



The Association for
Education & Ageing

AEA DIGEST

Issue no 31
Summer 2010



Hot off the Press - AEA's new publication *International Journal of Education and Ageing*
(see page 3)

IN YOUR SUMMER DIGEST:

- Page 2 Notes from the Chair – Jo Walker
- Page 3 News items: First issue *International Journal of Education and Ageing*; In memoriam Robin Gray; StokeReads project; New members
- Page 7 Conference News: AEA Conference/AGM; Prospects for Lifelong Learning in Challenging Times - London; A New Age for Learning - Strathclyde; Never too early, never too late – call for papers
- Page 12 Features: Learning Through Life review; Extra Mural: The End of the Road.; Active Ageing in Singapore;
- Page 18 AEA Contacts
- Page 19 Arts and Culture section: The Mayor of London's Cultural Strategy; Paradise – the show; Infinite Variety exhibition; New older playwrights
- Page 23 Book, theatre and film reviews

FROM THE CHAIR.....

Jo Walker



Dear Friends

I'm looking forward to seeing members at our day conference in London on 22 July, which will also be the occasion for the Association's AGM and the Frank Glendenning memorial lecture. We are delighted that this year's lecture will be given by Dr Alexandra Withnall, of Warwick University and we look forward to her reflections based on a long involvement with research and policy on later life learning. See page 7 for booking details.

Having held recent conferences in Lancaster and Leicester, we hoped that a day in London would be accessible for many. It will be a day of treats and celebration: our theme on storytelling as a potent means of learning will be demonstrated in a number of ways; our venue in Camden Council chamber will afford a dramatic space for presentations; the new International Journal of Education and Ageing will be launched; and we'll finish with a cream tea. Don't miss it!

Please continue to pass the word on about the new Journal and, of course, register your own subscription. AEA members rates are very good value for a periodical of this quality. Check it out again on the website at <http://www.associationforeducationandageing.org/pages/journal.html>. A summary of some of the articles in Issue 1 can be found on page 3 of this digest. Our plan, having published the three issues of the first volume in hardcopy, is to also make it (and subsequent volumes) available on-line to subscribers during 2011. Our website will be developed accordingly over the rest of this year, to create a members'/subscribers' area and enhanced facilities for interactivity, such as discussion groups. Do let us know if you would value any particular additions to website activities.

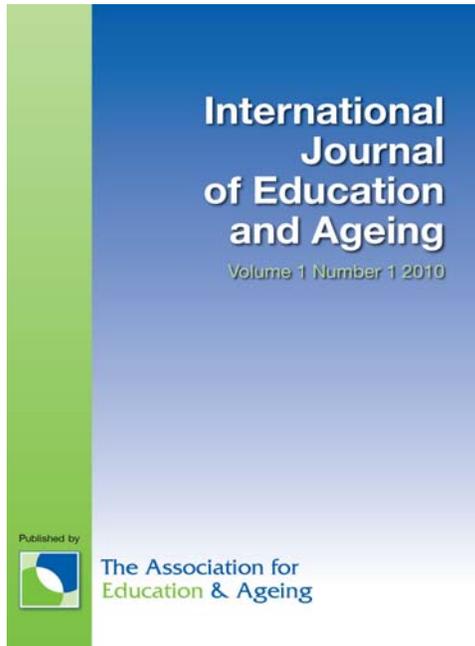
Members' news about participation at meetings, conferences or learning activities and projects is always welcome. Let us know your plans, so you can take some AEA publicity, and share with us your learning experiences and outcomes afterwards. These can be written up either in the Digest or the Journal so that the benefit can be increased.

Have a great summer.

Reports on recent conferences and further conference news can be found on page 7.

If you are planning to attend a conference and would like AEA promotional materials to distribute there, please contact Jim Soulsby on jim.soulsby@btinternet.com or Carol Allen on aeasecretary@googlemail.com

NEWS ITEMS



*After a five year interval AEA is once again publishing its journal, under the new title, the **International Journal of Education and Ageing**. It will be announced to the academic press at the time of our conference on 22nd July and the first issue will be going out to subscribers within the next few weeks, with two further issues in the first volume available before the end of the calendar year. **Professor Keith Percy**, who is one of the journal's three editors, gives here a taste of some of the many and varied articles from both the UK and overseas that can be found in the first issue.*

The IJEA will publish original research, scholarship, analysis and critical discussion concerned with learning in later life, ageing, education and older people. It will be inter-disciplinary and will cover theory, practice, policy and innovation and aims for a truly wide

readership of those concerned with older people. Issue 1 contains an introductory editorial essay, five substantial articles, four shorter articles and book reviews.

An article by Chris Phillipson is concerned with active ageing and the possible future role of universities with regard to older learners. Phillipson concludes that, given demographic, economic and societal trends, higher education in particular could secure major benefits for older adults and for society if it introduces some changes. He outlines what these should be. An empirical study by Andrea Creech and her colleagues investigates a group of 131 older learners at university and explores the personal and social costs and benefits for them of studying in higher education. Theoretical constructs of 'self determination' and 'the will to learn' are used to interpret the key aspirations of these older learners.

Tom Schuller analyses NIACE's recent independent inquiry into lifelong learning and its implications for learning in later life. The report's two pivotal recommendations are that lifelong learning policy should be based on a new life-course model with four key stages and that national financial resources spent on lifelong learning should be re-balanced fairly across these four stages. The third and fourth stages of life (being 50–75 years and over 75 years) would be major beneficiaries of such a re-distribution.

Malcolm Johnson's article is concerned with the end of life care of older people in residential /social care and nursing

homes and the training of staff. Although many members of the staff in these homes have relatively low levels of education, Johnson shows they already have experience, skills and values which, with short spells of training, will enable them to deliver end of life care, which respects and ensures the dignity and individuality of the dying.

An article by Bryce Dickson and Lisa Glennon addresses the significant area of age-based discrimination in the provision of services, including educational services. Fee concessions for older people participating in educational courses have been perversely threatened by legislation against age discrimination. Considering particularly the 2010 Equality Act, Dickson and Glennon propose criteria to be used in drawing up such legislation, which would take account of the particular needs of older persons, promote social inclusion and among other things make sage-related concessionary fees lawful for later life learning courses.

The first of four shorter articles concerned with policy and practice in this issue is an editorial essay by Jim Soulsby, which introduces three papers on the place of learning in later life in the EU Grundtvig programme. The first, by Anne-Sophie Parent, discusses future rationales for the Grundtvig programme, highlighting intergenerational work and volunteering opportunities for older people. Carmen Stadelhofer and colleagues then outline the activities of one Grundtvig-funded network of seniors' organisations from Danube region countries and a subsequent contribution of the network to a European Commission consultation. A paper by Jumbo Klercq is concerned

with volunteering networks and active citizenship and the contributions of the Grundtvig programme.

*All this and more, as they say. Details of how to subscribe to the **IJEA** and the procedure for contributing to future issues can be found on our website at <http://www.associationforeducationandageing.org/pages/journal.html>*

Obituary – Robin Gray

*Robin's many friends in AEA were saddened to hear of his death earlier this year. One of those is **Howard Gilbert**, who pays tribute here to his friend and former colleague.*

ROBIN GRAY died on 20th March 2010 in Millom, Cumbria, after a short illness. His happy, generous, and positive life was celebrated later by his wife Joan, his five children, many relatives, and friends and former colleagues.

Robin's life profession was as an Advisor for Adult and Community Learning. He was one of a strong team with the Lancashire Education Authority that gained a regional and national reputation for excellence. His particular strengths were in tutor training and the field of innovation. He was a dedicated professional and had a commitment to the wider field of national engagement. He frequently argued that Education is, and always must be, a "seamless robe" initially woven in childhood, but continued throughout life. He was sometime Chair of the Association for Adult Education (AAE) and steered their submission to the Russell Committee. The subsequent Report in 1973 embodied many of the AAE's ideas.

