation of all age groups in social, educational, and art activities as well as other social spaces.

*How is ageism and the social significance of age connected to the social space? We referred to the exclusion from social life that individuals experience due to their age, whether it reflects the narrative of being useless — in the case of older people — or that of inability to make decisions — in the case of adolescents and young people. Exclusion from public and social life is also related to exclusion from the public space despite various examples of European and non-European cities which are constantly evolving and trying to reform (Silver 2019; Green, 2013). Access to public space and the cultural, economic, political, and social activities that take place therein, give a society the status of democracy. Participation in these activities creates relationships and interactions between the individual subjects of a society, creating a common point of reference, that of its public life. The *possibility of public vision* also plays a decisive role in the social space, with the gathering of a multitude of diverse information that constitute stimuli for reflection and action. Anything in social space affects its political dimension, raising issues of accessibility, use, expression, and thus redefining the fluid boundaries of democracy (Agouranou, 2021). Even more, participation in physical and cultural activities, in the case of older citizens, contributes directly to their physical and mental health and it is vital for designing active ageing strategies (Green, 2013).*

For the facilitators of *Intergenerational Theater Workshop* Katerina and Despoina, “social age” meant the process of creating social spaces through theatre, performance and non-typical education. In their projects they try to re-examine social and theatre roles

concerning ages and furthermore to re-create the frames inside of which they are process all the above.

In 2023, we implemented the project *65 + Co-Stations*¹. As part of the project, we explored the phenomenon of the generation gap and ageism by contacting young people, older people, and experts. At the end, we presented part of the project's results through a documentary. As it was revealed through collected interviews of passers-by conducted for the project's documentary, the generation gap is actively working today and is growing, especially with the rapid development of technology.

Figure 2

Intergenerational workshop of contemporary theatre, presentation of performance titled phase 1661, Educational department, National Theatre Greece. (Despoina & Katerina).



As a development of our work to combat the phenomenon of ageism during the spring of 2025, we inspired, designed and facilitated the project '*Intergenerational Workshop of Contemporary Theater*². It was an experimental artistic encounter with social explorations regarding coexistence and the experiences of persons aged 11-16 and 60+ years old.

¹ The project *65+ co-Stations* took place in Athens in 2023, in 10 friendship clubs as part of the actions of *People Behind* organisation in collaboration with the Municipality of Athens. The project was inspired by Katerina Kataki and facilitated by Katerina Kataki and Despoina Mitsiali.

² The project *Intergenerational workshop of contemporary theater* took place in 2025 within the framework of the Educational Department of National Theater of Greece, artistic direction by Maria Magkanari. The project was inspired, designed and facilitated by Katerina Kataki and Despoina Mitsiali.

Intergenerational relations are present in family or labour contexts, but are underrepresented in formal educative environments, which are typically homogeneous regarding age. It is not usual to find older people sharing the classroom with younger students. It is also not surprising to find young and older people sharing leisure places. Contact interactions between people who belong to different social groups can reduce prejudice towards the contact partner's entire outgroup, resulting in changes in attitudes towards groups of people. The findings of the meta-analysis, in which 10% of the studies explored contact interactions between different age groups, has significant implications for intergenerational contact, suggesting that it is a viable prejudice reduction technique capable of reducing ageist attitudes (Requena et al., 2018).

Figure 3

Intergenerational workshop of contemporary theatre, presentation performance titled phase 1661, Educational department, National Theatre Greece. (Xenia Tsilochristou).



In our workshop two generations met, found common thoughts and ways of actions, exchanged views on life and age, played together, reflected together, renegotiated ages and finally built together spaces for all, empowering communities. It was a social theatre practice of intergenerational meetings exploring creatively time and life issues, challenging limits of time and age perception, reframing narratives of age (young and mature). In the workshop, we used the theatre stage as a rehearsal space for the representation of *Social Space* and the presence or absence of different generations within it. Our methodology was based on the idea of *Intergenerational Learning (IL)*. IL is where people of all ages can learn together

and from each other, classically common within families where knowledge is shared down the generations (EPALE, 2020). The workshop concluded with the production of a video³ with footage from his presentation. The video was presented for the first time at the Performing Space 2025 Conference.

Figure 4

Intergenerational workshop of contemporary theatre, presentation of performance titled phase 1661, Educational Department, National Theatre Greece. (Xenia Tsilochristou).



In societies it is the absence of scenarios of encounter and interaction between people of different ages that reduces contacts and limits intergenerational relations, which generates isolation and loneliness and, consequently, dehumanises our communities. In the Manifesto *Intergenerationality Adds Up Lives* (2020) Intergenerational practitioners suggest promotion of intergenerational contact between people of different ages, especially between children and young people and the elderly. Also, to adopt the intergenerational perspective as an alternative to specialisation by age is a new way of facing challenges and adopting solutions from an inter-age perspective in the design of services and public spaces. Avoiding spatial separation from an age perspective, which is commonly justified by the type of services provided to users, implies remodelling the organisation, management and services, as well as the uses of community centres and public spaces, in order to prevent and combat all segregation by age. The interaction between generations contributes to making society more powerful, creative, and efficient. Intergenerationally should be used as a key perspective for the orientation of decisions in the field of public services and community spaces.⁴

³ You can watch the video at the link below. <https://go.screenpal.com/watch/cTiUjnltye>

⁴ The Brdo Conference, organised under the Slovenian presidency of the European Union and the European Commission on 28th and 29th April 2008, under the title Intergenerational Solidarity for Cohesive and Sustainable Societies, established 29th April as the "European Day of Solidarity and Cooperation between Generations", a date that has been celebrated since 2009.

To conclude, the title *Performing Ages* reflects our artistic educational practice that emerged through workshops with teenagers and 65+ people in schools, friendship clubs in Athens and also at the educational department of National Theatre Greece. It incorporates pedagogical values of democratic education, interculturality and inclusion to cultivate intergenerational experiences of co-acting, co-creating, and co-learning. By using selected teaching content and devised activities it generates tools for negotiating unanswered questions regarding time, ages and social participation through play, physical and verbal dialogue, collaboration and coexistence. Its focus is to contribute to an expanded inclusive culture and education, and its approach could be applied in various contexts in micro and macro level such as workplaces among employees, social structures (friendship clubs, nursing homes) and educational institutions. Towards the end, we wish all of us to understand more the value of the interplay between the biological and the social, of the relationship between personal and social change and the intersection of social space and public life.

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