***Mortal: A Drama***

***A theatre project commissioned by Wellcome Collection***

***by Elizabeth Lynch***

*Death lurks near the jostling mass of London Euston station. The Wellcome Collection’s exhibition ‘*Death: A Self- Portrait’ *leaves no (grave)stone unturned in exploring the visual representation of Death throughout the ages: from contemporary wire sculptures of the Grim Reaper to Medieval tapestries of peasants falling into eternal damnation. A company of young actors, myself included, are using this morbid ephemera as inspiration for devising a piece of theatre that brings this exhibition, ironically, ‘to life’. Hannah Elsy, 19[[1]](#footnote-1)*

In February this year *Mortal: A Drama* was performed at the Wellcome Collection by a company of ten teenagers 14-19 years old and three professional actors in their early 20s. The show aimed to explore how the ideas in the exhibition resonated with their own experiences, the insights it had provoked and their responses to the key questions posed by the collection. The production played to three capacity audiences in the Collection’s small Forum Theatre who told us that they found it funny, moving, inspiring and provocative. It seemed to strike a chord with many – moments of recognition, a memory, an image, a piece of music. There were also uncomfortable moments when there was no getting away from death’s shadow.

*I was five years old when I understood what death really means. My grandma had died, I used to visit her every other day. When my parents told me she had died I didn’t realise that I would never see her again. I didn’t cry or get upset. For the next few weeks I kept thinking, when am I going to see her again? Then one day I just realised she was gone, I was never going to see her ever again and that was it.*

*I over heard my mum and her friends who were nurses, discussing ‘incurable illnesses’. What did they mean? Then they started talking about death, so casually, this thing that happened to everyone, but I hadn’t heard of it. So when the friends had left, I asked my mum to explain what death was…. this was probably the best and worst question I have ever asked…*

*When I first realised about death I was around 6 or 7. It was when my pet hamster died. It was because I didn’t feed it enough and I didn’t give it enough water. It was shocking when my mum told me that my pet would never come back. As well as realising what death was, I also, for the first time, felt guilt.*

*Scene 1: First memories, Mortal: A Drama*

The group was recruited through school, college and youth arts networks and met from late November 2012 until February 2013 over six evening and five daylong sessions. The director and professional actors met outside these times to plan workshops, structure the material and develop the music soundtrack. A recent graduate, Liv Wright was employed to work on the visual design with a brief to develop images and film for multiple projectors and a concept for costume and props.

*Death: A Self- Portrait* showed 300 art, historical artefacts, scientific specimens and ephemera from across the world, selected by curator Kate Forde from Richard Harris’ vast collection. *Mortal* took the five themes of the exhibition as its starting point.

These were displayed in five distinct rooms whose design and colours suggested domestic interiors. The first was *Contemplating Death.* This included vanitas paintings such as Adriaen van Utrechts’s 17th Century still life, which contrasts a bouquet of flowers, a pocket-watch and an hourglass with an immobile hollow-eyed skull. *The Dance of Death* focused on the universal certainty of death, regardless of our status in life featuring versions of the *Danse Macabre* and images of the many faces of death - benign, playful, friendly and terrifying. *Violent Death* showed work by Otto Dix and Goya, depicting the desperation and horror of war; *Eros and Thanatos* explored people’s fascination with morbid phenomena such as flayed corpses, voluptuous nudes cavorting with skeletons and photographs of people posing with skulls. *Commemoration* showed images and sculptures associated with burial and mourning from several cultural traditions. These expressed shared desires to connect with our ancestors, to sanctify the body and to feel intimately connected to people beyond death.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the reading space at the end, one wall was given over to a dramatic new commission by David McCandless, which visualised the major causes of death in the 20th Century.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Mortal company were, for the most part, strangers to each other, although I knew several young people from previous projects. They came because they were interested in developing their theatre skills, because they would be working with a professional production team alongside some professional actors and because the venue and the subject was interesting – in that order. For each one, this was a first encounter with the Wellcome Collection. With the age range of 14-19 years old, and coming from the various cultural and social backgrounds you might expect in inner London, the individuals brought varying levels of maturity and experience to our exploration. This variety was a rich resource and we wanted to reap the value through our creative working process. We had to make sure that we created an ethos and a working environment that encouraged and stimulated, with space for observing, speaking and listening.