Robin had many professional colleagues and associates during his career. Arthur Stock remembers with much affection his capacity for lateral thinking. While team members, and colleagues, might struggle for a solution to an issue, his sometimes eccentric, idiosyncratic approach touched the nub of the matter and pointed to a resolution that found common acceptance.

Undoubtedly Robin's immediate post-war education at Oxford significantly influenced his analytic capabilities. After war-time military service he went to Keble College where he studied Classical Greats. He had a life-long love of the English language, enjoying the precision of statement of which it is capable.

However, Robin was much more than the sum of his professional life. He became a "tentative sailor" in Greek Mediterranean waters, sailing with his friend, Arthur. Much more than this he learned, in mid-life, the skill and art of ski-ing, first at Aviemore and then on more testing slopes from a family cottage in the Alps. In this he was a "natural" continuing to enjoy the sport during his early retirement years.

At home on the Hill of Millom he practiced and became an expert gardener, opening his garden annually under the National Gardens Scheme. This he continued in his retirement when, downsizing from the family home he created a new garden, opening that as before. In this part of life he sustained some of his former professional connections through membership of the Association. He will be remembered as a lively, articulate person, an occasional raconteur and the good professional colleague that he was.

Robin and I met less frequently after retirement. Arthur Stock, former Director of NIACE has generously added to my knowledge of Robin; I am grateful to him for that.

In this age of electronic information gathering and entertainment, it is easy to overlook the pleasure to be found in reading a good book. **Lynne Wealleans**, Positive Ageing Manager at the Beth Johnson Foundation has news of the success of **StokeReads**, a project funded through the Learning Revolution Transformation Fund to promote reading as a learning and leisure activity among older learners.



Volunteers training as facilitators for the StokeReads project

Funding for this was secured by Stoke-on-Trent's Libraries and Archives service to work in partnership with the Beth Johnson Foundation (BJF) and the local Primary Care Trust (PCT) to deliver the project, whose aim is to establish a network of reading groups across the city. These groups are facilitated by trained volunteers, who are supported by the library service to set up and run groups which are primarily targeted at involving older people and people with mental health issues.

The library service promotes reading as an enjoyable, informative and entertaining way to enhance health and well-being. BJJ has long promoted access to learning opportunities as a means for people to build confidence and to feel more included.

We thought recruiting volunteers might be a challenge but in fact we were over subscribed and despite quite intensive training nobody dropped out and nearly all of the volunteers are now running a group, including one here at BJJ. The reading groups are meeting in a range of settings including libraries, day care centres for older people and people experiencing mental health issues and a local care home for people with dementia.

The key thing about these groups is that the facilitators and/or group members choose text, read it aloud in the group and then have a discussion about the contents. The range of texts chosen is as wide as the number of reading group members and is at times quite challenging.

Although the funding through the Transformation Fund ceased on 31st March this year, the library service is continuing to support the groups and volunteers and so the project is still continuing. Although it is early days, the volunteer facilitators have reported a high level of satisfaction with the support received both in training and in running the groups and they will be central to measuring and reporting on the impact on group members of their involvement.

New Members

Members who have joined the association during the last quarter continue to reflect the wide ranging nature of AEA membership. Welcome to Maura MaGinn from Armagh in Northern Ireland; Lois Gladdish, who brings to our table her valuable experience from her many years with working with NIACE; and Henry Lim from Singapore, a founder member of the Gerontological Society there, who writes on page 17 about the promotion of active ageing policies in Singapore.



Camden Town Hall, venue for AEA's 25th anniversary conference, AGM and this year's Frank Glendenning lecture – see next page

CONFERENCE NEWS AND REPORTS

Official Notice of the Association for Education and Ageing AGM

The Annual General Meeting of the Association for Education and Ageing will be held at 4.00 pm on Thursday 22nd July 2010 at:

Council Chamber,
Camden Town Hall,
Euston Rd (entrance on Judd Street)
London WC1H 9JE

If you are unable to attend and would like to present apologies please contact the Secretary on aeasecretary@googlemail.com or ring Carol on 020 7385 4641

As has been our practice in previous years, the AGM will be held immediately after our **Annual Conference** and will be followed by the **Frank Glendenning Lecture**. For our 25th anniversary we have an interestingly innovative programme. The theme is Storytelling in Later Life and presenters include Eirwen Malin, of NIACE Dysgu Cymru; Helen Leech and Christopher Smith of Open Age on Storytelling in Care Settings and a presentation of storytelling through dance, song and movement by the Camden Chinese Community Centre.

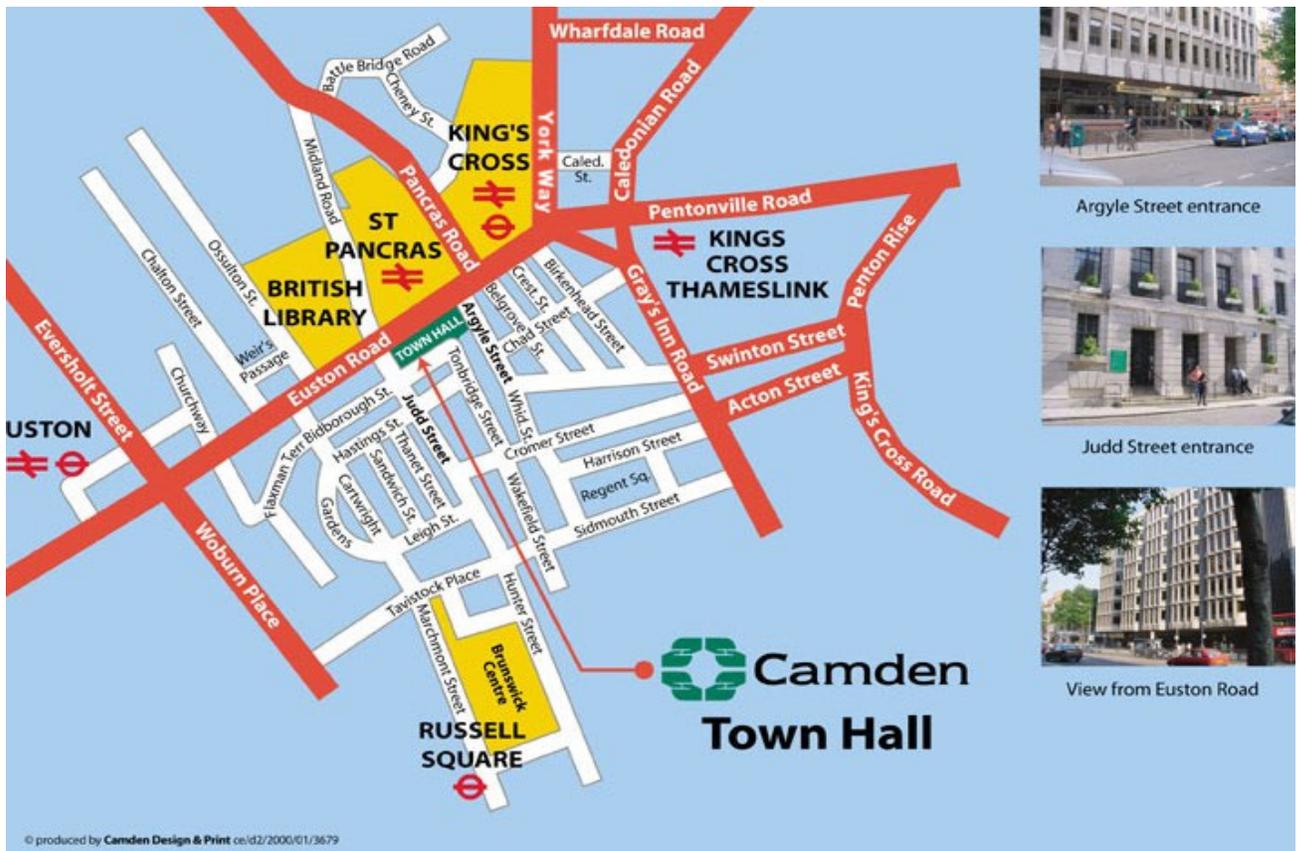
Arrival and registration are at 1.30 pm and the conference proper starts at 1.50 pm. There will be a short discussion and summing up at 3.20 pm, followed by a cream tea for conference delegates, all at the very reasonable price of £5 for AEA members, £7 for non members.

