



## Culture Hive Case Study

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Oxfordshire-based Human Story Theatre (HST) is a company, launched in August 2016 by Gaye Poole and Amy Enticknap, that focuses on new writing with a health and social care issue at its heart. Our mission is to be accessible, popping up in any designated space with audiences paying what they can afford for a ticket. After every performance there is a Q&A session with panellists from the NHS, partner charities such as Alzheimer's UK or Guideposts, or academics. Gaye Poole's play *Connie's Colander* is about dementia, seen through the experiences of a mother living with dementia, and a daughter, who presents a television cookery programme. We would like to share our findings on the health impacts on audiences, and on performing a health-related play in English libraries, based on two tours of *Connie's Colander* in 2018 and 2019.

The tour had the following aims:

- a) To present an excellent drama to audiences
- b) To support libraries with their remit in providing information and resources about health and social care, and dementia
- c) To provide communities with help and advice about dementia, informing communities about local services and providing opportunities for people to share stories
- d) To support Arts Council England in promoting libraries as performance spaces by helping the sustainability of local libraries in attracting new users, or in offering existing users a new service

Our aims are aligned with DDCMS policy on wellbeing (as outlined in its 2018 report *Areas of Research Interest*), and parliamentary recommendations on promoting libraries as safe spaces 'essential to people's wellbeing' and on targeting Arts Council support for organisations making health and wellbeing outcomes central to their work, as suggested by reports by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics in 2014 and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing in 2017.

For our methodology, we asked librarians to gather basic demographic information on audiences for *Connie's Colander*. Librarians and audiences provided qualitative data in the form of a questionnaire on the health impact of the play and question and answer session, the impact relating to health and arts promotion on libraries and aesthetic impacts. The artists reflected on their lived experience of the tours. Emails, social media comments and face-to-face conversations with stakeholders, funders and partners were also gathered and analysed.

Our findings suggest audiences and librarians agree that attending Connie's Colander helped them learn about dementia, its progress, and its effects on people living with dementia and their families or carers. For some, as with a respondent from Beaconsfield, there's a possibility that her mother could receive earlier treatment (benefitting the individual, family and NHS): "I found it very moving. It also was very authentic. It made me realise my mum really does have dementia" while for many there was a value in seeing their stories being represented on stage, as an attendee from Bognor Regis says: "Excellent play. Very close to home for me. Going through this at the moment with my mother". Many attendees gained ideas and strategies for coping with people living with dementia whilst others gained therapeutic impacts having been comforted by realising their experiences were not unique, having believed they were not coping well, as an audience member from Radlett states: "Informative, moving, gave me a feeling of understanding & helped me not feel so guilty about my reactions to my mum – everybody goes through the same emotions". Some felt that they were able to 'see better' how others close to them were living, having family members or friends caring for people living with dementia. Here there are clear implications for the health service, as the play helps with speedier diagnosis and with their own mental health as their responses suggest how they contextualise their experiences or worries.

Audiences found the experience of seeing Connie's Colander in a library intimate and cosy, appreciating the proximity of the performance to them. Most welcomed libraries as being friendly, informal, nice, welcoming relaxed, chilled out venues for performances. Most commented on the accessibility of the library, the convenience to attendance, the fact that they are local facilities. Many felt more included in the performance because of the intimacy of the space, more engaging and absorbing, despite the background noise of an open library.

Librarians felt that programming Human Story Theatre impacted on their remit in promoting health and wellbeing, with some performances coinciding with Dementia Awareness Week. Some libraries have been used as performance venues for a long time, most not. Attending the production was also beneficial to library staff as it helped them understand the issues better, and feedback suggests increases in empathy as well as knowledge. Marketing from the libraries themselves varied with some using social media or newsletters with most audiences finding out about the play from the librarians, from a poster on a notice board or from someone working within health care.

Feedback suggests that both the performance of Connie's Colander, and the Q & A, to be of high quality. Arts Council England's Relationship Libraries Relationship Manager South East, Chris Fardon, described the production as "brilliant" and "well-received by the audience". Librarians thought Connie's Colander as "very well acted", "wonderful", "moving", "touching", "professional", "engaging", "high quality" and "outstanding", terms echoed by audience members on their feedback forms where along with "excellent", and "thought provoking".

We hope that librarians and health professionals are encouraged to participate in similar tours, evidenced by the words of Michelle Berry, Neighbourhood Co-ordinator for Wellbeing Team, Wellbeing Service, Reading Borough Council, which end this case study. She said: "I loved it, such a powerful and true like performance. I really wanted to go and sit with Connie while waiting for the show, just watching her was bringing tears to my eyes, it felt so real. I have never done a Q&A as such an emotional wreck before. Well done! It was most definitely the most effective way for us to raise awareness of dementia and promote the dementia friendly communities/friends programme."