As part of our first evening workshop, the participants were given a short tour of the show by Val Brown from the Wellcome Collection’s Youth Programme, who selected some key exhibits in each room to talk about in more depth and answered questions. Then they were invited to spend some time exploring on their own. Later over some food and drinks, we asked them to tell us about one object that had made a great impression on them and another that had had a personal resonance. These reflections were recorded and so beautifully articulated that we created a collage of their descriptions and used it as a soundtrack as the audience assembled for the performance.

Having the exhibition as our starting point was useful and liberating. It gave us a host of external stimuli that invited different ways to interrogate and reflect on the subject. Even if they had little personal experience of death, each person could find something in the rooms to surprise, shock or intrigue them. What left them cold was as interesting to us as what had moved them.

At this stage we were excited that we had recruited such an interesting group of young people, a total of sixteen[[4]](#footnote-4) (including our actors). However our challenge was to use our short time frame as productively as possible to ensure a rewarding process and a high quality production. We needed to plan well and exploit the opportunity to structure our performance using the five themes of the exhibition. From the outset I had proposed that our show would last approximately 35 minutes. It would use a non-narrative format that would combine original text, choreographed movement, music and projections to explore the theme. The performers would play a version of themselves rather than act characters. We had to keep the need to memorise text to the minimum, to offer a mix of ensemble and solo/duo performances opportunities to the cast and to make a strong visual connection to the exhibition.

The second session with our group was a daylong workshop on Sunday 9 December. This gave us enough space and time to establish the aims of the project, to demonstrate the range of approaches we would use to generate ideas, text, physical expression, ensemble and individual performances. We explained how we wanted to work as a team, co-creating, critiquing, editing, refining, and collaborating on design, staging, lighting and sound. We found out about their interests and skills. My role and responsibilities as overall artistic director were clarified. I had met the actors Jonnie Riordan and Dritan Kastrati when we all worked on Frantic Assembly’s Ignition and they brought their workshop leadership and physical performance skills to the process. Actor Ajazz Awad-Ibrahim brought her dance expertise to the mix. Val Brown provided excellent pastoral support, important at any time, and especially when dealing with a subject that could be sensitive for any participant.

That intense, action-packed day was powerful and exhilarating. At the end of it, our fate was sealed. By five o’ clock the group had become a company and they told us it was because they felt they could trust everyone in the room. During the workshop we captured ideas on video and set up a members only Face book group to share this work in progress.

Wellcome Collection’s Youth Programme wanted the project to be co-produced with young people and the methods used to generate ideas and material were critiqued and reviewed throughout the process as we selected, rejected and refined the content. Writing exercises and improvisation created text, gesture and movement exercises directly inspired by the artworks produced dynamic and nuanced expressions of humour, sadness, fear and memory. We explored how the ideas in the exhibition resonated with their own experiences, and what was new for them. We looked at historical and cultural traditions and attitudes around death and how death is portrayed in contemporary media.

*‘Mortal: A Drama’ explores the devastating, gruesome and sometimes humorous aspects of death. Our fascination with death, as humans, has always had a theatrical quality to it: from the spectator sport of medieval witch-burnings to the final speeches of Shakespearian tragedies to the cult following behind the ‘Bunny Suicides’ merchandise today. Hannah Esley*

The cast told us about their need to defy and ignore death.

*I can’t allow you to take me, I haven’t done enough yet*

*I’m afraid of knowing you, afraid of the void*

*I don't want to think about death*

*Scene 2, If I could speak to death right now: Mortal: A Drama*

These statements would resonate with people of all ages but their poignancy is perhaps more intense when spoken by a 15 or 18 year old. They also talked about their enjoyment of risk- taking that combined fear with thrills, such as adventure sports and partying with friends.

*If I were to look death in the face I would like to be able to say: Dare me, thrill me!*

*I’m going to live forever!*

*Scene 10, Things I would like to say to Death, Mortal: A Drama*

We experimented with photography, film and music. We talked about the deaths of young people and relatives. During the life of the project, amongst the cast, three of their grandparents died. Two young people had also experienced the death of friends through street violence. From the outset we needed to bear in mind that we all shared the challenge of dealing with a sensitive subject amongst people we didn’t know very well.

*As a company, our aim is to get the audience to think about the implications of their own deaths. If you died tomorrow, what are the things you wish you’d never said or done? What would your fantasy funeral be like? What objects would your family keep as mementos of you? Hannah Elsy*

Whilst individuals were asked to write their personal responses to questions such as these, this material was then typed up and shared anonymously for others to speak. In this way an authentic expression of ideas and feelings was captured, as the cast felt free to be vulnerable and to be honest. There was no pressure on performers to re-live their individual experiences or to bare their soul on stage.