The AGM will take place at 4.00 pm, followed by this year's Frank Glendenning lecture, to be delivered by Dr Alex Withnall on the stimulating and not often discussed subject of "Exploring the Gender Agenda in Later Life Learning".

Both the AGM and the lecture are free and the lecture is open to the public. Further details of the programme and a booking form can be found on our website at http://www.associationforeducationandageing.org/pages/aea_events.html

AEA looks forward to welcoming many of you to the event, which is taking place in the Council Chamber (Judd Street entrance). Nearest tube station to the town hall is King's Cross and there are also plenty of buses that go along the Euston Road. A map of the venue can be found on the next page.

Thursday 22nd July 2010 1.30 pm Camden Town Hall.



*Turning to other conference news, Malcolm Ball attended the NIACE, Adult Learners' Policy Conference on **Prospects for Lifelong Learning in Challenging Times**, which was held in May at the Mermaid Theatre in London. One of the speakers was the then newly appointed Minister of State, Department of BIS, John Hayes.*

This report is a collection of impressions built out of the formal presentations and informal discussions. Although the conference was well attended, there was an understandably minor presence from the North of England. My reason for attending was to gain some understanding of thinking about the future prospects for Lifelong Learning following the election of a new government.

The programme for the conference was organised around the recommendations of the IFFLL Report *Learning Through Life*, published in 2009. (See Jonathan Hughes' review of this on page 12) The report was charged with offering '...an authoritative and coherent strategic framework for lifelong learning in the UK.' A key recommendation is to recognise a new lifecourse, which extends beyond age 75. 'A genuine lifelong view means that a four-stage model – up to 25, 25-50, 50-75 and 75+ – should be used as the basis for a coherent systemic approach to lifelong learning.' (Report, 2009, p.1). The opening session identified issues associated with the 'fourth age of learning', 75plus. The second presentation raised issues associated with the third age of learning, 50-75.

The third presentation addressed the second age of learning, 25-50 and the final formal presentation was focused on the first age of learning, up to 25.

This method of organising the strategic issues - who is engaged in LLL; who is excluded and why; how do we effectively improve participation equitably - brings information into consideration in an interesting way. It prompted me to pose the following questions:

Should an educational provider organise its curriculum offer to reflect the four ages of learning?

Is it helpful and informative to organise its record of activity in this way?

Are there any benefits from using this model to drive strategic planning?

Will NIACE have any success in persuading policy makers and implementers to adopt this model and if so is this an argument for acting in anticipation?

I found of particular interest the idea of building learning partnerships with the managers of public spaces such as museums and libraries to promote decentred learning activity, which in turn raises the question of how can these resources be systematically accessed to support the 3rd and 4th age curriculum? In a discussion about the reluctance of the 4th age to engage in learning it occurred to me that 'By preparing for tomorrow we can enjoy today'. In his presentation Tom Wilson (Director TUC Unionlearn) included the following points: 85% of the funding for learning goes to the first age. This group is important but the funding here could be reduced and reallocated across the other ages of learning; Employers' receive 3 billion in tax relief on money spent on

learning, but there is no available information as to which learning area this is. The issue is being researched and will be reported on at the TUC Congress in September 2010. The new right to request 'time to learn' is being effectively used by employees and could be important in building the demand for future learning, especially for those who traditionally get least.



The Rt Hon John Hayes

The formal presentation by John Hayes, Minister of State, Department of BIS (Vince Cable is the Secretary of State, BIS), was his first as Minister - he had been in his post then for approximately one week. He was only present for his contribution and he did not take any questions.

Earlier in the conference Tom Wilson had mentioned that a new major research project on union workplace learning activity and employers' activity had been released and that both Vince Cable and John Hayes had asked for copies and suggested they should discuss this with the TUC. In addition in the May issue of *Adults Learning* there is an interview with David Cameron. John Hayes underlined the budget deficit as an important factor in developing policy. He explained that 'learning is a vital part of our lives', and 'adult education brings hope and enriches lives.' He continued in this vein to sketch out a liberal vision

of the purpose and value of adult learning. In doing so he referred to a number of key thinkers. Post-compulsory learning should be of value to us for instrumental, vocational and liberal purposes. There is a place for forms of accreditation and for non-accredited learning. The values he expressed bore a striking similarity to the Introduction, by David Blunkett, to *The Learning Age* (1998). He concluded his remarks with the promise that he will be the champion for adult learning in government.

(The full text of this speech can be

accessed at

<http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/nia-ce-conference>)

Several of the conference speakers, including Tom Wilson argued for treating the government with an open mind. Other speakers were optimistic that there may be opportunities for lifelong learning with this government that had not been available in the recent past. In contributions from the floor and in informal discussions between the sessions, one got the impression that participants were anticipating the decline of the 'target culture' and a new looser relationship with central and regional bodies. Expectation was that the emphasis would move to local management. Meeting local needs would be the principal activity and measure of performance. Managers would have knowledge of their resources, would conduct their own needs analysis and set their objectives. It is anticipated that managers may have some authority to manage financial resources across headings and not be restricted to narrow financial budget criteria.

Alan Tuckett gave the final remarks for the day and underlined the optimism which had featured in most of the contributions.

*The sun shone in Glasgow on the delegates to an upbeat half-day conference **A New Age for Learning** held on 16 June at Strathclyde University, hosted by the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL). Enjoying both the conference and the sunshine was **Jo Walker**.*

Sub-titled *Future Directions for Learning in Later Life*, the programme featured two guest speakers and two senior members of the Centre, who each contributed a view on the current and future prospects of learning in later life. Networking was encouraged over lunch, tea and a drinks reception, so that participants from the teaching and learning communities, as well as from other interested organisations, could share their stories.



Lesley Hart

Lesley Hart, current head of Centre and past director of the hugely successful Senior Studies Institute (part of the Centre for Lifelong Learning) is to be leaving the University shortly and so permitted herself some brief observations on the development of later life learning as a significant activity in Strathclyde – one that has not really been rivalled since it began in the early 1990s anywhere else in the UK. She recalled that the recipe for success had started with enthusiasm and vision, shared with key people in the University, and had evolved with the decision to supply the kinds of learning that older learners actually wanted rather than the programmes that academics could offer or thought should be required. With the addition of persistence and adaptability through changing circumstances, a successful programme with many related projects and activities was created, involving thousands of older learners.

Lesley felt that now, with the ‘thundercloud’ of public expenditure cuts and less disposable income now approaching, the older learning ‘market’ would have to adapt yet again. New strategic and economic challenges will need new learning responses; ‘retirement’ increasingly includes work of various kinds; ageing could benefit from technological advances and skills. There is still plenty of ‘useful learning’ (the original mission of Strathclyde University) to be developed and offered to older learners.

Kali Lightfoot, a previous contributor to Strathclyde conferences, had travelled from Maine to remind us of the successful Senior College model for later life learning that flourishes in America, often in the shape of Lifelong

Learning Institutes attached to universities. Kali is Executive Director of the national resource centre that supports a particular network of such Institutes, sponsored by the Osher Foundation. The Osher Institutes for Lifelong Learning (OLLI) now number over 100 and cater for 85 thousand older learners. Courses are typically 6-13 weeks and are led by staff or by volunteer tutors (like U3As) and programmes vary according to local community needs and cultures. Kali’s resource centre supports them through curriculum and methodological advice, by collecting learner testimonies and running conferences and training. See www.osher.net for more information and to view the LLI Review, containing articles, essays, interviews and poetry.

