

Madhouse: Reclaiming the history of learning difficulties through acting and activism

Until the very end of the twentieth century the history of learning difficulties was subsumed into other histories, of psychiatry, of special education and, indeed, of disability. Initiatives to enable people with learning difficulties and their families to record their own histories and contribute to the historical record are both recent and powerful. Much of this work has been led or supported by the Open University's Social History of Learning Disability Research (SHLD) Group and its commitment to developing "inclusive history". The article tells the story of the Madhouse Project in which actors with learning difficulties, stimulated by the story of Mabel Cooper, historian activist and supported by the SHLD Group, learnt about and then offered their own interpretations of that history, including its present-day resonances. Through a museum exhibition they curated, and through an immersive theatre performance, the actors used the history of institutions to alert a wider public to the abuses of the past, and the continuing marginalisation and exclusion of people with learning difficulties. This is an outstanding example of history's potential to stimulate activism.

Introduction

An extract from Mabel Cooper's records from St Lawrence's Hospital, 1957 read: 'Imbecile. A girl of 13 years whose intelligence is not superior to that of the average 7 yr old child. She is educationally very backward, being practically illiterate...She is dull and slow in response, lacks reasoning power and appears to have no general knowledge whatever, being incapable

of telling the time’¹. Reflecting on her discovery of these records some years later, Mabel commented: ‘It did upset me for them to say I wasn’t teachable. I think if someone goes around and says something like that are you going to learn? You are not. And then they turn around and say “Oh you are not teachable.”’².

Over the past twenty-five years, people with learning difficulties have been recovering, capturing and sharing their histories. Individuals and groups of people with learning difficulties have used a variety of techniques to represent their identities and experiences, across different cultural and academic spaces (Brownlee-Chapman et al., Walmsley and Jarrett). Self-advocacy organisations have charted their histories, telling stories of resistance, strength, and belonging that defy widely held notions of what it means to live life as a learning disabled person (CEPF and Walmsley; Mitchell et al.; Speak Out). Individuals and groups have told their stories using ever more imaginative and interdisciplinary methods, contesting dominant deficit narratives found in archives and popular discourse. Much of this “inclusive history” has been undertaken through or with the Open University’s Social History of Learning Disability (SHLD) Group, founded in 1994, comprising members with and without learning difficulties. Aligning with wider developments in the democratisation of history-making, such as those charted by Raphael Samuel in *Theatres of Memory*, the SHLD Group was concerned initially with supplementing knowledge located in public records with oral and life stories. Over time the focus shifted to privileging the interests and experiences of people with learning difficulties as a means of contesting or reappraising that knowledge. This shift occurred in part because of the interests of academics involved in the group’s work. But it also resulted from people with learning difficulties arguing that the records often “got it

¹ Notes of Dr Geraldine Casey on Mabel Cooper, Case Paper, Mental Deficiency, St Lawrence’s Hospital, Caterham, Surrey. 21st November 1957.

² I’d Like to Know Why – Mabel Cooper with Dorothy Atkinson. Private publication p. 24 2013.

wrong,” misrepresenting the facts, or omitting significant aspects about their lives. Such challenges often occurred during early SHLD conferences, where delegates with learning difficulties were known gently to “heckle” professional historians presenting their analyses of institutional life.

Mabel Cooper (1944-2013) was in the vanguard of this movement to de-stabilise the dominant discursive practices and portrayals of people with learning difficulties. Mabel was a survivor of a long stay hospital, an activist, a researcher and long-standing member of the SHLD Group. Supported by friend and ally Dorothy Atkinson (an Open University academic), Mabel took steps to reconstruct the details of her own life through an investigation of archival records. In doing so, she learned about the circumstances of her admittance to institutional care. She also discovered how her life had been recorded and constructed in the official records from the point at which she entered the State’s guardianship: the words and labels used to describe her; the systems and categories used to measure and assess her “progress”; and the moments and events deemed worthy of note by institutional officials. As Mabel herself said:

I was shocked only by the names I was called, and for the places they put me in, and from where I’d been expelled. I didn’t know that. It shocked me and I think it makes you different if you know that, it makes you harder. (Atkinson and Cooper 21)

Life story research highlights how the stories of people with learning difficulties are often overshadowed by painful events - being removed from home; few friendships and relationships; accounts of failure, exclusion and abuse. All too often such “problem saturated” narratives pay little attention to people’s unique qualities, contributions, and talents (Westerhof et al; Wigham et al.).