*At the Electric Ballroom everyone would gather in African print clothes and sing along to Sam Cooke performing ‘A Change Gonna Come’. Everyone will eat chocolate and drink mango smoothies and everyone must dance! After that, it’ll be down to the River Thames for a Viking burial.*

*After a church service, everyone would go to the woods to eat bangers and mash, fish and chips and drink pink wine and builders’ tea. They all must wear red and under no circumstances will songs by Robbie Williams or Celine Dion be played. Guests will all dance to Gangham Style.*

*Scene 4: My fantasy funeral, Mortal: A Drama*

The talking and writing was balanced in each session by dynamic physical exercises that were directly inspired by the exhibits. A wild dance of death was created as contemporary take on the Seven Deadly Sins (depicted in a medieval sculpture) performed to a club music soundtrack. The scenes of war depicted by Otto Dix and Goya provoked a choreographed scene performed amidst projections of the artwork and news footage from Syria and Afghanistan. We included a news announcement about the death of a young British soldier. “War isn’t just about it happening in another country,” said one actor, “it’s about the impact at home too.” Clothing and personal mementos were combined with small simple gestures, repeated and connected to convey memory and loss accompanied by music and film of the gestures projected around the performance space.

*‘Mortal: A Drama’ is jarring and surreal to watch, with periods of destructive dancing juxtaposed with re-imagined reality television that judges the dramatic value of contestants’ deaths. Lynch is firm that she didn’t want to create a piece of theatre that just allows the audience to sit back and ‘enjoy’, but to stimulate in the individual an ‘intellectual, emotional and sensual’ response. Hannah Elsy*

The cast’s responses to the *Eros and Thanatos* section resulted in shockingly dark and funny (and ubiquitous) reality TV scene, ‘Strictly Come Die With Me’, in which contestants competed to stage ‘the death of their dreams’:

*The game show where life really is just a game! Tonight three lucky contestants will die right here in this studio watched and envied by millions. They may die today but they’ll live forever on our Wall of Fame, what more could you wish for?*

*Scene 6, Strictly Come Die With Me, Mortal: A Drama*

The scene playfully commented on violent computer game fantasies and romantic notions of death. And yes, it featured a tsunami of clichés and puns about dying. I’ll spare you.

*And now for the final word: as Guildenstern said:*

*Dying is not romantic, death is not a game, which will soon be over. Death is not anything…..death is not…. oh to hell with that.*

*Just don’t try this at home folks. Try it here next week. ‘Till then bye for now!.*

*Scene 6, Strictly Come Die With Me, Mortal: A Drama*

An early letter-writing exercise produced one of the show’s most moving scenes. During workshops each person wrote a letter to loved ones, imagined as they wait at heaven’s gates after a freak and fatal accident. The letters were placed in sealed envelopes and each person picked one at random to read aloud if they wished. After five or six, I asked, enough? No, they wanted to hear every letter, all 15 of them. To re-create that atmosphere in performance we later had to edit, to cut and paste the best bits. As with several other scenes, this was swiftly done, as a group task as we rehearsed and refined the material.

*Dear Dad*

*I want you to know I have always loved you and always will. You weren’t just a father to me, you were my best friend. Even though you believe my death was your fault it’s not true, I died from a heart attack not our car crash. You must go to the drag race I booked for us, take one of your friends, you old man. Oh and dad, please find my dog.*

*Love from*

*Your little sh\*\* xxx*

*Dear Bushra*

*When you said extreme sports were not my forte, you weren’t wrong. If only I’d been wise enough to see this as a statement rather than as a challenge, I might not have fallen from the snapped bungee. I don’t blame you whatsoever. Make sure this doesn’t deter you from taking risks as you are brilliant at it. Don’t forget what you live for.*

*Love from the idiot*

*PS You were right, it was fun!*

*Scene 8, Letters, Mortal: A Drama*

The performance began down in the exhibition itself with three of the movement sequences directly inspired by artworks performed simultaneously in the Dance of Death, Violent Death and Commemoration rooms. This served as a kind of ‘trailer’ for the show, but also gave those attending just the exhibition a little extra something during their visit, complete in itself.

The final scene articulated some of the shifts in attitude to death experienced by the cast as a result of their participation in Mortal. It also reflected on the cast’s metaphysical thoughts and questions.