Two further excellent presentations were made by Baillie Liz Cameron, Chair of Culture and Sport for Glasgow City, and Brian McKechnie, Knowledge Exchange Manager for CLL and Director of the Scottish Centre for Intergenerational Practice. Both spoke with passion and from their great experience of making learning more accessible to ‘ordinary’ people in later life, especially those who had not enjoyed many learning opportunities in the past. Their themes could be summarised as to do with excellence and inclusion – two overused words which were not out of place on this occasion. Many projects and activities, too numerous to describe here, were outlined.

As we were all wondering how such good practice could be replicated elsewhere, we were reminded of Lesley’s recipe for success: enthusiasm, key supporters, listening to the learners, persistence and adaptability.

Call for Papers

Submissions for symposia, papers and posters are invited for the next Annual Conference of the British Psychological Society Psychology of Education Section ***Never too early, never too late: LEARNING FOR LIFE***, which is being held on 12th to 14th November 2010 at Kents Hill Park Conference Centre, Milton Keynes (conveniently located within minutes of central Milton Keynes and the M1)

The theme of the conference is learning across the lifespan. Empirical, theoretical and review material, as well as work in progress are all encouraged. Paper sessions and symposia will be organised around themes representing a wide variety of educational disciplines and contexts. Keynote Speakers are Professor Peter Pumfrey, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Manchester, who will be talking about *Royal Roads and cul-de-sacs': Psychology's role in education across the lifespan* and Professor Tom

Billington, Professor of Educational and Child Psychology, University of Sheffield, who will be delivering the 2010 Vernon Wall Lecture on *Knowledge, experience and learning: constructing research and practice*.

Abstract submissions (300 words), general enquiries, and those regarding bursaries can be addressed to:

Dr Andrea Creech, Faculty of Policy and Society, Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL.
A.Creech@ioe.ac.uk

Closing date for submissions is Monday 16th August 2010

Make a note too for next year of the **Asian Pacific Ageing Conference (APAC)** which is being held on 24th to 26th March 2011. The theme of the Conference will be *Dignity & Grace of Ageing*. Further details will be released later at www.gs.org.sg

News of further conferences will be released via the AEA e-mail network as and when they are received.

FEATURES

*The NIACE report **Learning Through Life** by Tom Schuller and David Watson, which formed the discussion basis for the conference, reviewed by Malcolm Ball on page 8, calls for a rethink of the way Government, employers and individuals spend an estimated £55 billion every year on lifelong learning. Dr. Jonathan Hughes of The Open University highlights some key recommendations.*

This book comprehensively reviews the key issues facing adult learning, emphasising (page 8) that “the right to learn throughout life is a human right.” which is “intimately connected with the achievement of freedom of choice, health and well-being, dignity, cultural identity and democratic tolerance.” Lifelong learning is seen (page 12) as “an essential and fundamental component of fairness in society” because it redresses “initial and recurring disadvantages.” This vision is accompanied by an understanding of the

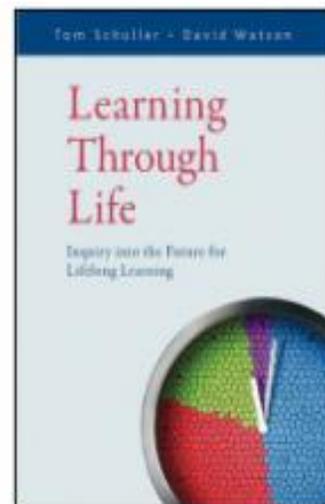
impacts of the ageing demographic of the UK and the changes in the way we enter and leave work.

Schuller and Watson's analysis stems from their basic proposal (page 83) that "we should view the life course as having 4 stages, up to 25, 25-50, 50-75 and 75+". They argue that this model provides the basis of a new contract between generations that "opens up prospects for a better balance in the distribution of resources and opportunities." Currently, expenditure on learning across the life course is distributed unfairly. The average amount spent for someone over 75 is £60; for someone aged between 50 and 74, it is £86. In comparison, £8,045 is spent on someone aged 18-24. The book argues that this spending should be rebalanced, so that there is a small, but significant, shift in favour of those in the Third and the Fourth stages of life.

Schuller and Watson argue (page 95) that in the Third stage, "most of us make the transition ... from paid employment to retirement." They continue (page 97) that it is this group "whose numbers are ... growing more than any other ... It is this life stage where most change in self-perception and social position has occurred over recent decades and where the largest source of potential skills and capabilities resides." The opportunities in this stage should help people carry on learning at work and deliver a 'citizen's curriculum' to support civic engagement, financial literacy, personal health and digital capability. For people in the Fourth stage (75 and over), issues of health and dependency are vital as well as the need for "positive opportunities for innovation and meaningful learning" (page 99).

Schuller and Watson suggest different entitlements which apply to people of all ages. Particularly imaginative is the idea that everyone would have an Individual Learning Account topped up at the beginning of each decade of life in order (page 133) "to remind people of their continued potential for learning". They also recommend "a stronger entitlement" of a double top-up at 50 to signal that this potential carries on into the Third stage.

I have two concluding thoughts. First, that this book should be seen as a rallying call for any one seeking to justify the value of learning throughout life or looking for ways to improve the offer to adults. Second, is my concern that the cuts in public spending will mean that this review's recommendations will be forgotten just when they could have been most useful.



Learning through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning by Tom Schuller and David Watson, 2009, Leicester: NIACE/IFLL, 272pp ISBN 978 1 86201 433 6 £11.99

Birkbeck College has a long and honourable history in adult education, stretching back to 2nd December 1823, when around 2000 people flocked to the Crown and Anchor Tavern on the Strand to witness Dr George Birkbeck and his supporters launch London's first ever Mechanics' Institution dedicated to the education of working people.



George Birkbeck

*It was a pioneer of further education for women, admitting its first female students in 1830 and in 1920 Birkbeck became a School of the University of London dedicated to the teaching of evening and part-time students. Another pioneer in the field was the London Society for the Extension of University Education, founded in 1876 with the aim of encouraging working people to undertake higher education. In 1903 it became the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of London and it was integrated into Birkbeck in 1988, later becoming the Faculty for Life-Long Learning. The Department as such has now gone and **Howard Gilbert** mourns **Extra Mural: The End of the Road.***

“Who’ll toll the bell?” “I” said the Owl, “With my book and cowl, I’ll toll the Bell”.

The last issue of the Life Course Development Association’s Newsletter

noted the Faculty for Life-Long Learning’s “dispersal”. There is much change in our society, some of it possibly long overdue, but sight can be lost of history, value, and essential pathways that (in this case) enable adult personal education growth and development. . The “dispersal” ends the last vestige of what was the University of London’s Department of Extra Mural Studies.

One unusual aspect of the Department’s enormous value was the part-time and evening course road it provided by which unqualified adults – those who left school without qualification, or were failed by the system, – could begin their journey towards qualification in a chosen field. It appears to be the case that, as the result of the dispersal, an important road – and a critical one for those who have taken it in the past – may now be closed off.

The Department’s roots were planted before World War I, when universities were very few in number. Between the wars they developed extra mural or extension programmes purposely to bring standards of university education to many more people. Uniquely, London’s Department created its own range of Certificate and Diploma examination courses, set to first degree standards. This was controversial. The policy was even questioned by some of the staff. Nevertheless the examination provision was continued and developed. A final manifestation came with the M.Sc in Life Course Development during the early years of the Department’s assimilation into Birkbeck College. Alongside this examination work the Department established a wide range of popular courses in the Arts,

Literature, Music, Environmental and Physical Sciences, Geography and Political issues of the times that were free from examination requirements, but encouraged systematic study.

Much of this rich and varied provision was centrally planned. However outside the immediate Department in and around Russell Square, a great deal was hosted by a variety of statutory and voluntary institutions, throughout London and the surrounding region. Local colleges, adult education centres and voluntary committees bid for and were authorised as centres for this work.