Narrative therapists view these stories not as truths, but as particular versions of an individual's life. The problem-saturated story may also reflect other powerful dominant stories; those that stigmatise or explain the exclusion of people with learning difficulties. One aim of narrative therapy and life story work is to tell an alternative story; to see the problem as part of a broader story about one's life. Lived experiences that are not part of, or contradict the dominant story, provide the starting point for an alternative story. In 2008, Van Puyenbroeck and Maes reported how narrative reminiscence can strengthen identity, raise self-esteem, and enhance social contacts.

Telling her life story came to be a defining moment in Mabel Cooper's life. From that point on, she actively championed the rights of people with learning difficulties to tell their own story in their own words, and repeatedly argued that the past must not be forgotten. When Mabel talked about the past, she was talking about *her* past; the past as she and her contemporaries knew and remembered it. While the official records had enabled Mabel to fill in critical gaps about her own life, the process of engaging with the archives had been painful (Rolph and Atkinson). Mabel came to understand how devoid those records were of her own lived experience. To redress the balance, Mabel Cooper published her life story in *Forgotten Lives* and then shared these experiences in schools, advocacy forums and universities. She argued that younger people ought to know more about the institutions and the lives of the people who had resided there. Mabel strongly believed that children and adults with learning difficulties should remain in their local communities rather than being excluded as she had been. She recognised that for many, bullying and name-calling presented an ongoing barrier to inclusion. She shared her story with school children to promote understanding and empathy.

Mabel expressed a desire in her Will for her work to continue after her death. This came to fruition in a film, *No Longer Shut Up*, made in 2015. Mabel’s advocate, in collaboration with the Open University, commissioned production company Advocreate to make a film that combined archive footage of Mabel with a fictionalised account of a young man with learning difficulties living in 21st century London. Advocreate employed actors from Access all Areas (AAA), which specialises in employing learning disabled actors in film and theatre. The young man is seen negotiating incidences of bullying and harassment. He learns about Mabel, then sets out to find out more about the history of people with learning difficulties. This prompted a real life plot twist as the actors from AAA began asking questions about the history of institutions, notably “how come we didn’t know all this stuff happened?” AAA decided to seek funding to pursue a research project to extend the actors’ knowledge about the institutional past in order to inform the development of a creative response. This led to “Madhouse, My House?” (‘madhouse’ was the term Mabel herself used to describe St Lawrence’s), a programme of inclusive and co-produced research and public engagement activities that included learning disability history workshops, intergenerational interviews and a museum exhibition³. It culminated in “MADHOUSE re:exit” a large-scale immersive theatre project that confronted the history of institutionalisation of people with learning difficulties and explored its ongoing legacy in the era of community care and “supported living⁴.”

Madhouse involved sharing Mabel’s story, and the legacy it represents, with a younger generation of people with learning difficulties for whom this history was unknown. Its aim was both to inform younger people with learning difficulties about aspects of their own

³ Madhouse, My House? was a three-year digital and creative learning programme funded by Heritage Lottery Fund.

⁴ MADHOUSE re:exit was funded by Wellcome.

cultural history, and to raise public awareness and debate on the effects that contemporary isolation and confinement have on the bodies and minds of people with learning difficulties. Madhouse asked: “has institutionalised really ended?” In doing so, we argue it produced a new generation of “historian activists,” equipped with skills, confidence and enthusiasm to continue Mabel Cooper’s legacy.

The impact of Madhouse was evaluated by an inclusive research team that included academics and actors from AAA (Walmsley et al.). The lead actor from *No Longer Shut Up*, Paul Christian, was central to the evaluation, and is a co-writer of this article. Throughout the article, Paul offers his own reflections on the project, structured around a set of questions developed by the academics. His comments have been transcribed and woven throughout the text. Commenting on the co-writing process, Paul argued:

I think that it is the dynamic that is needed, a tactic to have a good rapport with each other – not only to be as a friend but a good solid and trusted relationship so we can get the best out each other.

For myself I take inspiration from many different sources not only my family – also from TV and documentaries and just plainly looking up words that I feel curious about so I look it up on the internet and try to incorporate it in what I am trying to say. If the thing that I am trying to say isn’t making itself clear then I will go back to it and try really hard to make my own sense of how I perceive the words in my head.