*BOO! That got you! I won’t run, I won’t cower. I accept you and so I am free!*

*While our bodies turn to dust, do our souls go elsewhere?*

*What is the difference between our soul and our consciousness anyway?*

*As my hero Harry Potter says: I’m going to come gracefully, without a fuss or a fight, because you’ve been so good to me in life.*

*Scene 10, Things I would like to say to Death, Mortal: A Drama*

The final line “We don’t know when death will come, so let’s make the most of living!” signalled an invitation to the audience to get up and salsa with the cast amidst party poppers and balloons. As people left they were given an envelope containing a piece of advice for living from a member of the cast.

A few months on, I asked the cast members what had stayed with them after the project. The following comments are typical:

*I got to work at a more professional level than I'm used to. The devising process was really fun and I learned that you can make an amazing piece of drama in a really short space of time if everyone is committed and there are good leaders to guide the group. I now talk and even think about death more confidently as I now fully realise there is no escaping it and the only thing we can do is live in the now. Maria.*

*Working in response to the exhibition allowed a lot of freedom as a young creative and watching the show develop into a fully formed performance was inspiring. Reflecting back on Mortal, I really appreciate how well the group worked together and the encouragement of everyone at the Wellcome Collection and involved. We were all valued in the ensemble. Bethany.*

*What has stayed with me is the different cultural perspectives on death, which are so different to our British approach. Ajazz.*

*I think I will never be able to discuss the subject of death now without thinking of this project and will get flashbacks to the dance of death or dancing the salsa with a plastic skeleton! It was an inspiring experience for me to see how youth theatre can create such strong work and have such a professional process, and how the young people involved responded so well to this environment - I think you got the best out of everyone! Liv*

Two members of the cast continue to be actively involved in the Collection’s Youth Programme and the gallery is now a fixture on everyone’s cultural map. With major building works beginning this summer, the Youth Programme’s Co-ordinator Clare Carlin will take what has been learnt through delivering this project when thinking about their new facilities and programme from 2014 onwards.

*“Mortal was the Youth Programme’s first opportunity to explore co-production through the medium of drama. It was a fantastic project and I really valued the commitment the young actors had to crafting and honing the show. The final performance was moving and polished – something our visitors enjoyed and were surprised by. We have learnt many useful lessons from this process and will return to this successful format in years to come. Thanks to Elizabeth and her team for their excellent work on Mortal – I know that everyone at Wellcome Collection really appreciated being involved.” Clare Carlin, Youth Programme Coordinator*

As a Director, this project was a highly creative and rewarding experience. The main challenge was maintaining the balance of focus and energy between some of the younger and older members of the group. The professional, young actors were terrific role models and as they worked alongside me, we demonstrated the co-producing approach, which gave space for leadership, experiment and failure, patience, discipline and dialogue. It felt like riding a wave. I was impressed with the quality of the support from Val and Clare at the Wellcome Collection and was very proud of what we all achieved for the final production and performances. Having one of the performances BSL interpreted brought another creative dimension to that particular performance. Mortal did answer a key question posed by the exhibition ‘Can art help us to negotiate death?’ However I think the use of live performance extended the visual parameters of *Death: A Self Portrait.* The spoken word, theatre, movement, music are each important as creative work which can help us think about death and dying, to activate memories, help us process emotions and reflect on our place in the universe.

*‘Life’ is intrinsic to a good performance, because actors need to feed off the energies of the audience and their fellow performers. The physical vibrancy of this piece and the youthfulness of the company meant that this play could be seen to be more of a celebration of life than a dialogue with death. The only thing we know for certain about this life is that we get one shot at it. So let’s make the most of it! Hannah Esly*

Elizabeth Lynch, Director

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**Wellcome Collection** is a free destination for the incurably curious. Described by *Nature* magazine as “London’s brave venue where science, art and culture converge”, here you can explore what it means to be human through an eclectic mix of exhibitions, events, the world famous Wellcome Library and more. Their Youth Programme aims to engage young people and the local community through participatory projects that build knowledge, inspire creativity and promote confidence.

1. Quotations by Hannah Esly have been taken with permission from an article she wrote for King’s College London student newspaper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For these descriptions I have borrowed freely from the book that accompanied the exhibition, *Death: a Picture Album* by curator Kate Forde. (Published by Wellcome Collection 2012). Further information and teachers’ resources can be found at www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/death-a-self-portrait.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more information visit: www.informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/20th-century-death/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Three later withdrew due to work/study commitments but their ideas and writing were used in the performance. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)