Immediately after World War II many of the Certificate examination courses were filled by ex-Servicemen and women who valued the pathway offered for entry into higher and further education. Many hundreds of students achieved Certificates and Diplomas of high quality that facilitated their academic or/and professional advancement. The demand continued into the 60s, 70s and 80s. Overall between twenty and thirty thousand adults benefited annually from the Department's broad range of programmes.

Government steadily withdrew direct financial support for Extra-Mural Departments some twenty to twenty-five years ago. However most universities continued to fund provision. National policies since the 1980s have progressively squeezed residual financial support and now, quietly and almost without public realisation, a major provider in this field, the long established London Extra-Mural Department (renamed Life-Long Learning), part of Birkbeck College, has gone.

It is to be wondered whether servicemen and women returning today to "Civvy Street" after the wars and peace-keeping operations of the past thirty years will find a similar open admission road to higher education. Or that numbers of disaffected post-school leavers, will also be able to discover such open direct entry options. Where have we got to in the year that the National Theatre stages *Pitmen Painters*, the story of the WEA Ashington (Durham) Miners' Art Group, during the 1930s?. Not perhaps an entirely apposite analogy but an appropriate sharp pointer. Surely as a society we need much more than a skills agenda and part-time programmes of closed entry to university education?



Extra mural students at Bristol University in the twenties

What is Birkbeck College with its foundation principles, and inheritance of the Extra-Mural Studies tradition doing about it? Surely it should be thinking seriously about ways by which the roadway to open, direct entry can be restored? More such avenues are needed to foster a Lifelong Learning Society, not less.

*Anne Jamieson, Reader in Education and Life Course Studies at Birkbeck replies to Howard's question **What is Birkbeck doing?***

Thank you Howard for highlighting the plight of Extra- Mural studies in London, the biggest, but by no means the only department to suffer the consequences of many years of adverse government policies. I completely agree with you in lamenting the dominance of the skills agenda and the downgrading of the broader aspects of education and lifelong learning.

Since you conclude by asking what Birkbeck is doing, I thought I would take the opportunity to respond. The short answer is that Birkbeck is fighting for its survival. The challenge is enormous. Funding for courses that are not 'assessed' has long gone, and we lost a large number of our students – especially older learners – in that process. We adapted by introducing assessment on courses and by incorporating nearly all courses or 'modules' into an award programme, i.e. the Extra Mural Certificates and Diplomas, subsequently converted to Certificates of Higher Education in line with the national framework of Qualifications. Many students would still enrol on individual modules for general interest and personal development. However, losing funding for those with existing qualifications cut the income from these courses by half overnight. It must be remembered that those attracted to study in later life tend to be already well educated. I agree that this should not exclude them from continued participation – indeed, I am hoping to do lots of courses in my retirement. Alas,

no government is likely to want to put scarce HE resources into that.

The funding council's response to Birkbeck's plight was to give us a three-year safety net, protecting our funding. However, among the strings attached to this were that during those three years Birkbeck must a) increase fees for such courses to be in line with degree level fees, b) increase recruitment of students without higher education qualification ('widening participation'), c) increase 'employer engagement', d) create 'progression' pathways from Certificate through to PhD study.

It was the last condition which led to a re-structuring and integration of the lifelong learning programmes, i.e. Certificates, with the mainstream college, so that now, for example, all History programmes are in one location, irrespective of level of study. That is what is what you refer to when you talk of 'dispersal'. This does not necessarily entail losing the certificates previously offered by Lifelong learning faculty. In practice though, financial pressure has forced Birkbeck to increase fees for those with prior HE qualifications and I fear that many retired learners will not be able to afford them.

So right now I'm afraid Birkbeck is focusing on staying alive, by increasing recruitment of undergraduates and Foundation Degree students. It remains to be seen whether we will reach our very high targets, turning round our financial position and enabling us yet again perhaps to think about subsidising extra-mural type, low cost provision. In view of this week's government budget 'promises', you can draw your own

conclusions. But we remain optimistic. Watch this space.



Henry Lim

*The importance of changing attitudes towards the ageing process is something of which people in Singapore are very aware. **Henry Lim** is a founder member of Singapore's long established Gerontological Society, a board member of the local Council for Third Age and has been actively involved in voluntary Community Services there, including work with older people since 1983. He writes here about **Active Ageing in Singapore.***

In Singapore, we are living longer and longer. On the whole we are fitter, younger looking and more involved in the community. The option of staying independent is now a reality for many of us. We have comfort and amenity in our homes as never before. Does this mean a change in the way we experience ageing? Is it now a golden time when we can feel increasing fulfilment, a stage where we have time to draw breath and experience the pleasure of life? Our Council for Third Age is doing a great job in promoting active ageing among our seniors by providing them with a variety of interesting wellness activities in the six dimensions – social,

intellectual, physical, vocational, emotional and spiritual.

The reality is that many people do not cope well with the changes that occur with ageing – the change in physical function, the change in daily activities that occur with retirement, the change in social environment and perceived social state. To what extent is this the inevitable response to loss, to what extent are we failing to adapt to change? If successful ageing is achieved by successfully responding to change, then there is a lot we can do in our own lives to ensure us.

Today, many organisations and individuals are working hard to promote the realities of ageing; the fact that for the majority people ageing is not a time of decline, depression and inactivity. Most older people today are in good health and lead very satisfying lives. This means the term “ageing” itself is not very meaningful, as just knowing someone's chronological age says nothing about their health, personality, attitudes, or abilities. When we speak about adapting to ageing, what we really mean is adapting to the changes that commonly accompany age.

Ageing is a positive experience for many people. Freed from previous worries and responsibility, many older people are doing things they have wanted to do for years and are finding talents and skills they never knew they possessed. Adapting to ageing can be an opportunity to enjoy life more fully, perhaps in a slower way, but often also in a more satisfying way.

Dealing with change is something we all have to face periodically. For older

people, changes within and without may vary considerably. Factors such as health and wealth, which are influenced by earlier events, can have an enormous effect on one's circumstances.

However, the ability to adapt to change can be an even greater predictor of well-being. Change is a process of quitting one state for another – a process which often requires letting go as well as embracing the new. The grief that can accompany letting go has to be experienced before the excitement and opportunity of the new can be enjoyed.

Although there are many sources of help in the community, it is important that an individual taps into their own resources in the process of change and it is also important to realise that acquiring new skills requires effort and practice. Here are some useful points to remember when encountering a major, stressful change:

- Decide what really has to change and what is negotiable
- Accept the reality that others may not react to change in the same way you do
- Gently move yourself out of your comfort zone
- Practice thinking positive thoughts
- Accept that change is inevitable and constant, like the sea and the sky
- Trust in yourself

Our Gerontological Society will celebrate its Silver Jubilee soon. We will be organising an Asian Pacific Ageing Conference (APAC) from 24th to 26th March 2011. The theme of the Conference will be *Dignity & Grace of Ageing*. More details will be released nearer the date of the event. We would be delighted to welcome you to this Conference and to enjoy the hospitality of Singapore. For more information, kindly keep an eye on our website at www.gs.org.sg

The Association for Education and Ageing

Patrons: Baroness Sally Greengross, Mr Derek Legge, Professor Arthur Stock, Professor Brian Groombridge

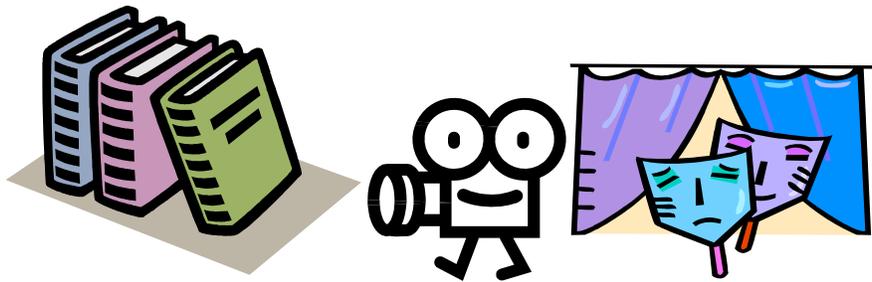
Chair: Jo Walker, jo_walker26@hotmail.com Tel: 01483 484909