Like what we have done today using my mobile phone. We have added to our way of working, it’s evolving – work in progress – we try to something see if it helps us and if it does we use it. So today when we spoke about a question I gave a reply and you typed it into the laptop – then you read it back to me and I hear and see how it sounds. Sometimes I change it again at this stage. But when my thoughts are really

coming quickly and words are changing as I speak it's good to record it on the phone and although you are still typing as I'm speaking quickly if you miss a word we can go back and replay it listen to it together and you can catch any missing words. Also when I replay it I hear how it sounds and that can help me make changes too.

People always label us and think that we aren't really intelligent and that we can't learn. Just because we are born with disabilities we are seen as sub deficient and we can't do anything but be a vegetable but that isn't really what we want to do. Writing like this is starting to take back the power. I think that is also what Mabel was trying to do – to try to influence the masses to get them to take her seriously.

While this is an approach that works well for us as co-authors, we are mindful that other teams will adopt strategies and techniques in writing collaboratively that work best for them.

The rationale for Madhouse

It will come as no surprise to readers of this journal that the history of learning difficulties is overlooked in the curriculum of most schools, colleges and universities. While the history of eugenics appears to hold the public's attention – often re-told in light of newly emerging scandals about poor care and neglect in contemporary society – people's day to day lives are often represented in distorting and stigmatising ways (as described by Anne-Marie Callus in her 2019 paper on representations of intellectual disability in film for this journal) or ignored altogether. AAA describes its work as “urban disruptive performance by learning disabled and autistic artists.” It aims to address the lack of visibility and representation of people with learning difficulties in the arts, particularly through theatre. It explores people's

“participatory and professional artistic abilities” while seeking to “improve the quality of life for people with learning disabilities and autism” (see the AAA website for more information). AAA blends art with activism and its members approach projects through a distinctly political lens. Paul Christian describes his initial encounter with Mabel Cooper’s story, and how this became the inspiration for the Madhouse project that followed:

I thought this story not only had to be told but also told really well as we had get this story of this wonderful woman to the outside world.

My feeling about the story is honestly about hardship and how we have to get away from shattered hopes and negative influences on how people have swiftly labelled us and stigmatised us and put us in these corners and how we need to get away from this dynamic – how we can learn and train ourselves to be in a position of power.

We discussed the [content of Mabel’s] story with Nick before filming. Nick had a kind of vision...things that needed to be emphasised and said. I felt that it was pretty easy for me because I just tried to project my mind-set on how life is for me in everyday life and how people treat me and how they treated Mabel so I kind of imagined and re-scripted my life onto hers.

To help to make a film about this woman’s life I felt that I was passing the torch on to people who may not understand not only Mabel Cooper’s story but also about disability and how they work with people with learning disabilities and engage with them. And to help them to grow as a person – I think we all have the potential to grow

and to try to realise our full potential to break out of our normal comfort zone and lead the next generation.

All the actors got on well in making the film. We worked well together. I think that the non disabled actors Ruby and Reuben wanted to learn – about acting and filming and about Mabel's life. Reuben himself wanted to come an actor so I feel that in that respect I could inspire and help him to grow as an actor and in who he wants to be. If I had not done that it could have been a different story in terms of how we got on.

The Madhouse Workshops

Once some initial project funding had been secured, AAA worked with the SHLD Group to develop people with learning difficulties' knowledge of the history. Academics Jan Walmsley and Sue Ledger taught members of AAA about the period 1840-2011 through workshops, with a particular focus on the institutions. There were five workshops. AAA actors were first taken to visit the site of Harperbury, which had previously been a long-stay hospital that served the area that many of the actors were from. Actors reported their shock at discovering sobering details of people's lives (and deaths) at Harperbury. It prompted conversations about family, relationships, control, and isolation. But it also triggered emotional responses that workshop facilitators had not predicted. Being in the physical space of a former hospital, now derelict and overgrown, enabled connections to be made between past and present. The actors drew parallels with their own experiences; re-evaluating their lives in the knowledge of a past

they were learning about, for the first time. The actors commented:

“It was emotional because we were told stories about patients. I felt a real connection towards the patients”.

“Going to Harperbury Hospital it made us get into the minds of how people must have felt living there. I noticed how the men and women were separated which made me feel so alone and isolated”.

“I couldn’t really have imagined this. I felt it deep down in myself”.

