

Ageism in the arts: Is it time to tackle a theatre culture skewed towards youth?

In theatre, younger workers vastly outnumber their more experienced counterparts, with older emerging artists – especially female ones – struggling to break into the sector and sustain careers. Theatre makers tell **Lyn Gardner** that age should be considered a diversity issue by theatre and the sector should stop fetishising youth.

When Alex Murdoch decided to let her natural grey hair colour come through, it led to a big conversation with her agent. “He was totally supportive,” says Murdoch, who is currently rehearsing *Dance to the Bone* at the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff, “but he did say it was a risk. That people would look at my headshot and immediately put me in a different bracket. It might affect my work opportunities.”

She is not alone. Since entering her 50s, actor, teacher and theatremaker Kate Maravan has found that her opportunities for commercial work are limited to “incontinence pads and cancer drugs”.

The barriers faced by older women actors are clear and need challenging. In Hollywood, Geena Davis and others have taken a stand, and here in the UK, the Equity-backed [Acting Your Age](#) campaign has been fighting for better onscreen representation of older women. But it is not just actors who are affected by ageism in the performing arts. At the 2019 Critics’ Circle Awards, director [Marianne Elliott declared that in theatre, representation of older women both on and off of the stage was poor](#) and said: “I think older women are regarded as not valuable, they’ve always been thought of in that way, as something to laugh at.”

Older women clearly face double discrimination due to both age and gender. When Murdoch and Maravan – who made her first solo show *The Old House*, a piece about dementia and memory, at the age of 51 and is still touring it – called a joint session at *Devoted and Disgruntled* in 2020 asking at what age you stop qualifying as an emerging artist, 85% of attendees were women.

The ‘dropout’ impact

Ageism in theatre is clearly a women’s issue, but it is a wider issue too because it has an impact on the diversity of the workforce, the commissioning and programming process and the stories that are told on our stages. Ageism is built into the very structures of theatre itself through the way it offers opportunities, at what age it expects people to enter the profession, the dropout rate that sees many leaving the industry in their late 20s and early 30s and going into jobs in other industries, the relative ease of starting a career compared with the difficulty of sustaining one, and by theatre’s constant search for the next bright young things.

Murdoch was once one of those bright young things as the founder of *Cartoon de Salvo* in 1997. But when the company stopped making work, she found herself emerging as a writer and actor in her 40s.

“As an artist, I want to be emerging all the time. I don’t want to be stuck in one place, which is why, creatively, I’m very happy to be beyond *Cartoon de Salvo* because I’m not doing the same thing and because if you run a company, it becomes your whole artistic identity. But that does mean I’m an emerging artist much later in life, and while I’m excited by that, it is also true that theatre does fetishize youth and finds it much sexier than experience.”

Murdoch adds that youth is far cheaper to fund than a late-emerging artist or one trying to sustain a career having hit their late 30s or into their 40s. “When you are just starting out

in your 20s and someone offers you £500 and a couple of weeks of development time in their theatre, that feels exciting and brilliant. But when you've already been making work for 20 years, that's not going to go very far."

The veteran director Sue Dunderdale, whose recently published book *Directing the Decades* charts her 50 years in the business as a theatre director from a working-class background, is still working in her 70s and still trying to get new projects off the ground. She says she is looking to make work "that challenges me, the people I work with and audiences", and much of that work is intergenerational, combining experience and youth.

Creative freedom
Dunderdale admits that as she gets older, it's increasingly difficult to launch each new project but that it also brings a kind of freedom. "By the time you get to my age, you have had so many rejections and people saying 'no' to you that you don't give a toss any more and it means you feel a creative freedom to just make the work you want to make."

Others like Donna Briscoe-Greene and Simona Hughes, late entrants to the profession – Briscoe-Greene did a performing arts degree aged 30; Hughes was 49 when she enrolled on a Central School of Speech and Drama MFA – are finding their own way despite starting later than most. Briscoe-Greene is becoming a force on the Derby performance scene by setting up East Midlands Black Arts Association and taking over the Maypole cafe bar and theatre "to provide the seat at the table for others that I never felt as a black performer".

Like Maravan, Hughes is creating her first professional work in her early 50s with *About 500*, exploring female fertility, which will be at London's King's Head in April. "It's not easy," says Hughes, "but being older does bring advantages. Maybe you are less likely to be knocked back, and I certainly bring all my experience in my former career as a psychotherapist and my experience as a parent to the job and the rehearsal room."

But does theatre fully appreciate the value of that experience? Battersea Arts Centre artistic director [Tarek Iskander](#), for whom theatre was a third career after successful stints in engineering and as a manager in the NHS, thinks not. "The creative industries are so insular. We don't value life skills when it comes to being creative in the room. People take a really purist attitude, as if the only way you can learn to be creative is in a rehearsal room." He argues that age is as much a diversity issue as any other for theatre. "Barriers that exclude older artists are part of theatre's diversity problem."

The big question is: where are the opportunities for older artists, whether they are new to the profession or have been developing careers for years? It's ironic that, while theatre has created plenty of 'Elders' initiatives that make work with older people and within the community (projects that are often led by younger theatremakers), many of the schemes in place to develop professional careers – particularly for directors – are geared towards the under-30s or under-35s. This works against those who don't follow the traditional routes into the profession via three years at drama school or university, shortly after leaving school, so they emerge into the professional world in their early or mid-20s.

But many don't or can't do that. Many of those people come from more diverse backgrounds, which means they were unable to access higher education after school or follow a passion for the performing arts. Or simply because growing up they had no experience of theatre and didn't discover it until they became adults.

Intergenerational divide?