Secretary/Digest editor: Carol Allen, 132 Dawes Rd, London SW6 7EF aeasecretary@googlemail.com
Tel: 020 7385 4641

Treasurer: Ron Speight ronspeight2003@yahoo.com

Development Office: Jim Soulsby jim.soulsby@btinternet.com

Elected members:, David Crossan, Mervyn Eastman, Trish Hafford-Letchfield, Jonathan Hughes, Anne Jamieson, Dr Alex McMinn, Carlie Newman, Keith Percy, Dr Alex Withnall



AEA DIGEST CULTURE SECTION

*One of Boris Johnson's responsibilities as Mayor of London is to encourage the development of cultural activities of all kinds, both in the capital itself and the 32 boroughs. Earlier this summer Brian Groombridge was invited to take part in a conference at City Hall on May 21 to discuss **The Mayor of London's Cultural Strategy** and how it relates to older people.*

The Mayor's powers in this area are somewhat restricted. Whereas for example he directly controls Transport for London (TfL), he can only have an indirect influence on cultural activities, but he is well placed to see the whole picture - all the way from, say, the film and video industries, which are of great economic importance to the capital, to opportunities available in particular boroughs, such as opportunities for children to learn to play a musical instrument, which vary from borough to borough.

The Mayor's cultural strategy for 2012 and beyond is currently being reviewed and renewed. The purpose of this conference was to give older people the opportunity to ensure that their interests are reflected in the revised policy. They were represented by the London Older People's Strategies Group, set up

expressly to lobby the GLA on a range of issues. About 100 members were there, chaired by LOPSG's own chair, Eileen McNally. I was one of three speakers. The main contributor was Tom Campbell, a member of the Mayor's team, who outlined the draft strategy. Paul Margrave talked about the Capital Age Festival, which is devoted to older people and the arts and is a major item in the Coin Street South Bank summer programme, and I was asked to speak on the subject of *Creativity and Wellbeing of Older People*. A brief announcement was also made by LOPSG Treasurer Mark Windisch to the effect that, as the event was taking place on Silver Surfers Day (21st May), there would be two introductory sessions for anyone in the audience who was not yet online to try their hand.

Campbell had two half-hour sessions. Margrave and I each had 30 minutes - quite a challenge, as there also had to be time for the audience to join in. I gave a few brief examples - all from London - of ways in which older people fitted the Mayor's terms of reference, starting with *Maman* at Tate Modern, which is just along the Embankment from City Hall, and now celebrating its tenth anniversary. *Maman* was that amazing spider - 500 feet tall - sculpted by the

late Louise Bourgeois for the Turbine Hall when Tate Modern first opened (I had a dominating photograph of the sculpture projected in the hall). Bourgeois was at the time nearly 90 and a very experienced artist.



Maman by Louise Bourgeois when exhibited at the Tate Modern

Another example I used, the *Singing for the Brain* groups, provided a very strong contrast. These groups enable older people afflicted with Alzheimer's to sing and dance with other older people - usually the spouses they enjoy being with but no longer recognise. So far the 47 groups in the UK include four in London (two in action, two still being set up). And of course I talked about the U3A. When I asked how many of the audience were in a U3A, well over half the hands went up. There are U3As in every London borough, and I had time to mention Richmond's member, Edna Ansdel, who only took up photography when she was over 70 but has been a finalist three times for the Over 60s Art Exhibition in the Bankside Gallery.

I just managed to fit in a reference to research at the University of London's Institute of Education about "the role of music in older people's lives". Professor Susan Hallam has chosen Westminster's Adult Education Service for one of her case studies, and the special courses for

older people at the Guildhall School of Music as another, with the Sage, Gateshead providing her third study. This is one of five interdisciplinary projects in the latest New Dynamics of Ageing programme, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and four other research councils. Another of the five NDA projects, based at Brunel University, West London, is about older people and fiction (See <http://www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/>). Then it was the audience's turn - with a particular focus on the U3A, but several people approached me afterwards, including one woman, keen to know more about Singing for the Brain for a friend who might benefit.

As some readers will know already, the free Coin Street Festival events are held on the South Bank each summer in and around Bernie Spain Gardens, next to Oxo Tower Wharf. Musicians and performers from around the world entertain with a wide range of genres and styles. Paul Margrave told us that this year's Capital Age Festival (2pm - 6pm, Saturday 10th July 2010) will be celebrating the lives of older people and their families with live performances, storytelling, visual arts, a tea tent and much more.

*The Mayor's Cultural Strategy under the title **Cultural Metropolis** was published in June and is available for public consultation during the period 21st June to 9th September.*

The document can be downloaded at <http://www.london.gov.uk/get-involved/consultations/current-consultations/cultural-strategy> where a consultation questionnaire is also available to complete.



**Blue Hawaii – scene from *Paradise*
Photo by Laurence Burns**

*1st Framework Theatre is a production company, which approaches the arts from a community intergenerational angle. They have been enjoying great success with their touring production of the show **Paradise**.*

The project started back in 2006, with the making of sound recordings with people from community centres, schools, convents, markets and many other places in five London boroughs about their many different ideas of Paradise. This was then turned into a show – a forty-minute visual evocation of those ideas mounted in a fairground tent with the interviewees’ voices heard while a troupe of actors, all over the age of 60, created through dance, physical theatre, tableaux and conjuring tricks a series of short and witty theatrical scenes. Ideas of Paradise were many and varied from the Iranian Muslim, who described Paradise as “The sanctuary of all the goodness and all the things that we live for, hope for wish for as human beings” to the more earthly woman who yearned for “A box of Black Magic chocolates and a bottle of brandy” and the nun, whose idea of heaven was “a nice cup of tea and a biscuit”. The show toured London, and was seen last year at the Capital Arts Festival. In the audience was Berlin Cultural Programmer Rudolf

Brunger, who invited the company to create a new version of the show with a joint Berlin/London intergenerational team to be performed at the *Long Night of Theatre Festival & EU Day of Solidarity Between Generations* in Berlin, in the course of which new sections of soundtrack describing Paradise as it occurs to Berliners were edited into the existing London show. A documentary and other material can be found on the 1st Framework website at

<http://www.1stframework.org/paradise.asp>, where you can also browse some of their other productions. And 1st Framework’s artistic director Peter Avery has promised to write a piece for the next digest on the company’s forthcoming projects.

***Infinite Variety** is an exhibition of portrait photos of older women, collected by well known actress Harriet Walter, which is currently on view in the Olivier gallery of the National Theatre. It was launched by Walter at a Platform event there on 2nd July. **Brian Groombridge** was present at the launch*

First, here's a quote for AEA readers to identify. Who said this?

‘So much has been said and sung of beautiful young girls. Why doesn’t somebody wake up to the beauty of old women?’ Answer on page 22 *

This was one of the quotes used by Harriet Walter to introduce the exhibition, which contains some fifty photographs of impressive women. On the platform with her were broadcaster Joan Bakewell and one of the photographers, Jill Kennington, a former model). The event was chaired by Stephanie Merritt from the Guardian.

Walter said she wanted her exhibition to be "a celebration", displaying the kind of pictures of older women "that we're not used to seeing". She is, she admits, disturbed by the incessant focus on youth in the arts and commerce despite the way the population is changing, something of which as an actress she is well aware, particularly though not exclusively when it comes to women and Hollywood. "Signs of encroaching age are loathed as reminders of a process of ultimate decay", on which point she could well have had the cosmetics industry in mind where one constantly sees makeup promoted as a magic potion to make old women look young. Why not recognise that many older women still look great, not in a conventional way, but in their look of wisdom with "delicately etched lines" of experience in their faces.



