



## Performing Pandemic Grief: The Arts of Losing

**Birkbeck Centre for Contemporary Theatre**

17-18 November 2022

Funded by Birkbeck's Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund

### **Day 1, 17 November (online)**

09.45-10.00                      Welcome (Fintan Walsh)

10.00-11.30                      Performing (in) the Pandemic: Michael Buffong, Rachel Mars, Conor Mitchell  
(invited artist panel) (Chair: Fintan Walsh)

*Break*

11.45-13.00                      Practices of Care and Remembrance: Dr Paquita de Zulueta, Dr Gabriella  
Calchi Novati, Jo Clifford & Lesley Orr (Chair: Fintan Walsh)

*Lunch*

14.00 - 15.30                      Performing Cultural and Community Care: Dr Holly-Gale Millette, George  
Gumisiriza, Dr Olga Danylyuk, Dr Emma Cox (Chair: Molly Flynn)

*Break*

15.45-16.45                      Keynote 1: Prof Sarah Wagner (Chair: Fintan Walsh)

*Break*

17.00-17.15                      Launch: Birkbeck Centre for Contemporary Theatre/Peltz commission, Yanik  
Reido and Bruno Vilhar



**Day 2, 18 November (in person)**

*(Tea and coffee provided)*

10.00-10.15                      Welcome (Keynes Library) (Fintan Walsh)

10.15-11.00                      Health Rituals: Jo James, Ruby Colley and Dr Nicola Abraham (Keynes Library) (Chair: Fintan Walsh)

*Break*

11.15-12.15                      Grief Personal and Social: Rhiannon Armstrong, Martin Kenny, Adie Mueller (Keynes Library) (Chair: Louise Owen)

*Break*

12.30-13.00                      Funerary Rites: James Murray (Keynes Library) (Chair: Fintan Walsh)

*Lunch (drinks and sandwiches provided)*

14.00-15.00                      Keynote 2: Dr Lucy Selman (Keynes Library) (Chair: Fintan Walsh; link provided to those registered)

*Break*

15.15-16.45                      Workshop 1: Prof David Harradine (Keynes Library)  
Workshop 2: Shabnam Shabazi (G10 Studio)



## ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES

### Panel: Performing (in) the Pandemic

**Michael Buffong** is Artistic director of Talawa Theatre Company. In 2020, Talawa produced *Tales from the Front Line ... and other stories* which documented the contribution of Black workers at the front line of the COVID-19 crisis, using verbatim interviews to create a lasting historical record.

**Conor Mitchell** is a composer, librettist theatre-maker, and Artistic Director of Belfast Ensemble. In 2020, Belfast Ensemble produced a film version of Mark Ravenhill's song-cycle *Ten Plagues* (2011), a song cycle that explores historical plagues.

**Rachel Mars** is a writer, performer and theatre maker. In 2022, she presented *Forge* at Testbed, Leeds, which centres on the replication of a gate stolen from Dachau concentration camp and the intergenerational effects of the Holocaust.

### Panel: Practices of Care and Remembrance

#### Reflections on Witnessing and Experiencing

In this talk I will share my reflections of witnessing and experiencing loss and grief as an inner-city general practitioner and as a therapist. Much of my work has been with those who have been involuntarily displaced and have sought safety and a new life in this country. They have lost their homes, their families, and their countries, even their sense of identity.

In my role as GP lead of the NHS outreach team with Grenfell survivors and the bereaved, I encountered profound grief and outrage, but also astonishing humanity, solidarity and resilience. I witnessed the importance of culture, of individual and collective life stories, and of social factors in shaping how people expressed their grief and what helped and hindered them in their healing. I was only too aware of how the imposition of a 'Western' medicalised psychological model was often unhelpful, if not actually harmful.

During The COVID-19 pandemic, I was working on the 'backline' supporting the clinicians and medical students by facilitating [Schwartz Rounds](#) and by offering mentoring and coaching. Many encountered painful and difficult situations and some lost colleagues to COVID.

With examples and narratives, I will describe the many facets and different types of grief - in particular collective grief, disenfranchised grief, ambiguous grief and so-called prolonged or complex grief. I will briefly consider what can help the bereaved to regain meaning, purpose and a sense of peace.

Grief is the normal response to the death of someone one loves or cares about. It is not an illness, but part of the human condition. I will critique the tendency to medicalise grief, to force it into pre-ordained trajectories, or stages, and the drive towards control and 'closure'. I propose that there is no closure, but there can be healing, renewal and hope.