When Nicky Allpress, whose production of *Romeo and Juliet* finished a run last month at Southwark Playhouse, left school, her family expected her to go straight out to work and bring money into the house. She did well, but it was not until her own family were growing up that she started trying to forge a career as a director, by which time she was in her

mid-40s. She's kept at it and it's starting to pay off. But while some such as Jessica Swale and Lindsay Turner have been supportive, she also feels that she has missed out on opportunities, including assisting roles, because of her age.

"I applied for 50 jobs last year and it's exhausting," she says, "and I think some younger directors are just worried that a 50-year-old woman in the rehearsal room will be bossy." But she also cites a younger director who said they would feel uncomfortable asking someone of her age to do the photocopying and make the tea." She adds ruefully: "Making the tea is no problem. I just want to be in situations where I can learn."

But that learning can be compromised by age. Becoming a director is, for most people, a process that takes time, and one that requires emerging directors to access opportunities at each step of the way. Age can make that slower, because potential applicants are excluded from many age-capped schemes.

As Maravan says: "As an older artist, you don't necessarily know the ropes and you don't have access to the contacts who can give you that information. So it is difficult to step out into the world as an older artist and feel you are really being invited into the theatre community with as much enthusiasm and resource as younger artists."

In an industry where directing is often seen as a race – will you have shows at the Royal Exchange and the Barbican before turning 30 and will you be running a building by the time you are 35? – starting later than the norm can be an additional disadvantage.

Iskander says that as he came into the industry, he probably managed to direct a show only every three to four years. "It takes forever, and it means your ability to learn and progress is limited." Iskander also found that pitching ideas to producing teams, most of whom were far younger than he was, was sometimes problematic. "I'd be sitting there trying out an idea, and I could see they were sceptical and wondering: 'How can this person still be so early in their career and yet be so old?'"

Arts Council England does not treat age as a protected characteristic, but it does collect data on the age of staff in national portfolio organisations. Those figures – the most recent relating to the year 2018/19 – are revealing. NPOs with more than 50 permanent staff are dominated by a workforce under the age of 35. Only 3% of Battersea Arts Centre's workforce were over the age of 50, with 67% between the ages of 20 and 34. At the Donmar, 2% were over 50 and 77% were between 20 and 34. At London's Royal Court, 62% were aged 20 to 34 and 10% were over 50. At Bristol Old Vic, 57% of the workforce were aged 20 to 34 and 9% were over 50. At Hull Truck, 64% were aged 20 to 34 and 11% 50-plus.

Just as Murdoch suggests that younger early-career artists are cheaper, part of the younger-age bias is almost certainly to do with the fact that a younger workforce is a cheaper workforce. As staff members get older and have families to support, there is a brain drain as they depart for other industries where the pay is better and the hours often not so long. But it creates a theatre culture skewed towards youth, which leads to a predominance of those stories on our stages and which, as Maravan says, "plays to the idea that innovation, risk, relevance and energy are the preserve of the young".

Iskander thinks this lack of opportunity for older artists, at whatever point they enter the profession, is a structural problem that arises from a poorly coordinated infrastructure. "Everyone is chasing the same pots of money. There is a glut of very-early-career support schemes, which give people that first or second opportunity, but almost no schemes to support people in their fourth or fifth opportunity, and because venues are often only programming very experienced people at the other end it creates a massive bottleneck in the middle.

"If we had a much more coordinated infrastructure of talent development, and organisations had clear routes for progression and support mechanisms, we'd have a much

better system for supporting people throughout their careers and have longer, sustainable careers.”

Iskander welcomes the increasing dialogue around loosening of the constraints and age caps and a reconsideration of what makes an early-career artist, but he reckons that the potentially galvanising game changer is the skills shortage facing theatre.

“The skills shortage is acute at the moment, so acute that it bursts open all the barriers and definitions and it’s making venues think much harder about who their workforce is and who they work with creatively,” he says. “The pandemic means we have lost lots of experienced, skilled people to other industries. It’s really challenging, so we need to be open to older people coming into the industry and attracting back some of those experienced people who have left. If we can make this a kind, supportive and financially attractive place to work, a place that creates regular opportunities for them, then we will do very well. But if we don’t, I think we will end up in a worse position than before.”

A relevant, skilled-up and inclusive theatre sector that reflects the world around it clearly needs a workforce that is diverse in every way, and that must include a wide spread of ages among those making work and those commissioning and programming it.

But there is an argument too around generational inequalities and the impact of Covid on younger people: that those just starting out in theatre should be prioritised over those who have already had long careers and who were beneficiaries of the more generous funding systems of the 1970s and the late 1990s. Or indeed those who have already had successful careers in other fields and are now financially secure enough to pursue a career in theatre. Dunderdale believes there’s an element of truth to that. “It’s true that some older people working in the arts have done well out of it. They have not had to struggle for funding the way young people do now.” When she started work at Watford in 1971 as assistant director of theatre in education, she points out: “I was earning £50 a week. It was an extraordinary amount compared with what my dad, who was on the docks, was earning; he was on something like £9 a week. I would say that I have been very fortunate. I’ve had the luck and the joy to have a long working life and to be paid for it. I’m still doing it. But I am well aware that is much harder now for young people starting out, particularly if they come from a working-class background like me.”

But like many I’ve spoken to, Dunderdale doesn’t think it’s about pitting the old against the young, but rather ensuring that there are opportunities for all ages, and more intergenerational working so that the older and younger learn from each other. “Of course, we need to champion the young, especially after Covid,” says Maravan. “But it’s also about recognising that older people can contribute, and not shutting the door on them or making it so very hard to get through the door in the first place.”