

2020

Review of 'The Penelope Project: An Arts-Based Odyssey to Change Elder Care

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The Penelope Project: An Arts-Based Odyssey to Change Elder Care, edited by Anne Basting, Maureen Towey, and Ellie Rose. University of Iowa Press, 2016. Pp. 230. \$24.95 (paperback and electronic).

Reviewed by Valerie Barnes Lipscomb, SAGE (lipscomb@sar.usf.edu)

After reading *The Penelope Project*, it is easy to see why Anne Basting was named a MacArthur Foundation Fellow. Her extraordinary vision for using the arts to improve quality of life is carried out in partnership with committed professionals from a variety of fields. This book offers a valuable summary of the process and products of The Penelope Project, an ambitious undertaking that is difficult to encapsulate in a brief descriptive phrase. University faculty and students teamed with professional theatre artists as well as the staff, residents, and volunteers at a multi-level retirement community in a two-year project to explore how art can transform lives at any point on the age continuum.

Teresa Mangum and Anne Valk, co-editors of the Humanities and Public Life series, deserve credit for recognizing the special nature of this project as they advance publicly engaged scholarship. The book format is unusual for a university press; much of it is short essay or dialogue between the participants. Basting's introduction explains that the book is not intended to demonstrate how to replicate The Penelope Project. This caveat is important because Basting's talents are not easily replicated. Rather, she means to assist others who have similar goals: improving long-term care, forging partnerships with artists, and engaging students in meaningful community work. "We hope this book provides a rare window into phases of projects like Penelope that are seldom brought to light—funding, conceptualization, partnership development, and evaluation," she adds (2). Eight appendices range from the project timeline and partnership agreement to a course syllabus and a description of the evaluation component.

The Penelope Project stemmed from conversations about collaboration between Basting and Beth Meyer-Arnold of Luther Manor, a large retirement

community offering a range of care from day services to skilled nursing. The two already had a strong relationship from previous partnerships. In choosing to explore how myth examines the concept of “home,” they centered on the story of Penelope, wife of Odysseus, as “the hero who never left home” (1). They brought into the project Sojourn Theatre, a professional group known for devising plays based on community research, and each partner worked to obtain external funding. Eventually, they invited participation from everyone who lived or worked at Luther Manor, as well as University of Wisconsin students, an invited “think tank” of diverse professionals for evaluative purposes, and finally, the general public.

Residents’ activities during the project ranged from completing a half-mile of weaving that wound through Luther Manor to demonstrating how they related personally to the hero’s quest and the myth of Penelope. UWM students in three classes assisted with research, worked with residents, and performed scripts resulting from the experience. While the book emphasizes that the process was at least as important as the products, the project culminated in a play using numerous public spaces at Luther Manor. The public audience followed as professional actors and residents performed the dual story of Penelope’s reunion with her husband and a present-day daughter’s reunion with her mother in a nursing home. “Every scene location was both everyday and nontheatrical, and at the same time a place of the mythic imagination,” Basting explains (xvii). More than 200 people held tickets to the play, and perhaps another 200 staff, residents, family, and students viewed it unofficially – a stunning achievement, especially given how regulated the adult-care industry is.

After helpful forewords by the series editors and the eminent theatre scholar Elinor Fuchs, *The Penelope Project* chronicles the undertaking through five main parts. The first offers perspectives on the current state of long-term care programming, community-engaged theatre, and academic theatre. The second describes the partners and how the partnership framework evolved. Part three outlines the challenges and revisions that occurred during the project, and the fourth section recounts the various successes gained from the work, including descriptions of activities and some of the resulting artistic products. The last

division explains the project's evaluation process and lasting effects, from new attitudes and programming at Luther Manor to adjusting the theatre curriculum at UW Milwaukee. Given the book's collaborative nature, the section on "The Essential Elements of Penelope" is a particularly helpful summary analyzing all the project data.

Among points that stand out are the adaptability and risk-taking of the partners, the variety of research tools used, and the insistence on accessibility, so that people with cognitive or physical disabilities could participate in all activities. The project underscored that artists and residents could create high-quality art right in the residents' home (rather than busing them to a play or staging an afternoon's "dramatic arts" activity). When "Penelope" ended, Luther Manor residents and staff together committed to additional artistic and intergenerational endeavors. The process addressed and allayed fears about aging, disability, and mortality in people of all ages.

Age, Culture, Humanities readers may be left wishing the book devoted more space to the difficulties and benefits of launching such a project from an academic base. Also, as the book is fragmented by nature, the introductory segments are especially important for continuity and orientation. At times, it would have been helpful to describe a writer's project role right at the beginning of that writer's section, rather than pages earlier in a more general introduction. Still, these are minor issues for a book that encapsulates the spirit and logistics of a unique effort.

When I first was exposed to a few details and video clips of The Penelope Project at the ENAS conference in 2011, I was surprised to be brought to tears. Fuchs expresses in her foreword a similar surprise at the intensity of responses to the play. After numerous years, journal articles, a documentary film, and now a book, I find that I still need a tissue when I read about Luther Manor residents of all abilities using Hawaiian folk-dance gestures to welcome strangers to their home. As Fuchs notes, The Penelope Project taps into something far deeper than a typical theatrical event, and this book represents that achievement well.