

GRANDCHILDREN OF THE BLITZ



From intergenerational conversations to intergenerational performance

INTRODUCTION

Grandchildren of the Blitz (GOTB), was a project created by London Bubble Theatre Company and funded principally by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It set out to explore living memories of the bombing of Bermondsey, Rotherhithe and Deptford between 1940 and 1941 and the changes that this had wrought upon the place and the people who lived there. The project was led by children who conducted interviews with people who had been their age during the bombing. From these conversations came transcriptions, these formed the basis of a website, an education pack and a play script. The play script (later titled *Blackbirds*) was produced as a community event performed by an intergenerational cast to audiences drawn from Bermondsey, Rotherhithe and Deptford.

The aims of the project were to:

- engage you people and adults in the history of a period that had a significant impact on their area and the residents of that area
- train young people and adults in new and transferable skills
- publish and celebrate the testimony of elders on an inter-active website
- create an event that brings today's residents together to mark the impact of the Blitz, both on the people and the landscape of Bermondsey, Rotherhithe and Deptford
- continue and develop London Bubbles practise of making theatre with, for and by our area

Phase 1, BREATHING IN (the first 6 months April to September 2010)

On 12th July 2010, Asya, age 10, and her friend Kezia age 11, visited Brenda, who was 10 in 1948. They had with them a solid state Marantz voice recorder and a sheet of questions. Asya and Kezia asked the questions, the project co-ordinator Marigold listened and occasionally chipped in. The interview lasted two hours, they drank tea, ate biscuits and talked Blitz. Towards the end of the interview Brenda brought out a child's dressing gown – the garment she had worn during the bombing, the dressing gown that had gone with her to the air raid shelter.



Kezia, Brenda, Asya and the dressing gown.

There were 18 interviews like this. Before the interviews were arranged the children and the volunteers had received training in oral history techniques delivered by Rib Davies from the Oral History Society, and had visited the Imperial War Museum to handle objects and attend a workshop exploring life on the “home front”.

Marigold Hughes, the project co-ordinator, had persuaded parents and others to transcribe the interviews. Kezia's dad, Robert, had the task of transcribing Brenda's words – they ran to 20 pages, slightly longer than the typical interview (as Robert regularly likes to remind people).

The outcomes of this interview were long lasting. Brenda (and the dressing gown) joined the project and appeared in the show. Kezia, Asya and Brenda became friends. The children deepened their knowledge of what had happened in their locality. Brenda connected to the Bubble and contributed time and wisdom to the development of the project. Each interview had its own particular list of side outcomes – connections, visits, shared stories.



Alfie Wright
was interviewed by
Tommy



Annie Wright
interviewed by
Tara



Barbara Robson
interviewed by
Edward and
Tabitha



Betty Grimwood
interviewed by Ella
and



Brenda Watkinson
interviewed by
Kezia and Asya



Daisy Edwards
interviewed by
Geillo and Wendy



David West
interviewed by
Louis and Ella



Eileen Dougan
interviewed by
Merlin



Gladys Saunders
interviewed by Billy
and Danielle



Mary Hewwit
interviewed by
Karielle and
George



Len Hatch
interviewed by Jake
and Asya



Reeny Sumners
interviewed by
Ameila and
Sapphire



Rosie Wheatland
interviewed by Tanya
and Jasmine



Sheila Bulmer
interviewed by Daniel
and Becky



Sheila McCulloch
interviewed by Alex
and Jodie



Tom Wintour
interviewed by Simon
Startin (playwright).

To arrive at this simple conversation the project had been advertised and promoted extensively through the press, through presentations and through word of mouth spread partly through the Bubble participants.

We branded the project and produced simple marketing materials.



Marketing postcard



**Know a local story about the Blitz?
Know someone who lived through the Bombing?
Would you like to help find and record these stories?**

London Bubble invites volunteers of all ages to get involved with the *Grandchildren of the Blitz* project, as we turn the testimony of local people into a play.

