



Funded by
the European Union



Theatre as a Tool for Connection: A Practical Guide to Artistic Encounters with Neurodegenerative Conditions

CULTURE
MOVES EUROPE

@otrahanden.culturemoves



**Funded by
the European Union**



This work was produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union.

The endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors:

Handan Akarsu Scarabello- Professional Coach (PCC-ICF) and Facilitator

Giuseppe Scarabello- Psychotherapist

Andrea Marchetti - Actor

Silvia Birizioli- Actress

Cecilia Roni- Social Theatre Performer

Alessandro d'Ortenzi-Actor-Director

Publication date: 05.05.2025



**CULTURE
MOVES EUROPE**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

- 01 • Why Theatre? Why Now?
- 02 • Who This Guide Is For
- 03 • What You'll Find Inside

Chapter 1: Guiding Principles

- 04 • Guiding Principles

Chapter 2: The Exercises

- 05 • Touch: The Puppet
- 06 • Trust: You Lead, I Trust
- 07 • Smell: The Spice Table
- 08 • Sound: Rhythm Circle, The Mirror
- 09 • Visual Based Exercise
- 10 • Appendix
 - Material List
 - Safety & Accessibility Tips

Chapter 3: From Exercise to Expression

- 11 • Creating a Collective Performance

Chapter 4: Reflection & Integration

- 12 • Reflection: A Space for Integration and Connection

Chapter 5: From Project to Practice

- 13 • Turning a Moment into a Movement

Closing Words

References





INTRODUCTION



Why Theatre? Why Now?

In a world where neurodegenerative conditions are becoming increasingly common, **theatre offers a different kind of language, a language of movement, sound, silence, and presence.** It helps us express what words can't say. It allows us to listen beyond speech. And it offers everyone involved, artists, caregivers, and participants alike, a shared space to feel, connect, and remember what it means to be human. This guide emerged from a unique artistic exchange where therapists, artists, caregivers, and individuals affected by these conditions used theatre to humanize experience and foster meaningful connection.



Neurodegenerative conditions are progressive disorders of the nervous system, such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and various forms of dementia. They gradually impair memory, communication, movement, emotions, and behavior.

While these diseases are not curable, **we can enhance the quality of life for both those affected and their caregivers.** Creative, embodied practices like **theatre and music offer powerful ways to foster connection, expression, and emotional relief.**

This guide is inspired by research—particularly "The Potential Role of Drama Therapy in the Prevention and Delay of Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia"—which highlights the therapeutic potential of artistic expression in dementia care. **Theatre, in this context, becomes less about performance and more about presence, empathy, and shared human experience.**

Who This Guide Is For

This guide is intended for:

- Artists and facilitators seeking to use performance as a way to connect with individuals in vulnerable situations.
- Caregivers and healthcare professionals interested in incorporating creative practices into care routines.
- Educators, social workers, and cultural professionals working in intergenerational or community-based settings.
- Anyone curious about the intersection of art, health, and human connection.



What You'll Find Inside

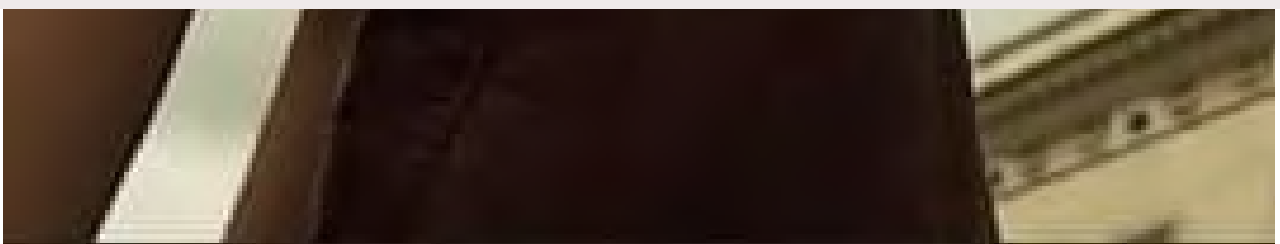
- A step-by-step overview of theatrical and sensory-based exercises used during our mobility
- Reflections on trust-building, emotional safety, and inclusion in therapeutic art settings
- Participant feedback and stories that show the impact of embodied, creative encounters
- Guidelines for adapting exercises to different groups and settings
- Tips for creating a safe and inclusive space where vulnerability becomes a strength
- Insights into how art can help reframe illness not as an ending, but as a new way of relating





CHAPTER 1:

GUIDING PRINCIPLES



Guiding Principles

Before diving into exercises, it's essential to understand the values and intentions behind this work. When working with people affected by neurodegenerative conditions, and their caregivers, ethics, presence, and sensitivity are just as important as creativity.