Other workshop sessions built upon this desire to make tangible the history. Reconstructions of hospital scenes and visits to public archives to explore institutional records enabled the actors to immerse themselves in aspects of institutional life, while also encouraging them to ask questions, offer reflections and develop their skills of critical analysis. Underpinned by theories of action research and participatory ontology, the actors’ response to what they learned and witnessed were treated as valid and to be respected. The workshops commenced with a pedagogical aim of “sharing” (or even teaching) the “history of learning difficulties” to the group. But as the project progressed - reflecting Samuel’s notion that history should be considered an “activity” and not a “profession” - with the very real potential for knowledge to filter upwards - the actors became producers of history: offering their own interpretation of the past (Access all Areas et al.)

In the final workshop, the actors interviewed former members of institutions. They interviewed two people, both in their eighties, who had lived at St Lawrence’s Hospital. They then interviewed two younger people who had recently spent time in Secure Hospital Units,

after being labelled as “challenging.” They described their daily lives, including food, contact with friends and family, and the restrictions encountered. The interviews were filmed, in part to create a record of this important encounter – historic in its own way – but also to enable the actors to revisit the interviews after the event. They served as an important resource for the actors as they developed creative ideas for Madhouse. The content featured in the museum exhibition that followed, and provided inspiration for scenes in the MADHOUSE re:exit theatre performance that took place in 2018.

For some members of AAA, these inter-generational conversations were particularly powerful. As Paul Christian commented:

I think the interviews went really well as it gives us real insight into how life was back then and how people were treated in hospital. Their dignity, their pride that was non-existent and their emotional state was put under pressure by how other people were treating the patients. And how they didn't feel like themselves but they felt like another person – how they had to try and vision themselves as being someone else in order to try and get through the day to try and get the torture treatment to stop.

For the younger people who told about their more recent experiences, I didn't know that was happening. I mean I didn't know about those places still being there. I couldn't believe it was so demeaning that it crushed any dream of their true aspirations of what they wanted and how they would like to be treated. It sounded unfair and how people with power can abuse it, and their authority was not real authority. We were always trained to believe that people in power would actually try and confront abuse and to protect people like us from people who many want to hurt us. Not try to egg people on and to be a part of it.

We asked the younger people what was it like and how did it feel to be locked up. At times they couldn't even see their parents.

Following the history workshops, five of the participants elected to train as workshop leaders. This was supported by the theatre company and involved designing activities and games to share institutional history with other people with learning difficulties. For example, a game based on shared toothbrushes was inspired by learning that residents at some hospitals did not have their own toothbrushes but had to take one from a batch shared by everyone on the ward. These five workshop leaders – including Paul Christian - then led sessions as part of a public education programme based at Hackney Museum.

The Madhouse, My House? Museum Exhibition

In 2016, Access All Areas worked with Hackney Museum to co-curate an exhibition on the history of learning difficulties. The exhibition was the actors' first creative response to what they had seen and heard in the preceding months through their participation in the history workshops. It ran for 6 months and was visited by over 8000 members of the public. It had been designed to educate the public on the “hidden history” of institutional life, but also aimed to stimulate attendees to consider how far policy and practice had changed in the deinstitutionalisation era. The actors viewed the exhibition as a potential “call to arms”- a

tool to encourage the public to engage with campaigns to improve the lives of people with learning difficulties, and to take small steps to help make things better. In follow up surveys and interviews (developed by the actors), exhibition visitors were asked two key questions:

- Do you think things have changed for people with learning disabilities since Mabel and Harvey were shut away? Is anyone still shut up, do you know?
- Is there anything you could do to change things for people with learning disabilities?

In Walmsley et al. we explore in more depth our analyses of the data emerging from the survey and interview data. In summary, we noted that the exhibition had raised awareness of the history of institutions and increased people's knowledge about the lives of former residents of long-stay hospitals. It successfully conveyed the scope and scale of institutions in the UK, but also the daily practices designed to silence and control residents. The objects selected for the exhibition had been chosen to reflect the de-personalising and de-humanising effects of institutional life: pills taken by residents to "shut you up", "keep you regular", "stop babies"; slippers worn to discourage residents from escaping; a single toothbrush presented alongside a row of false teeth, depicting its shared use in the hospitals. Mattresses piled high on an old hospital bed, with dates inscribed on the side of each one to reflect key "moments" in the chronology of institutions (laws, policies, hospital closure dates) – the history often focused upon in academic texts. The exhibition also featured audio and video content created by the actors, articulating their own perspectives on what they had discovered through their visits to Harperbury and the archives, and what they had learned in their conversations with former residents.