Una Stubbs
Photo by Jill Kennington

I had not heard of all the women portrayed but there were expressive pictures of (among many others) Joan Bakewell herself, Germaine Greer (not looking so fierce as usual!), the actress Phyllida Law with her daughter Emma

Thompson, the renowned Japanese pianist Mitsuko Uchida, Anna Ford (one of the BBC newsreader casualties), Bianca Jagger (looking very militant), Vanessa Redgrave (of course), Una Stubbs, Cleo Laine, and Jane Birkin arm-in-arm with Charlotte Rampling...

I hope this list will encourage AEA members to go to the exhibition (it ends on **August 15**). Not all AEA members can reach the South Bank, so I asked Harriet Walter if there would be a book or video version. She said that, sponsors permitting, she hoped it would be on show in other towns and cities.

** That apt quote is from Harriet Beecher Stowe Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) author of Uncle Tom's Cabin*

On the subject of older women, in a recent poll of the most beautiful women in world, three women over sixty featured in the top ten. French actress Catherine Deneuve, 67, was fifth in the list, Dame Helen Mirren, 65, came sixth and 76-year-old Sophia Loren, a grandmother of two, was in 10th place. Ok, so at number one was Penelope Cruz, a mere baby at 36, but she was the second youngest on the list, with young sexpots like Beyonce and Cheryl Cole rating nowhere.

"Real beauty is something that comes from within and usually requires maturity", says Anthony Edwards, who commissioned the poll. "When we showed our list to 1200 young men, 80 per cent of them agreed these women were really beautiful. It is amazing the number of guys who really fancy Helen Mirren, even though she is 65. She looks better now than she did when she was a young woman."



No More Salvator
Photo by Valentina Esposito

*When theatres and such go on the hunt for **New Writing**, the word “young” usually comes into the brief somewhere. Not always though, as **Carol Allen** reports here.*

This year when CurvingRoad, a theatre organisation whose mission is “to find new artists within a variety of disciplines” put out their annual call for new talent, they specifically requested submissions from people over the age of 40. They were inundated with hundreds of scripts from both sides of the Atlantic, from which they finally chose two for production at the Old Red Lion in East London last month (June)

American writer J.D. Smith's “Dig” is classic Italian-American gangster conceit, which one reviewer described as “a cross between *Lock, Stock* and *In Bruges*, between comedy and darkness.” *No More Salvator* by Scottish writer Michael Hart's is a very different idea - a verbal sparring match between the Mona Lisa, who comes to life to converse with the Renaissance painter Salvatore Rosa, whose two Louvre paintings hang beside her and are overshadowed by her fame. The London Theatre review described them as “like an old married couple bickering and ranting at each other, with

the humour coming from some rather good lines –”the only reason you should be famous is you’re the world’s first Goth” –, from the incongruity of the Mona Lisa speaking in 21st-century casual slang, and some dashes of brilliant comic timing.”

All further proof, if needed, that you don’t have to be young to be a “new talent” on the block.

*Current theatre recommendations here from **Carlie Newman**, who has been seeing some of the productions in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s season at Stratford upon Avon.*

There is a tremendous *King Lear* (until 26 August) and a not so perfect *Antony and Cleopatra* (until 28 August) in the current season at the RSC’s Courtyard Theatre. Let us begin with *Antony and Cleopatra*, where my concern is around the Cleopatra of Kathryn Hunter.

Although a fine actress, she is not everyone’s idea of the captivating and beautiful Queen of Egypt, who seduces Antony and takes him away not just from his wife but also from Rome. Hunter is a very strange-looking Cleopatra; certainly not beautiful or voluptuous, but a wiry, thin creature, who jumps around the stage and even onto the shoulders of her Eunuch. Her husky voice with what is possibly an Egyptian accent is a good touch and she certainly answers to the description of being “of infinite variety,” in the way she uses her expressive hands and body. Dark blonde Octavia (Sophie Russell), the sister of Caesar, who becomes Antony’s wife in order to bring together

the triumvirate, is the complete opposite of tiny Hunter.

This modern dress production by Michael Boyd is not to everyone's taste, but at least we can make out the difference between the Egyptian and Roman armies as they wear contemporary uniforms. Another nice touch in the costumes is that Cleopatra and her women first appear dressed all in black, then later red and later still in white and it is interesting from a topical perspective to see the triumvirate of Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar and Lepidus at work as they try to make their 'coalition' government effective.



Kathryn Hunter and Darrell D' Silva in Antony and Cleopatra. Photo: Ellie Kurtz

Once again we see the RSC's excellent, repertory theatre style casting at work as Greg Hicks, (King Lear in the other production) here takes the small part of the Soothsayer, interpreted most effectively as the Man in Black. Darrell D'Silvia (Earl of Kent in *Lear*) plays the middle-aged Antony with authority though there is little sexual chemistry between him and his Cleopatra and there is a delightful cameo from Paul Hamilton as the Messenger who has to deliver the news that Antony has remarried; he cringes, both verbally and physically, before Cleopatra as he responds to her anger.

It is astonishing to see the transformation in Greg Hicks from his early acting days into the towering performance he gives as the lead in director David Farr's well-constructed production of *King Lear*. Farr gives us a production full of moments that explain the characters' motivation and present us with an impression of the harsh territory around them, both emotionally and physically, as when Lear is forced by his cruel daughters out into the storm. From the little caress that Lear gives his youngest daughter as he enters at the beginning, we get an understanding of his special affection for Cordelia. This segues well into his denunciation of her, when she cannot or will not profess her great love for him in the exaggerated manner of her sisters Regan and Goneril (very well played by Katy Stephens and Kelly Hunter).

Every time one sees this play there is something new to discover and in this production, it is the realisation of what a likeable and honourable man is the King of France (Brian Doherty), when he chooses Cordelia as his wife in spite of the loss of her dowry. Goneril shows her nasty side as soon as she has been given her father's gifts. She is vicious not only to her father but also mistreats the Earl of Kent (Darrell D'Silvia) and others who are loyal to Cordelia and Lear. There is the horrific scene when Regan and her husband take out the Earl of Gloucester's (Geoffrey Freshwater) eyes, after he is betrayed by his illegitimate son, Edmund (Tunji Kasim) for helping Lear. Although awful to watch, it is not as terrifying as the memorable Old Vic production when the eyes rolled across the floor and members of the audience fainted! When Edgar says, "The oldest have borne most" we

feel the huge tragedy of Cordelia dying at the end of the play, when we so wish for her to find joy once she is reconciled with her father.

The only quibble is the mixture of periods in the costumes. What period uses swords and drips (Lear in pyjamas with drip)? While some of the characters wear long robes, others wear suits and spectacles. There are, however, many good touches such as a hat of flowers, which Lear wears in his madness, instead of a crown. The set is simple but appropriate showing the end of an era and significantly the flimsy walls of Lear's kingdom collapsing and rain falling on the King.

The chief joy here is in the performances. The members of the entire company not only give excellent individual characterisations but also work so well together as an ensemble. The Fool is usually played by a male actor, but Kathryn Hunter comes across as exactly right in her devotion to Lear. She looks good too: a funny little hopping, dancing, singing, Puck-like figure.



Greg Hicks and Kathryn Hunter in King Lear
Photo: Tristram Kenton

The leading role is one of the most demanding in theatre. Greg Hicks gives us a moving Lear in which he displays a command of Shakespeare's verse

delivered in a strong voice full of colour in which the emotions of a once-great man who comes to realise, "I am a very foolish fond old man" are beautifully displayed. We can believe that he dies of a broken heart after he carries in the dead Cordelia. I doubt that we shall see a better King Lear for a good while.