Presence Over Performance: This is not about “putting on a show.” It’s about being together. Theatrical tools become ways to connect—not to entertain or assess, but to encounter others.

Slowness is a Gift: Neurodegenerative conditions affect memory, processing, and physicality. The pace of the work should slow down, not speed up. Allow silence. Allow repetition. Allow space for breath.

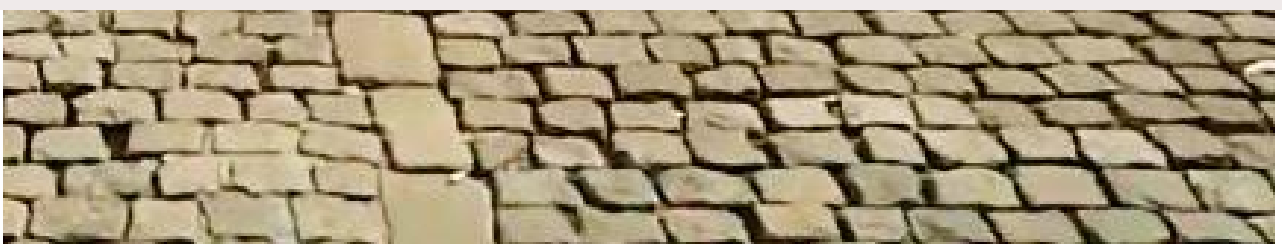
Listening Beyond Words: Not all communication is verbal. Be open to listening with your eyes, body, and intuition. Often, the most meaningful exchanges happen without words.

Mutual Respect and Trust: Participants are not “patients” or “subjects.” They are collaborators in a shared experience. Build trust slowly. Give clear instructions. Always obtain consent, verbally or nonverbally—before initiating physical contact or blindfolded activities.

Artistic Vulnerability: As a facilitator, your presence is your instrument. Be willing to be seen, to not know, to share your own emotion. Vulnerability invites connection.



CHAPTER 2: EXERCISES



TOUCH— BASED EXERCISE

“The Puppet” (Marionetta)

Purpose

Explore control, surrender,
and awareness of body

Setup:

In pairs. One person is the
"puppet", the other is the
"puppeteer".



- 1 How:
 - The puppeteer gently guides the puppet’s body—head, arms, hands, and legs—into different positions.
 - The puppet allows their body to be moved without resistance.
 - After 2–3 minutes, switch roles.
- 2 Facilitator Notes:
 - Always ask for permission before touching.
 - Keep touch slow, soft, and clear.
 - Encourage stillness before and after the exercise for reflection.
- 3 Feedback examples:

“I didn’t know I could trust like that.”
“It was peaceful to not have to decide what came next.”

TRUST AND MOVEMENT

“You Lead, I Trust”

Purpose

Deepen connection and awareness through non-visual navigation

Setup:

In pairs, One partner wears a blindfold, the other leads them slowly through space.



- 1 How:
 - The leader takes the blindfolded person gently by the hand or arm.
 - Move around the space for 3–5 minutes in silence.
 - Switch roles.
- 2 Facilitator Notes:
 - Use calm, open spaces with no trip hazards.
 - Give participants time to pause, breathe, and reflect.
 - Offer a moment at the end to describe what they felt, heard, or imagined.
- 3 Reflection Prompts:
 - How did it feel to be led without seeing?
 - What emotions came up when your partner took your hand? And when they let go?
 - What helped you feel safe or unsafe during the walk?

SMELL AND TEXTURE

“The Spice Table”

Purpose

Stimulate memory and emotion through scent and texture

Setup:

Prepare small bowls with herbs, spices, and aromatic plants (rosemary, lavender, mint, thyme, etc.).



- 1** How:
 - Participants are invited to close their eyes.
 - One by one, they smell or gently touch each item.
 - Optionally, invite them to guess or describe what it reminds them of.
- 2** Variation:
 - Use dried flowers or leaves for added texture.
 - Create themed sequences (e.g., “summer garden”, “kitchen memories”).
- 3** Facilitator Notes:
 - Ensure no allergens are used.
 - This exercise often triggers memories—allow time for emotional responses.
- 4** Reflection Prompts:
 - What memory or feeling comes to mind with this scent?
 - Can you describe the texture or sensation?
 - Does this remind you of a specific place, person, or time in your life?
 - How did your body or mood respond to the smell?