**Paquita De Zulueta** qualified as a GP in 1984 and worked until 2021 as an inner-city, London-based GP and has a special interest in mental health, migrant health, clinical ethics, professional wellbeing and development. She is an honorary senior clinical lecturer at Imperial College since 2000, has worked as a part time CBT, compassion focused & EMDR therapist since 2008, and a qualified coach and mentor (pro-bono and private) for several years. She has been teaching and writing about clinical ethics since 1993. She is currently setting up a charity called Human Values in Healthcare Forum.

Paquita has been mentoring and coaching doctors, including during the pandemic, since 2000, and has contributed during the pandemic to webinars on trauma, resilience, and grief. She worked for three months as GP lead for the NHS Grenfell Outreach Team following the disaster in 2017 and for ten years as clinical volunteer for Doctors of the World's London Clinic. She is a Schwartz Round facilitator (winner of the Point of Care Shining Star award 2021) and a recent member of the clinical ethics committee of Imperial College NHS Trust. She was also a member of the Nuffield Council in Bioethics for six years.

### **How the Unconscious Performs Grief and Loss in Times of Pandemic Catastrophes**

The same urge for truth that gave birth to science should realize what progress implies. Science must recognize the as yet incalculable catastrophe which its advances have brought with them.

C.G. Jung <sup>1</sup>

In this paper I will put forward some psychoanalytic reflections on the ways in which the unconscious, individual and collective, has been dealing with pandemic grief and loss (not only caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is still ongoing with its variant OMICRON at the time of writing, but also by the so-called Anthropocene). My argument stems from C. G. Jung's reflection on the ways in which the so-called modern *man* has had the demonic illusion to have conquered nature, which dramatically has resolved in the current geological epoch, namely the Anthropocene. As Žižek puts it, 'there is a paradox in the very heart of this notion of the Anthropocene' in that 'humanity became aware of its self-limitation as a species precisely when it became so strong that it influenced the balance of all life on earth.'<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic is the very expression of such unbalance, and has forced us to acknowledge that we humans are one of the many species on earth, and that surely, we are not the privileged one. In this brief intervention I will attempt to reflect on three 'losses' that have stemmed from the pandemic, with a particular attention to their subjective and collective psychoanalytic significance: 1) the loss of unconscious touch, from greetings to thinking, which has caused an hyperawareness around our hands<sup>3</sup>; 2) the loss of fearless breathing symbolically and practically performed by the use/abuse/dismissal of sanitary masks; 3) the loss of accidental human proximity which has been pathologized by the introduction of disruptive new concepts, internationally signified via the English language, such as 'social distancing' and 'lockdown.' I will discuss these 'losses' by critically engaging with the 2021 film *Don't Look Up* directed by Adam McKay, which to me exemplifies both philosophically and psychoanalytically the art(s) of losing of/in our times of pandemic catastrophes. I will conclude my argument by advancing the hypothesis that, if we agree with Žižek that mankind 'was able to dream of being a Subject only [...] against the background of a stable nature,'

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<sup>1</sup> C.G. Jung, 'The Symbolic Life,' CW 18, para 1367 [*italic added*].

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Ecology against Mother Nature: Slavoj Žižek on Molecular Red,' *Verso*, 26 May 2015, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2007-ecology-against-mother-nature-slavoj-zizek-on-molecular-red> (accessed November 15, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Openly realised as a consequence of a collective infantilisation by the government (i.e. we were all taught via online tutorials and billboards the correct way to wash our hands and the strong prohibition to touch our face or other surfaces. Still in many toilets there are posters instructing us on rightful handwashing).



then the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that deeply destabilised such a background, can be psychologically integrated not only as a way-too-long list of losses, but also as a paradoxically productive loss, in that it could provide an unknown psychological space in which a new subjectivity could emerge. Perhaps a subjectivity that *does* look up.

**Dr Gabriella Calchi Novati** is a cultural philosopher and an internationally accredited psychoanalyst based in Zürich, Switzerland. In her academic research she works at the intersection of performance and Anthropocene studies, biopolitics and psychoanalytic theory. Her work has been published in peer-reviewed journals such as 'Theatre Research International', 'Performance Research', 'Performance Paradigm', 'About Performance', and 'Cinema: Journal of Philosophy & the Moving Image'; and in many edited collections. She regularly lectures at international symposia, conferences and institutions. In 2019 she was visiting professor at Trinity College Dublin. Dr. Calchi Novati is a member of the Advisory Research Committee of 'The Anthropocene Atlas of Geneva' ((TAAG): <https://head.hesge.ch/taag/en/>), and a member of the organising/scientific committee of the international and interdisciplinary academic/artistic network '[T]Error on Tour.' Her academic research is inextricably linked to her approach to psychoanalysis. By working with and through art and performance, Dr Calchi Novati engages with the powerful effects that non-verbal expressions have on those who have experienced trauma and/or neglect, and the potentiality that individual creativity has for the realisation of the self and the strengthening of the ego.