Some visitors reflected on people with learning difficulties' roles as researchers and curators; suggesting that in making the *process* of co-production explicit, the exhibition – as an artefact and record in its own right - further contested notions of what it means to be a person with the

label *learning difficulties*: “What stands out is the amount of work people have put into the exhibition, the amount of interviewing in the films, a serious research project.” (Walmsley et al., 20). The exhibition became a site to affirm the agency and creativity of its curators – a contemporary act of defiance, displaying a younger generation’s desire to “take the history on.”

Here, Paul Christian reflects on the process of designing the exhibition, and what it meant to him to be part of it:

...we wanted to encourage the public to go beyond the perimeters of what they see and to make sure they absolutely got the message and that they encapsulate the feelings about what we as disabled people went through – not just to be there just to see an installation because this is the story of people’s lives and we wanted to share these artefacts with the public to give us feedback on what they see and perceived.

I always feel that I’m showing these kind of aspects of our lives and what they mean to us and how we want other people who haven’t been affected by this to step in our shoes and experience how it must have felt. I guess I also had a sceptical mind when we were making the exhibition about whether people were truly getting what we were trying to show. Some of the people we interviewed were quite shocked about what they saw.

In my mind I think that young children get it, even though they may not understand it, but in their own way they get it as their mind hasn’t been fully influenced and set by the world and its prejudices– so hopefully they will grow up with the idea that people

should be treated well and be must be aware. With children their mind-sets haven't fully developed and it can give them a new way of thinking.

The exhibition served not only to raise public awareness about the history of institutionalisation, it also offered interpretations of that history by a younger generation of people with learning difficulties. In doing so, it unsettled the very conceptualisations of people with learning difficulties that were so enmeshed within the historical narratives and artefacts present in the exhibition itself. However, the exhibition was less successful in enabling the public to make the link between past and present. Without explicit reference to the contemporary deployment of institutional facilities for people with learning difficulties (for example, Secure Hospital Units / Assessment and Treatment Units) a number of visitors – particularly those without personal or professional experience of “learning difficulties” – appeared to leave the exhibition with the belief that institutions were firmly consigned to the past. Enabling members of the public – including people with learning difficulties who live their lives in the community – to draw parallels between past and present was a key ambition of Madhouse. As Margaret Atwood reflects upon in *The Testaments*, while history may not repeat itself, it often rhymes. This was what the actors experienced standing on the disused grounds of Harperbury hospital (‘I felt it deep down in myself’) and what they wanted to communicate to the wider public. The next task for the actors was to find a means to convey these subtle shifts and continuities through time, acknowledging contemporary experiences of isolation, while fulfilling their overarching objective to persuade people to commit to take action.

The Madhouse immersive theatre production

In 2017-18, AAA created and performed MADHOUSE re:exit, an ambitious and immersive theatre production that was performed in London and Manchester, experienced by 1500 people. The production was the culmination of the previous three years of learning and research on the history of learning difficulties. It featured five “rooms”, each storied into discrete and surreal episodes, designed to both reveal and contest fragments of learning difficulties history. The development and curation of each of the five performance spaces was led by a learning disabled performer working with professional non-disabled directors and dramaturgs. Theatre-goers were guided through a dark and underground cavern, encountering artefacts from the past while occasionally crashing into the shiny new present. This was brought into being through “Paradise Fields”, an exemplar of innovation and personalisation – designed to support the neo-liberal able subject. Short on staff but long on technological solutions, Paradise Fields was a playful but provocative commentary on the latest wave of policy idealism that promises big change but fails on delivery, all too often leaving people isolated and lonely behind the walls of their community-based tenancy or care home. Cian Binchy reflected on how his visit to the Harperbury hospital site led him to question how much had really changed for people with learning difficulties today: “Although they have knocked down the walls, in some ways they are still here. People like me can’t always go out because we don’t have the support or the money. We are still locked up ... on the outside of society” (ref). As Dayo Koleosho’s “useless eater” room made plain, beneath the glossy brochures, underlying ideas about learning difficulties remained the same. Eugenics discourses continue to pervade in subtle and complex ways, despite more recent introduction

of laws promoting equality and human rights. Policy-makers and professionals have adapted their terminology and systems, but attitudes have proved harder to shift.