SOUND— BASED EXERCISE

“The Rhythm Circle”

Purpose

Build unity, awareness, and collective energy through shared sound

Setup:

A group of 5+ participants stands in a circle.



- 1 How:
 - One person starts a simple sound—e.g., clapping, tapping, humming.
 - Others join in one by one, each adding a unique sound that complements the first.
 - The group builds into a shared rhythm, letting it grow organically.
 - After reaching a peak, slowly begin removing sounds until there is silence again.

- 2 Facilitator Notes:
 - Allow the rhythm to evolve without verbal coordination.
 - You can repeat the cycle several times or introduce objects for sound-making (paper, spoons, etc.).
 - The return to silence can be powerful—use it as a transition into discussion or rest.

- 3 Reflection prompts:
 - “How did it feel when the group became one voice?”
 - “What did silence feel like after the rhythm stopped?”

VISUAL— BASED EXERCISE

“The Mirror”

Purpose

Develop awareness, empathy, and creative leadership

Setup:

In pairs or participants stand in a circle.



- 1 How:
 - One person enters the center of the circle and begins moving slowly.
 - Everyone else mirrors their movements with attention and presence.
 - When the person in the center feels complete, they return to the circle and another person takes their place.
 - Continue until all who wish to have had a turn.
- 2 Facilitator Notes:
 - Movements can be abstract or inspired by emotions, nature, or music.
 - Encourage spontaneity and authenticity.
 - Use music to guide mood if helpful, or remain in silence to focus on subtlety.
- 3 Variations:
 - Pair work: two participants face each other and mirror one another in silence.
 - Emotion-based movement (e.g., joy, confusion, nostalgia).
- 4 Reflection Prompts:
 - How did it feel to have your movements mirrored by others—or to mirror someone else’s?
 - What did you notice about the connection between you and the group while moving in silence?

Appendix

Materials List

- Soft blindfolds or scarves
- Bowls with spices, herbs, flowers
- Portable speaker or percussion instruments (optional)
- Paper and markers for reflection
- Comfortable, quiet space
- Mats or chairs for rest
- Water and snacks for breaks



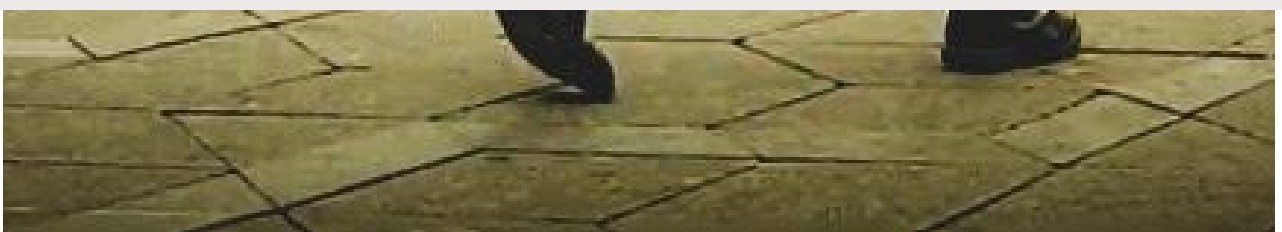
Safety & Accessibility Tips

- Always provide clear consent-based instructions for touch and movement.
- Make activities adaptable to all mobility levels—seated versions are always valid.
- If working with people affected by Alzheimer's or other cognitive challenges, **have a professional caregiver or family member present.**
- Emotional responses are normal. Be prepared to hold space for sadness, confusion, or joy.



CHAPTER 3:

FROM EXERCISE TO EXPRESSION



A Collective Performance

After building trust, practicing sensory-based exercises, and engaging with movement and sound, you may choose to co-create a final performative moment. This is not a traditional play—it's an invitation to share presence and story, guided by the tools you've practiced.



Tips for structuring the performance:

- Use a circle as a central symbol of inclusion and community.
- Select exercises to include live, such as the mirror or rhythm circle, inviting audience participation.
- Use soundscapes made during workshops as background music.
- Share short spoken reflections or poems from participants or caregivers.
- Consider ending with a moment of silence or a collective gesture to honor the community created.



CHAPTER 4:

REFLECTION & INTEGRATION



Reflection: A Space for Integration and Connection

Reflection is a vital part of the artistic process, especially when working with people affected by neurodegenerative conditions. It allows participants to process their experiences, express emotions, and make sense of what they felt during the session. Reflection also strengthens group connection, reinforces memory, and offers a safe space for emotional release. For facilitators, it provides important insights into the impact of the activities, helping guide future sessions with greater sensitivity and care. Most importantly, reflection honors the shared experience and gently supports the transition back to daily life.



