

## NEW CONNECTIONS

By ELIZABETH OAKLEY

The stimulating article 'Another String to your bow' ( *Word Matters* Summer 2016) which describes how Jeni Law came to give her drama career a new dimension by moving into Wedding and Family Celebrancy is a prime example of the versatility of STSD members' work. The communication skills on which we, as teachers and performers, focus seem to be increasingly adaptable and relevant to our twenty-first century society. One of the purposes of *Word Matters* is surely to draw attention to research into new developments in our area of expertise which might attract readers to become involved and give them an opportunity to share such work with us.

As Jeni's experience illustrates, a Drama teacher's work is often free-lance, always creatively draining, and entails shifts in emphasis to adjust to personal circumstances: what seems right and acceptable in one phase of life needs alteration in another. One such pressure point, though there are many others, is of course 'retirement' though it is debatable whether Drama teachers ever do wean themselves completely from the performance-related commitments that have fuelled their creative endeavours for practically all of their formative and adult lives! However, such activities are more likely to entail voluntary than paid participation and it is this voluntary, charitable sector where we might specifically use our special skills that is the subject of this article.

Over the last few months, in quest of articles destined for *Word Matters*, I have chanced upon reports about three fascinating new research projects, based on either music, dance or poetry that involve trained practitioners leading practical sessions for people living with the effects of a stroke, or with Parkinson's or subject to memory loss.

I was particularly interested, having picked up the magazine in my local library, to read in the Spring 2016 number of *Stroke Matters* (see [www.stroke.org.uk](http://www.stroke.org.uk)) a report on the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's sessions with stroke groups over the last two years '*to explore the benefits of creative music making on stroke rehabilitation*'. The report includes the observation that as a result of their participation in the sessions '*Aphasic patients {began} speaking out loud in groups for the first time*' and also this comment from a member of one of the groups: '*I live in sheltered accommodation and since the music group I have started to go into the communal room and have a coffee with others, which I never did*'. It was encouraging to read of these positive results and it seems to me that this approach could be extended to include drama. For instance, group activity sessions in storytelling and poetry run by trained performers/teachers might be similarly effective.

Recently I was most interested to see a BBC news item which showed people living with Parkinson's in a movement session run by members of the English National Ballet. Parkinson's (see [www.parkinsonsons.org.uk](http://www.parkinsonsons.org.uk)) is a condition which affects motor skills including speech. The benefits of these sessions with dancers seem to be that muscles feel loosened and freer through being guided by experts; that the music lifts the spirits of those taking part; and that people in the group begin to socialize more fully. Parkinson's UK also has a long list on its website of groups who meet to sing and though I have not read any reports of drama sessions, I feel that movement, drama and group storytelling under the guidance of trained performers would produce therapeutic benefits.

Lastly, I was most intrigued to hear the poet Sir Andrew Motion's enthusiasm for some new research relating poetry to memory loss which I feel will be of particular interest to STSD members. In the following extract from the website of the charity Literature Works, Tracey Guiry explains:

"The genesis of this project {National Memory Day-see below} comes from my own personal experience with my mother, who has dementia. I read her some poetry which she would have learned by rote at school and before long she was joining in from memory. The readings also unlocked other memories from her childhood, stories which in some cases we had not heard before. If ever there was proof that the written and spoken word can help those with dementia and memory loss, then our experience is a prime example. The objective of National Memory Day and the activities that spin out from it is to multiply our experience by the hundreds (if not thousands), to raise awareness and funds for dementia care and research, and to set the arts to work improving the lives of those with dementia and the people who care for them. ( [www.literatureworks.org.uk](http://www.literatureworks.org.uk))

National Memory Day is a joint initiative of the Alzheimer's Society, Plymouth Literature Project at Plymouth University, and The Poetry Archive. The date is to be 18<sup>th</sup> May 2017. Amongst other open writing competitions on the subject of celebrating memories, National Memory Day will showcase a 'wiki' poem/collage of lines contributed by those suffering memory loss and gathered over the period of last July. The first line was launched by Sir Andrew Motion: *'What I remember is the day you gave'*.

Sir Andrew has given his full support for National Memory Day as follows:

Wordsworth famously described poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquility'. The three big words have equal weight here, but 'recollection' has a particular significance: it makes clear that writing (however soon or late it might come after the event it refers to) is essentially a re-claiming and in the process a re-making. For that reason alone, the creation of Memory Cafes, where memories can be stored and examined and preserved, is an excellent one: these places have the potential to be very important centres of poetic business. But of course they'll have another dimension of value as well - a social dimension, which will involve the re-valuing of experience in young and old alike. It's this combination of the literary and the living that makes the National Memory Day so important and original. ([www.nationalmemoryday.org.uk](http://www.nationalmemoryday.org.uk))

We should be delighted to hear if our readers are engaged in any of the above projects or any similar ones!