You can help with interviews, event support and much more. To find out more or to join us as a volunteer, please contact Marigold Hughes on 020 7237 4434 or email marigold@londonbubble.org.uk

Supported by  **The National Lottery**
through the Heritage Lottery Fund 

Press Advert

We also ran a series of events including a launch night with cakes, a local history quiz and a Pearly King/MC. Volunteers helped co-ordinator Marigold to create an interactive Map of Remembrance comprising a 1941 map of the local area, a register of local blitz victims and a contemporary A to Z. We took this to various events to allow people to select a name from the register, locate their address and pin a ribbon of remembrance with the name on to the map.



The map of local bomb damage and register of victims – exhibited at Southwark Carnival.

By June 2010, 30 elders and 20 volunteers had connected with the project offering to help with the recording of local events.

The process of interviewing continued for five months and these interviews became the spine of the project – both through the stories gathered and the relationships made. The transcribed stories made the basis of a website, became the subject of drama workshops and provided the soundtrack to a short film. This film – using footage drawn from the Imperial War Museum archive, was shown on the evening of the 70th anniversary of the first night of The Blitz, on September 7th, under the night sky beside the Thames at Surrey Docks Farm.



Audience attending 7th September film showing at Surrey Docks Farm

This film event was memorable and moving, and it suggested that we should set our sights on another anniversary - May 10th 2011, which would mark exactly 70 years since the last night of the first wave of bombing. This would be when we would premiere a dramatisation of some of the stories we had gathered.

This gave us 244 days to do justice to the stories and relationships offered up by the first 6 months of the project.

Phase 2, BREATHING OUT (the next nine months, September 2010 to May 2011).

When first applying to the Heritage Lottery Fund we had identified the usefulness of building a website to pull together both contributions and comment. Working closely with Eak design we built a site that contained a number of useful features – transcriptions and recordings of the interviews with elders, a map of local bomb damage, a section on project development and a blog. The site allowed us to include the film made in September, and later a teaser trailer to promote the performances. After launching, the website was the subject of a series of presentations in local libraries and to elders in homes and sheltered accommodation settings.



Project Co-ordinator Marigold Hughes leads one of the website demonstrations

The website is designed to continue to grow as people use it. Messages, anecdotes and testimony can be continually added by users. At the time of writing the website has received 13,121 page views. The site can be found at <http://www.grandchildrenoftheblitz.com/blog/>

Alongside the digital approach, the gathered material was also shared developed through a very un-digital medium – theatre.

Throughout the summer a group of children had met weekly to workshop the subject matter. In September they were joined by adults and teenagers from Bubble's existing workshop groups and some elders from the interviews – this would become the intergenerational company that would go on to perform the material.

Led by Director, Jonathan Petherbridge and Project Co-ordinator, Marigold Hughes the group, ranging in age from 7 to 82, met weekly to explore ways in which the testimony might be brought to life.



David West and Jake Startin – Workshop

The workshops touched on a number of strategies - turning interviews into dialogue, then monologue, using images alongside the recorded voice of the “story teller”, children playing out the events of the teller, working as a large chorus, community song, semi-choreographed movement, and using sounds as collage. Some worked, much didn’t.

But the sessions were mostly energising and the group built to over 40 people including 3 pairings of parent with child (or child with parent in tow, to be more accurate).

A key decision point came in late October arising from a visit to the local history library where a photograph and information on **Mayflower Street** had been discovered. This was a street directly behind London Bubble, now comprising flats and maisonettes built since the war. The photograph told a very different story and the incident book of nightly bombings explained the transformation.

The group visited the street, read through the electoral roll and were divided into families to work on a shared history of their household using invented names – as listed below.

MAYFLOWER STREET - CASTING THE ELECTORAL ROLL

NUMBER	WHO USED TO LIVE THERE	ACTOR	AGE
7	Edward Clark	Mark	30
	Isabel Clark	Jodie	11
	Louisa Taylor	Kezia	12
	James Ardley	Ryan	
	Caroline Ardley	Faye	30
8	Elijah Livermore	Muhammad	40
	George Hendry	Hazel	40
	Caroline Ardley	Ella	11
	Sarah Livermore	Rosie	12
	Hannah Livermore	Marina	30
9	Ellen Bishop	Johanna	30
	William Bishop		
	Hannah Lawrence	Asya	11
	Henry Lawrence		
10	Mary Abbot	Brenda	70
	Emma Daly	Jasmine	10
	Sarah Jenkins	Annie	14
	Daniel Webster	Edward	12
	Helena Webster	Lucy	30
11	Joseph Bishop Snr	Chris	
	Joseph Bishop Jnr	Chris (y)	
	Charles Causton		
	Elizabeth Causton	Saphire	10
	Henry Hefferman	Mat	40
	Mary Hefferman	Iris	50
	Ellen Munns	Amelia	12
12	Benjamin Atkinson	Alex	13
	Caroline Atkinson	Lauren	24
	William Atkinson Snr		
	William Atkinson Jnr	Louis	12
	Emma Overy	Tabitha	10
	William Overy	Jake	11
13	Daniel Byrnes	Lee	23
	Maria Byrnes	Tanya	9
	Edith Grigg	Patricia	35
	Elizabeth Grigg	Wendy	28
	Annie Tedder	Rose	12
	James Tedder	Robert	49