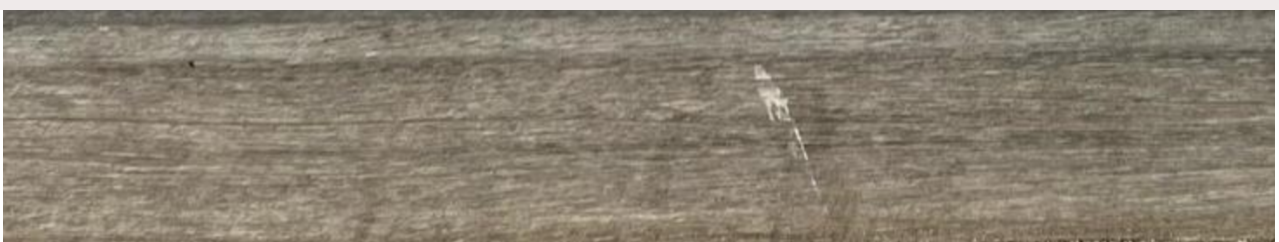
Suggested Reflection Activities:

- **Circle Talks:** invite each person to share one word or sentence about how they feel after the session.
- **Drawing Emotions:** participants illustrate their experience with simple shapes or colours.
- **Memory Mapping:** after sensory exercises, participants mark which smells, sounds, or movements reminded them of something important.



CHAPTER 5:

FROM PROJECT TO PRACTICE



Turning a Moment into a Movement

This guide is not the end of a project, it is the beginning of a mission. Our experience showed that **even short, sensory-rich theatre sessions can open doors to deep connection**, and awareness. The tools offered here are simple, human, and adaptable. Their power lies not in perfection, but in presence.



How to Continue the Work

- **Facilitators and Artists:** Use this guide to develop your own artistic practice in care contexts. Start small, one exercise, one group, one moment.
- **Caregivers and Healthcare Workers:** Try integrating a short theatre-based activity into your daily routine. Even five minutes of mirroring or rhythm can offer relief and connection.
- **Community Organizers and Educators:** Organize local workshops to share these practices and build inclusive, creative spaces for all ages and abilities.
- **Policy Makers and Funders:** Consider supporting programs that combine the arts and health sectors. Invest in training that values emotional well-being and human connection.
- **Researchers and Universities:** Use this guide as a starting point for deeper study into the impact of theatre on dementia care and caregiver burnout.

Closing Words

Neurodegenerative conditions often take away language, memory, or independence, but through theatre, we can offer something back: a sense of identity, a moment of joy, and a place of belonging. We hope this guide will inspire you to keep creating, feeling, and listening.

As we learned: from one moment to another, everything can change, so let that moment be full of presence, sound, and care.

References

1. **Chatterjee, A., & Vartanian, O.** (2014). Neuroaesthetics. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 18(7), 370–375. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2014.03.003>
 2. → On the brain's response to art and aesthetics.
 3. **Dassa, A.** (2018). "Opening Our Hearts to Music": Music Therapy for Persons with Late-Stage Alzheimer's Disease. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 60, 10–16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2018.03.002>
 4. → On the use of music in reaching people with advanced Alzheimer's.
 5. **Harries, B., & Sinding, C.** (2010). Drama and dementia: Exploring the potential of drama in practice. *Dementia*, 9(2), 259–281. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1471301210364454>
 6. → On drama-based approaches in dementia care and their ethical implications.
 7. **Young, R., Camic, P. M., & Tischler, V.** (2016). The impact of community-based arts and health interventions on cognition in people with dementia: A systematic literature review. *Aging & Mental Health*, 20(4), 337–351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2015.1011080>
 8. → A literature review supporting the cognitive and emotional benefits of arts engagement.
 9. **Quinn, B., & Blandon-Gitlin, I.** (2021). The Potential Role of Drama Therapy in the Prevention and Delay of Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 74, 101814. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2021.101814>
 10. → The central inspiration for your project, directly aligned with your methodology.
 11. **Killick, J., & Craig, C.** (2011). *Creativity and Communication in Persons with Dementia: A Practical Guide*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
 12. → A practical handbook often used by arts therapists and caregivers.
- Noice, T., & Noice, H.** (2006). Artistic Performance: Acting, Memory, and Cognitive Function. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 33(2), 101–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2006.01.001>
- Research on acting and its effect on memory and cognitive function in older adults.