But AAA chose not to leave the conversation there. While acknowledging how the past inflects the present in ways that are problematic and often damaging, the actors also offered alternative pasts and in doing so, alternative futures. The room featuring actress Imogen Roberts explored how people with Down Syndrome had been revered by an ancient Mexican tribe. Cian Binchy designed a room for “London’s oldest baby,” in which his character was found languishing in a cot, wearing a nappy, while reciting poetry. Staff members occasionally interjected to insert a dummy in his mouth. Binchy argued that the piece was a commentary on society’s distorted perspectives on the sexuality of people with learning difficulties, and prevailing beliefs that people like him do not develop beyond childhood.

The useless eater room turned the tables on the audience, raising complex questions about where power lies, and in relation to whom. Beginning on familiar territory, the audience were presented with a person with learning difficulties consigned behind glass, being watched, assessed, judged. The audience were then prompted to feed the “useless eater,” remnant of Nazi propaganda about the economic burden of disabled people on the State. But from the room’s speakers then came questions and tasks for the audience, articulated at an ever more frantic pace, designed to leave theatre-goers feeling panicked, incapable and powerless. Who was “deficient” now?

At the end of the performance, a stone’s throw from the exit, the audience was presented with a front door; a refreshing and welcome symbol of normality, the everyday and the modern –a blessed relief from the chaos and claustrophobia of the past that had been conveyed in previous scenes. Theatre-goers were encouraged to peek through the letterbox (more watching, more assessing), and were presented with a sparse room, with minimal furniture

and a television. No real signs of belonging were apparent, a poignant reminder that cuts to services in recent years have created a new type of institution, one in which people with learning difficulties are confined to their bedrooms, with few opportunities for social connection. Dayo Koleosho, the actor who fronted the “useless eater” piece, commented that his ambition for MADHOUSE re:exit was “to make a change to what continues to go on in our world [and] help people with learning disabilities to express themselves, to break out of their shell”. He also viewed the production as a reminder that people with learning disabilities have a voice “and we want to be heard”.

The findings from the performance evaluation demonstrated that MADHOUSE re:exit did achieve its aim of facilitating greater understanding of the link between past and present, exemplified in the extracts below:

*Where my son lives now is beautiful, but it does not matter how lovely
your prison is, it is still a prison, your four walls are your four walls if you are just
sitting around like that.”*

*We human beings like to believe in progress. It’s dangerous. People see TV
programmes about institutions and think it is the past.*

(Walmsley et al., 21)

The performance also succeeded in encouraging theatre-goers to consider steps they could take to support campaigns to improve the lives of people with learning difficulties. In telling histories of the present through creative, surreal and disruptive forms, MADHOUSE re:exit revealed hidden aspects of people’s contemporary experiences, focusing on loneliness, boredom and isolation. It was a deliberately disorientating production, where familiar

narratives, ideas, and events were blurred and merged; an exercise in historical shape-shifting which effectively and provocatively contested the notion of “learning difficulty” as a fixed and stable phenomena. Reflecting on the show’s impact, Paul Christian commented:

It achieved sense of a framework of discussion and it set off a blue print of people who had seen the show who had never seen a performance as big as that put on by people with learning disabilities - altered their mind-set through how it all came together and how it was told. How it was done so professionally. The set the staging was very high quality - this was very important.

I think Madhouse played a big part - our next big show is all about virtual reality and how it not only encapsulated the feeling of how we see technology and how its evolving it also gives the true perspective on how people see us now – how we are nothing more than just avatars trying to be a part of the world but not really existing but just floating there like ghosts. This brings it back to how we can dramatize that in a performance and deliver that message – how we shouldn't be viewed as a transparent entity.

Conclusion: From actors and academics to historian activists

Conversations amongst the team prior to writing this article suggested that through Madhouse we all experienced a shift in identity from our existing roles (actors, educators, researchers) to something else, yet to be defined. The project was explicitly political and participatory,

offering exciting opportunities to democratise the making of history, while using that history to address contemporary questions of social injustice. We conclude this article by reflecting upon whether we might now be described as “historian activists” and – particularly for Paul Christian – how his engagement with Madhouse influenced his identity and sense of self. Sue Ledger begins, reflecting on many years working in the field of “learning disability history”, primarily through the prism of academic research:

What does it mean to be an historian activist? To me, it means both hearing about the past from people with learning disabilities and their families, and sharing important historical messages with them, and others. Hence the Social History of Learning Disabilities Research group, an inclusive group dedicated to adding to the historical record, and furthering interest in and knowledge of the history of learning disabilities.