Our version of Mayflower Street would become a key element of the dramatisation.

This holding form worked on a number of levels, it created strong intergenerational bonds within the company, it allowed participants to develop detailed biographical work and, not least, the structure introduced familiar parent/carer control figures to the children, which allowed them to “play” safely on stage. Eventually this process turned into a rich tapestry of many of the feelings we associate with “family” – support, guidance, pushing boundaries and affection. This allowed an organic and natural style to emerge, the performers grew and the company rose to the emotional demands of the subject matter.



Number 11 Mayflower Street - Iris Dove, Chris Hawney, Sapphire Collins, Amelia Spooner and Alex Madewell.

As the workshops progressed it became clear that wartime experiences could be shared through more than words and that practical workshops might create intergenerational experiences while adding another layer to the theatre making.

A series of workshops were grouped together under the title **Make Do and Mend**. They explored different aspects of life on the home front through practical hands-on sessions. These were titled:

- **Rag Rolls and Curling Tongs** (Hair and make-up of the '40's)
- **Hats, Gloves and Shiny Shoes** (accessories)
- **Cardboard Cakes and Paper Chains** (Christmas decorations)
- **Bread, Dripping and Rabbit Stew** (cooking)
- **Sides to Middle** (mending)



Make Do and Mend, hair and make-up workshop

The Make Do and Mend sessions created informal moments of intergenerational contact and learning – they were fun, practical and informative. They also ran alongside the development of the production and affected the look of the show. One participant tracked down period glasses to replace his modern pair, even teenage boys were cajoled into having a “short back and sides”. Female performers of all ages took to the look like ducks to water.



Blackbirds, production shot

FUNDRAISING AND STEERING

Throughout the autumn and spring, the company sought further funds to put towards the dramatisation of the material. While interviews, workshops and recruitment continued, we applied to a range of Trusts and Foundations, to Livered Companies, to local Businesses and to the Arts Council of England.

These resulted in a range of positive outcomes both financial and in kind. These included the Hilton Community Fund, Albyn Funeral Directors, Winkworth Estate Agents in Surrey Quays, the Yellow House Restaurant (who also compiled a Theatre Menu for the performance week, with contributions to the company), North Southwark Environment Trust and Arts Council England through the Grants for the Arts scheme.

In November, possibly too late in the process, the Steering Committee met formally for the first time. While members of the steering committee had been identified and approached during early autumn and various one to one meetings had been held, the 17th November was the first time the group met as a whole. From here on the group met three times, to discuss the general direction of the project and to advise on a range of aspects.

The steering committee were:

Barry Mason (Surrey Docks Farm), Pam Schweitzer (Founder of Age Exchange), Steve Cornish (Local Activist and Chairman of Russia Dock Woodlands), Carles Ferrer-Miralles (South Bermondsey Development Partnership), Dr. Patricia Dark (Local History Library), Sue Timothy (London Bubble Board Member) .

SCRIPT AND EDUCATION PACK

During the autumn, playwright Simon Startin attended a number of rehearsals. He had been recruited to pull together the various elements of the project, including the workshop experiments, into a script. He, director Jonathan Petherbridge and set designer Pip Nash, had worked on a number of previous Bubble community projects and were known to a number of the participants and to the director. They were joined by costume designer Holly White, sound designer Myles Stawman and Company Director Julia Voce to make a strong and experienced team who were trusted by the participants.