*For her book review in this edition of the digest Alex Withnall has been reading **Isa and May by Margaret Forster***

As regular Digest readers will know, I've long been a fan of Margaret Forster's novels. Her theme is invariably the complexity of family relationships, especially the nature of the bond between mothers and daughters. Now in her seventies, she has chosen here to explore the role that grandmothers play in relation to their grandchildren and their potentially powerful influence on family life. The result is what we used to call a 'woman's book' although it may have some appeal to men too.

Our narrator is Isamay, a nearly-thirty-something wannabe academic who is trying to complete a dissertation on the role of grandmothers in history by examining the lives of a number of famous women including Elizabeth Fry, George Sand, Queen Victoria and Vanessa Bell. She is very much influenced by her relationships with her own two grandmothers, after whom she is named – the sophisticated and elegant Isa and the plump, opinionated and stubborn May, who appears to have a less than satisfactory relationship with her own children. In tandem with her research, Isamay uncovers some surprising family secrets and also comes to reconsider her feelings about having a child of her own with live-in lover Ian,

who is vehemently opposed to becoming a father for reasons that are revealed towards the end of the book.

In spite of her wonderful way with words – Forster has an uncanny knack for observation of tiny details that make each scene come alive for the reader – I felt that this is not one of her best works. *Isa and May* seem to be somewhat stereotyped characters and I found Isamay herself really annoying. In fact the most sympathetic characters are probably Isamay's parents, who play a more minor role in the narrative. I also found it hard to believe that Ian would be so uncommunicative about his own past. Would a woman really live with a man for four years with no knowledge whatsoever of his family background? I was suspicious too of Isamay's research supervisor, the somewhat distant Claudia, who does ask pertinent questions from time to time but appears to have let Isamay plunge into a vague project without any idea of what she is really trying to discover – at least not until later in the book, when Isamay's reflections on her own experiences help her to crystallize her ideas.

This is quite a long book and although I appreciate that Forster is trying to raise questions about the significance of blood relationships, issues concerning nature versus nurture and intergenerational relationships, I felt I waited a long time for something to happen. When it did, it all came in a rush in the final chapters and seemed scarcely credible as an explanation for Ian's reluctance either to explain his origins or to become a hands-on father to Isamay's baby.

In spite of my criticisms, my own thirty-something daughter read the book and

thoroughly enjoyed it. Perhaps I'm becoming too cynical in my old age....

Isa and May by Margaret Forster is published by Chatto and Windus at £17.99 (hb).

*Some recommendations now by Carol Allen from the offerings currently around **On Screen***



London River is an emotionally engaging movie about two disparate people, who find much in common. It also has a poignant topicality, being released as it is to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the 7th July bomb attacks on the London transport system.

Elizabeth (Brenda Blethyn) is a widow living in Guernsey. Ousmane (Sotigui Kouyate) is an African Muslim working in France. The news of the bombings brings them both to London to search for their adult children, who have gone missing after the attack. In the course of their search they keep bumping into each other and initially their cultural differences make them wary of each other. But when it emerges that the two young people were in a relationship together, Elizabeth and Ousmane form a mutually supportive friendship, united in their determination to find out what has happened to his son and her daughter. It's a simple, skilfully crafted and very strong story with two superb central

performances, which strikes a strong blow for tolerance and understanding

The cultural differences between the two principal characters are emphasised by the language barrier, which the writer/director deals with ingeniously, in that Ousmane comes from French speaking Africa and Elizabeth, who doesn't strike one as an educated woman, comes from Guernsey and therefore does speak French. She is a woman with limited experience of the world, who finds herself in the alien environment of North London, which is, as she puts it, "crawling with Muslims", reflecting an apparent racism which is initially shocking but which, we soon realise, comes from ignorance and fear. It is also sometimes comic, as in a scene where Elizabeth and Ousmane go to a Muslim centre, where the daughter has been taking lessons in Arabic. Elizabeth is puzzled. "Who would want to speak Arabic?" "Well, we do", replies the woman in the centre with amusement.

Ousmane is a much more subdued character, played by Kouyate, who sadly died shortly after the film's completion, with that impressive quiet dignity you get from certain African actors. The relationship between them grows convincingly and gradually, from their initial accidental encounters, where she declines to acknowledge him, into a mutual trust and shared purpose and the climax of the story, when they discover what has happened to their children, is almost unbearably moving.

Still as powerful a film maker at the age of seventy as he ever was, in *Tetro* Francis Ford Coppola returns to the theme of *The Godfather* movies - family and family conflict in an Italian émigré context - but in a totally different way.

17 year old Bennie (talented newcomer Alden Ehrenreich) arrives in Buenos Aires in search of his adored older brother Tetro (Vincent Gallo), who ten years earlier walked out of the family home in New York, where they lived with their symphony conductor father Carlo (Klaus Maria Brandauer). He finds him a changed man - moody, self destructive and semi disabled after a road accident. Tetro rebuffs him, but Tetro's girlfriend Miranda (Maribel Verdu) welcomes Bennie and tries to heal the breach between the brothers.



The "present day" of the film, which appears to be some time in the late sixties or early seventies, is shot in crisp and often stunningly theatrical black and white, while the frequent flashbacks, which reveal the past in an imaginative and often oblique manner, are in fifties style Technicolor, drawing on both opera and ballet in that Michael Powell's film of *The Red Shoes* plays an important role in Bennie's childhood and the brothers' history is played out in fantasy ballet sequences in the style of Robert Helpmann. The riveting climax, which is reminiscent in some ways of the opera sequence in "Godfather 3", reveals the secret at the heart of Tetro's malaise, as real life is intercut with the dramatisation on stage of the family story as perceived and written by Benny.

I was disposed to like *Gainsbourg* (opening end of July), a biopic of French singer Serge Gainsbourg, because of its subject matter. An added bonus however is its free-flowing, sometimes surreal visual style; a mixture of reality, fantasy, surreal animation and to some extent the musical. There's also Gainsbourg's Mephistopholean alter ego La Gueule – Ugly Face - a fox like marionette with exaggerated ears and nose and glittering eyes (the very talented mime Douglas Jones), who tempts him in the ways of the flesh.



It all helps to give you a visual insight into the inner life of the artist, particularly his early years as a young Jewish boy in wartime Paris, when he's known as Lucien (Gainsbourg's born name and played by Kacey Mottet Klein), while Eric Elmosnino is very impressive as the adult Gainsbourg, whom he takes from young man to a prematurely aged late fifties.

And then of course there are Serge's women - many of them, although the film is never sexually over explicit. Lucy Gordon is dominant amongst them as Jane Birkin, who evolves from a vulnerable and gawky girl in a sweetly silly mini dress falling in love with Serge on the banks of the Seine to a strong woman, protective of her children. Laetitia Casta does a convincing impersonation of Brigitte Bardot and Anna Mouglalis of Juliette

Greco. The evocation of the smoky bars of Paris in the fifties and early sixties is delightful and Gainsbourg's songs are well used and integrated into the film. The subjective nature of the narrative sometimes makes it a bit tricky to follow but we end up with a vivid picture of a life lived to the full - not always a happy life but one packed with experience - and a man and indeed a film overflowing with wicked charm and creative energy.

Everybody's Fine (out on DVD) is both a road movie and a family film, in that it is about the concept of family. De Niro plays Frank, a widower living alone since the death of his wife, who decides to pay surprise visits to his four grown up children, who are living all over the country.

The opening scenes skilfully introduce us to Frank's life and his home, which is that of a working class man, who's worked hard all his life to provide for his family. We then move into a classic road movie format with this imperfect but engaging human being at the centre. De Niro is on top form here. An apparently affable old guy, who is later revealed from the point of view of his children as a loving father, who has alienated them by his too high expectations. We also become very aware of the unseen personality of his late wife, who held the family together. There are good performances too from Kate Beckinsale, Sam Rockwell and Drew Barrymore as three of Frank's children (there is a mystery about the fourth David) and though a touch heavy handed at times, the film overall is a journey well worth taking.