It means letting go, too. In working with Access All Areas, after sharing important information with the members, we watched as they created their own interpretations. The memory shared, of my shock on visiting Farleigh Mental Handicap Hospital in the early 1980s to find the patients shared toothbrushes, became one of the conduits for AAA to convey the reality of institutional life. The toothbrush game. Similarly, standing in Harperbury imagining how restricted were the lives of residents, was translated into Doctor’s Keys, a variation on Grandmother’s footsteps, the familiar children’s game. The “patients” creep up on the doctor as her back is turned to try to steal the keys to the door of the locked ward. If she turns and catches them they are “in punishment.” Two people found this so scary they asked to leave the room.

On reflection, the power lay in combination of our factual stuff with the work of the creative enablers to translate fact into feelings. It was through these emotional connections that people could connect past and present, the similarities between the lives of those distant institutional residents, and their own lives, in London today. This was beyond my skill set – my job was to light the touch paper, it was up to others to run with it while I watched.

Sue and Paul's conversation unfolded as follows:

Paul: With the labels, I feel I can really say they all apply – an actor, an author, a historian, and an activist. I like to own all these roles because each of them gives a different aspect on how the different pieces need to be seen and put together in order to try and encapsulate a powerful and complex subject such as disability rights.

Sue: so do you mean that it's now as though you move from being an actor to an activist but it is more circular – with all of these roles existing at the same time and all informing each other?

Paul: Yes that's right I think you can do more by having all these ways of approaching something.

Sue: What about the term historian activist? Does that term make sense to you?

Paul: Yes it does and I like the term. Like if you know your history you can use it. Like with Madhouse use the stories of the past for change now. It's powerful.

Sue: I like the way it's a term that feels comfortable for all of the writing team - like you, me, Jan and Liz to use. We all have different backgrounds but we are all bringing these to our work as historian activists.

Paul: Yeah it works – I mean you can still be other things - like me as trustee and now an author. It's all connected.

As Sue Ledger reflects above, the term “historian activist” brings a sense of equality to our relationships. It helps collapse the omnipresent binary of “disabled” and “non-disabled” that so often characterises the experiences of people with the label of learning difficulties, particularly in their relationships with the academy. It reflects the common ground between our team: a desire to support more people with learning difficulties to be producers of knowledge, and to use that knowledge to help improve people’s lives. It enables us to acknowledge that this was a truly participatory and inclusive endeavour. The actors’ creative responses (the exhibition and the immersive performance) were the outcome of collaborative efforts, also involving academics, museum officers and theatre specialists. Reflecting on the production of *Theatres of Memory*, Sophie Scott Brown in her 2019 article considers the challenge Samuel faced in seeking to “de-privilege” his own important contribution as historian and activist, in order to sustain a grand narrative of pluralism and active participation. Within the context of our team, we do not feel the same pressures to “write each other out” of the story. All of us who contributed to Madhouse (and indeed the

authoring of this article) brought to bear valuable – and valued – insights and experiences. We didn't always agree, but we learned from one other. The SHLD group has long subscribed to the perspective that the academy can and should be “a catalyst in a sustained dialogue between different registers of knowledge” (Sophie Scott Brown, 308). The term “historian activist” reflects therefore what united us on this project – a belief that history is made by many “invisible hands” (Samuel), and that history can be used as “a tool for exposing (and disrupting) the hegemonic structures through which individual subjectivities were both constituted and, in turn, subjugated” (Sophie Scott Brown, 308, citing Johnson 2007). As historian activists, we acknowledge the power of grand historical narratives to shape contemporary experiences, and the importance of finding collaborative and inclusive mechanisms to contest and de-stabilise such narratives. As Paul Christian argues:

Taking leadership is a big part of it. Not only gives us a sense of power what we can achieve but also properly set up a ripple effect and butterfly effect – how one event can alter the cause of others. You can see the effect from Madhouse –altering the way disability is viewed can help tackle prejudice in other areas where it might still be very strong.

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