The company had identified Dilston Grove Church as an exciting space for the performance. This old concrete building, narrow and sparse, has seen and survived the Blitz and had recently been refurbished by the Café Gallery to be used as an exhibition space.

In January 2011 the first draft of Blackbirds was read by a group of 40 adults and children. Feedback was given and the script was taken away for some re drafting.

Thereafter the company met for 25, two hour, rehearsals, slowly developing the characters and scenarios suggested by the script. The piece interwove the voices of the elders – played as recordings, the stories of the families of Mayflower Street, factual information about the events of 1940-41 plus dialogue, poetry and imagery that evoked the time.

Meanwhile the Project Co-ordinator consulted with schools and then worked with the Bubble Education Director to develop a teacher's pack that would contain games and activities and be of practical use in a classroom setting.

Aurora Metro then published the script and accompanying teachers pack in May 2011, as **Blackbirds, ISBN: 978-1-906582-29-6**

THE PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY

The production of Blackbirds opened at Dilston Grove on the 10th May 2011 – the 70th anniversary of the last night of the Blitz.

The show played for 7 performances, for which there were 525 tickets available. Demand outstripped supply and with the help of some rugs and standing room the show was eventually seen by 926 people.

"I do remember just thinking how everybody who was onstage, whether they spoke or not - seemed to be absolutely and utterly with the time - which takes some doing. Even for adults, because they wouldn't know. Those adults wouldn't have been born when the war started and as for the children, of course not. But the children weren't taking it like – "isn't this fun, this is like a game" - they seemed to be really immersed in it" (Sheila McCulloch, Interviewee)

The show received excellent feedback, both from artists and audience members. Peers remarked on the artistry of the endeavour, audiences on the depth of community imparted by the project.

"Seeing Blackbird last month really opened by eyes to the strange beauty of community theatre. I found the whole experience rather affecting in the way that the performers seemed to honour and embody, to stand in for, those that had come before them"(Matt Trueman, Critic)

Of particular interest was the way an understanding of history was gained through theatre making, and how the theatre made gained from the understanding of history as imparted orally.

The performance part of this long project undoubtedly also benefitted from the slow cooking process. The company were truly immersed (marinated perhaps) in the subject, and consequently reached a new performance standard. The marketing of the show gained from the interest stimulated during the previous 12 months of activities. The look of the show gained from the location and workshops carried out across the previous 6 months and as a result of all of these factors, the audience were given a rich and moving experience.

"Firstly can I say what a" wonderful show", it gave me goose bumps in places! The interweaving of the characters on stage with the audio really brings the story alive. It's the syntax of the elderly voices takes me back to how I remember the older generation in my family and neighbours talking, the expressions, the phrases, it's all there" (Audience Member on Blackbirds, May 2011)

But the show in turn consolidated much of the learning – both for the participants and for the audience. Not only the information carried in the script and imparted by the performers, but the very action of performance – the “event”, which attracted and engaged South East Londoners of all

ages. Thus the performance of Blackbirds publicly showed and shared some of the trauma that the area experienced and acted as a catalyst for discussion and re-examination. One small example describes what happened after the performance.

At points during the show, the cast spoke the names of people who had lived locally and lost their lives during the Blitz, while speaking the names they produced handkerchiefs that might be associated in some way to the victim. For one cast member this had an added resonance

“Just found out from my Nan and Grandad after tonight’s performance; my Nan saw it and got all emotional... the 'Bond' family mentioned in the play are relatives of ours. I knew it was the same name but I didn't even think they could have been related. Brings it all closer to home somehow.” (Vicky O’Neill, 20, performer in Blackbirds)

CONCLUSIONS, REFLECTIONS AND POSSIBLE FUTURES

The process of the project as a whole – starting with a subject of local interest, then onto participant and volunteer recruitment, moving through to oral history training and interviews, then onto devising, skills-based workshops and rehearsing into a full community production – is one that is relatively new to the company. It is a model of practice that Bubble are keen to develop and use again.

Growing from strong roots the project has branched out to many different places and to many key “community” links - local interest groups, elders, young people, parents, local activists, community councillors, local trusts, local history library, nearby schools – both primary and secondary and local teachers. This has developed our understanding of the local area and highlighted the areas where more work needs to be done, i.e. in recruiting more local volunteers. Ultimately, the project has improved our position within our community which bodes well for future projects.

