

**The impact of the ERASMUS+ StaGe of Mind project: Upskilling adults living with mental illness through multidisciplinary performing arts. Project number: 2020-1-ES01-KA227-ADU-095918 (01/05/2021- 30/04/2023).**

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The COVID-19 Pandemic was an unprecedented health crisis, which intensified, among other things, the phenomenon of social exclusion, due to the measures taken to limit its spread, in particular those of restricting movement and human contact. While such measures were vital in stopping the spread of the virus, they unfortunately exacerbated the isolation and loneliness of people with psychosocial problems and increased the risk of relapse in mental health compared to people with a sense of belonging to a community.

Additionally, adults with mental illness are rarely employed or enrolled in formal education programs, meaning they lack access to environments and activities that will stimulate them intellectually and prevent cognitive decline. At the same time people with prolonged and severe mental illness rarely have the opportunity to enjoy activities in the cultural and creative field and almost never have the opportunity to participate or co-create.

In an effort to combat these phenomena, six organizations from the fields of mental health and the performing arts, from the countries of Spain, Ireland and Greece joined forces to address the above issues by implementing the StaGe of Mind project, funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union

It was an art and education program that utilized the educational and therapeutic potential of various art forms, particularly theater, drama and music. The protagonists of the project were users of mental health services from three European countries. Over 12 months they received personalized training from performing arts professionals and mental health experts and worked together to conceive, design and perform a musical theater performance under their guidance. The participants were involved in the design and production of the musical performance from start to finish.

The project used the arts to engage mental health service recipients in a meaningful activity that created a sense of community and stimulated their creativity. After all, it is proven that the arts are a fertile ground for people of all ages to liberate themselves, to function creatively, to have fun, to acquire knowledge and cultivate an aesthetic sensibility. In addition, they function as a means of emotional relaxation and discharge, while at the same time they have a therapeutic role, offering the participant the possibility of freely expressing their feelings, thoughts and concerns in a creative way and in a safe environment (Alkistis, 2008, Samaras, 2020). Theater is one modality of the arts whose contribution and value for wellbeing has been recognized since ancient times. In addition to the above qualities of theater, according to Faigin & Stein (2010), its' role in its' various forms is especially important in the rehabilitation of people with psychosocial problems and to support people experiencing enduring and long term mental health difficulties in their mental health recovery.

No one auditioned. Response and participation was by invitation only and brought mental health service users, therapists, artists and volunteers all together as equal members of a large group with a common purpose. Somehow, the way human communities should be. Different people with different abilities and weaknesses who contribute what they each have to the wise supervision of the group. Within this temporary and more ideal small community the participants shared the reality of departures and transitions, the difficulties of mental illness, the pain and anguish it brings.

The StaGe of Mind raised the bar and therefore confronted the essence of dramaturgy, with the very essence of theater which is identified with the essence of existence itself: the truth. However, not the objective, the measurable, the one truth, but the subjective, the infinite, the truth of each person and each eyewitness of their fate and experience. And if this truth has infinite faces, heroes and themes, through the experience of StaGe of Mind it was proven that the partial can express the whole and that the musical theater is a unique place that concerns us and includes us all without discrimination.

The dramaturgy of StaGe of Mind's theatrical performances conveyed on stage the truth of its creators as eyewitnesses of their experience: the truth of mental anguish in the face of trauma, loss, separation, loneliness, frustration, the truth of human existence confronted with fate, loneliness, the adversities of the environment, the truth of human relations but also the other truth, that of the transformation of drama into liberation, into an education of the soul and into a rewarding experience. The theatrical performances, which were created using the tool of diversity, were not only meant for the country's diverse audiences but also for everyone else. The performances were relevant to all of us as we all have our own stories to tell and can relate to the experiences depicted in the performances.

In Ireland's musical performance, "Awakening Awake", the original theme came from an experience of grief and loss of the beloved father of one of the beneficiaries of the StaGe of Mind project. For him, the loss of his father was the catalyst for the deterioration of his mental health. The StaGe of Mind workshops provided the participant with a safe space to name and explore this experience and the emotions that arose. Despite the initial discomfort, the Irish team agreed to work with this theme of grief and loss and offered him the transitional space and theatrical means to explore, re-enact and re-imagine that event in his life with the support of his peers in the cast as accompanists and eyewitnesses.

In Spain's musical performance, "A Farewell Party", on the other hand, the participants say goodbye for a while to the pressures, suspension and exhaustion of being part of a society that doesn't listen to them and doesn't give them a voice. They become the protagonists and authors of their own history, they address to everyone a call for resilience.

Finally, in the musical performance of Greece, "The Coffee of the Shy Ones", the patrons of a cafe witness both the loneliness and separation that dominates life against our will, as well as the power that human connection hides when it blossoms in the acceptance of respect, the feast and the joy of coexistence. The audience that flooded the packed theater laughed to tears and cried to tears. They sang along with the "shy people" and shared their charge and their own emotion. The inclusive power of theater art and creation once again worked redemptively.

The participants during the training workshops were faced with intense insecurities, fears and doubts until in the end the troupes managed to captivate and move the audience. In the performance they manifested themselves with a confidence and self-belief that no one previously thought they had. One of the most important achievements of the creative process was that a need emerged in the participants that they did not have before or did not know they could have. That of being on the stage and discovering that in addition to being therapeutic, it is valuable and important to share their life

experiences by leaving their lonely shelter for a while and joining forces with everyone who feels the same.

The StaGe of Mind project has ended, but it leaves a great legacy as its echo and imprint remains deeply engraved on the people who benefitted from this opportunity, the beneficiaries of mental health services who felt their cognitive abilities strengthened, their confidence increased, who developed a sense of belonging to a group and a commitment to work towards a common purpose, and most importantly, who become the protagonists of their own life and their own story by presenting outwardly all the inner beauty and strength they carry with them.

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