But not only have we have set up conversations between Bubble and the community but also between the community and itself.

On the 15th June, the participants came together to reflect on their experiences of Blackbirds. The evening ended with a screening of the filmed recording of **Blackbirds**.

The emphasis was placed on active and creative evaluation. In small groups, the performers brainstormed their perspectives on the rehearsal and performance process and were then asked to choose one negative and one positive reflection and express it in tableaux.

In addition to undertaking a collective evaluation of the project, we also asked the participants to document their responses to a number of questions individually. We asked i) what they thought about the project as a whole ii) what they thought of their contribution iii) what they gave to the project iv) what they gained.

“And I thought the production and the direction, to use activity on stage to demonstrate what was being said over the airwaves was remarkable. I thought it was such an artistic endeavor and remarkably clear. But for me, the magic moment was hearing myself and watching myself all at the same time - dancing in the railway arches. For me, obviously that was a personal

thing - was just wonderful .” (Brenda Watkinson, 78, Interviewee and Performer in Blackbirds)

“I loved working with so many different people of different backgrounds and age. The rehearsals and everything made us come together and the intensive work together made us something like a big family I think. I wish I could do the autumn show shows with you.” (Chris Hiller, 19, performer in Blackbirds)

“Very satisfying. The experience on stage was very unique as someone who hasn’t done something like this before and really something I will remember. I think the direction was mature and always interesting the blend of realism and conceptual performance was effective.” (Ryan Hewitt, 25, performer in Blackbirds)

*“It was extremely fun. When we watched the show *video of the performance+ it came out really good.” (Tabitha, 8, performer in Blackbirds)*

Collating these responses allows us to focus in on the detail of individual experiences and also observe the trends of positive and negative aspects of the process.

Following the performances we also visited the interviewees who had attended the show, to ask them about their experience of the performance and the project as a whole. The response was overwhelmingly positive and has begun the process of discussing what project might come next.

*“...you think of all those things *the bombing of the blitz+, I've never thought of it before you know - as I say, my son was so surprised and when he heard it [the interview] - he listened to it all on the website, he phoned me up and said "mum, I'm so proud of you" - I said - "are you Paul? He said "I didn't realise how much you were alone in the war at such a young age" and I said that I didn't give it a thought, you just got on with it - you know, you just got on with your life.” (Daisy Edwards, 81, Interviewee)*

The project was also evaluated independently. Two external evaluators, Alison Rooke and David Kendall, were brought in from Goldsmiths University in the early stages of the project. Their remit was to conduct a detailed evaluation into London Bubble and its impact on the community through Active Citizenship research and also to undertake a separate evaluation of Grandchildren of the Blitz, which would serve as a case study for the above.

David Kendall was assigned to work on the Grandchildren of the Blitz aspect of the evaluation. He attended a number of rehearsals at various intervals throughout the project, set up focus groups and undertook interviews with three “case studies” at the beginning and completion of the rehearsal process. **The reports emerging from this work will be available on the bubble website, shortly.**

FUTURE PERFORMANCES

An additional run of Blackbirds was always provisionally planned for the Autumn and following the success of the Spring performances, has since been confirmed. These performances

are to take place at the Albany Theatre in October, at the Lavender Pond Pumphouse in November and at the new Canada Water Culture Space in January 2012. These performances will allow us to reach out to new audiences in the Deptford and Surrey Quays area and enable us to target other potential audience groups who missed the first run of the show.

To promote these performances and the website the project co-ordinator (sometimes helped by a young volunteer) is currently delivering a series of cluster events targeting elders and schools. The informal events introduce the background to the project, describe the different stages and allow time to take people through the website.

As with previous stages of the project many of the elders attending have lived through this period of history; although they are not directly involved in the project, our intention is to demonstrate that their experiences are being passed down to a younger generation and that value is being placed on their memories.

THANK YOU

We owe a huge debt of thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund (especially to the long suffering Felix Gott), to Arts Council England and to other donors large and small.

But our biggest thanks go to the people who lived it, and then shared it. Ta.

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and
Marigold Hughes, Project Co-ordinator

APPENDICES (See separate document)

1. Project activity and outcomes
2. Participant evaluation
3. Voluntary time given
4. Connections created
5. Feedback