### **The Covid Memorial**

In 2021, Jo Clifford and Lesley Orr created *The Covid Requiem*, as a rite of a remembrance for those who died during the pandemic. They performed it at Pitlochry Festival Theatre in September 2021, and in November 2022 at St. Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh, alongside a 30-strong choir singing Fauré's *Requiem*. In this presentation, Jo and Lesley will describe the origins of this work, how it was structured, how the experience unfolded and our need for rites of communion and remembrance.

**Lesley Orr** is a historian, an activist for gender and social justice, and a member of the Iona Community. **Jo Clifford** is a playwright of over 100 plays, many of which have been performed all over the world, including *Every One*, *The Tree Of Knowledge*, *Faust Parts One And Two*, *Ines De Castro* and *Great Expectations*

### **Panel: Performing Cultural and Community Care**

#### **Performing Common Grief: 'The We Grieve Project', Clapton (2019 – 2020)**

In this talk I would like to discuss the role of Community Activists, Display, and Public Performance in the expression of grief in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Late in 2019, I was approached by colleagues in the Clapton Commons Community Organisation to help devise a way to help our community come together to mourn the loss of multi-denominational neighbours and friends. I was asked to make use of some hoarding that was encircling a soon-to-be completed community rebuild project. We had nine panels to fill and the message had to be simple, impactful, and represent the intersectionality of the weekly 'grief circles' held on Clapton Common. These weekly gatherings had become central to a community processing loss. The display could be seen from the main road leading in and out of Northeast Hackney. And soon it was a newsworthy public act that became a feature of North Hackney. Late in 2020, the display would take a performative turn when the community began posting 'remembrance tags' on what had come to be referred to as 'The Grief Wall.' Later, in a public



performance, rosemary (for remembrance) sprigs were added to the display, as we ceremonially accounted for our year-long practice of grief.

I would like to discuss the practice of these community acts and performances via display in terms of process, ritual and social and cultural practices. It is interesting to note that the 'We Grieve' project later developed into a 'We Welcome' project, in the context of the rise in traumatised migrants arriving to our community following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. This seems to suggest that design and the arts are increasingly being resourced as a strategy to process intersectional grief and trauma beyond -19.

**Dr Holly-Gale Millette** is Senior Lecturer in Intersectional Identity Cultures at Winchester School of Art (WSA), University of Southampton. A former theatre practitioner, she is now a display practitioner, creating public and social display in her locality since 2018. Past research has been in cultural and theatre history and the Gothic. Currently, she is working on a lengthy action-based research project with a local Housing Estate. She lives and works, mainly, in London.

### **Repatriationscapes: COVID-19 Corpses and Grief Mirage in Death Politics**

'Repatriationscapes' (Gumisiriza, 2021) is a framework for exploring death and the process of repatriation of the deceased. This term encompasses the physical space and emotional aspects within multidimensional funerary rituals and practices. Repatriationscapes consolidate the ontological meaning of identity and belonging through traditions and other rites of passage (Gennep, 1960). My paper draws on my on- going PhD research into the repatriation of corpses among African diaspora in the UK. It focuses on the margins of grief amplified by COVID-19 losses. I examine the period before, during and 'post' the pandemic. How and whose grief was marginalised, particularly at the peak of the pandemic? I argue that the subtle micro-arguments at various levels altered, edited, and recycled grief (Gumisiriza, 2022b), but for who? The paper focuses on key issues involving : a) Constructed forms of grief in 'We are together in this' COVID-19 pandemic necro politics; b) Resistance for and against COVID-19 corpses in an African context (Lozano, 2020); c) Anticipatory grief, stigma, and grief disenfranchisement (Doka, 2002); d) Technology outwit of virtual funerals against (African context of mourning and grief) and COVID-19 losses (Gumisiriza, 2022a).

**George Gumisiriza** is pursuing a PhD in Social and Policy Sciences, funded by ESRC and the University of Bath. His PhD thesis is Repatriationscapes: death and body repatriation among African diaspora in the UK. His work focuses on Afrocentric perspectives on death. George obtained Master of Research in International Development (distinction) from the University of Bath (2021) and MSc in Social and Cultural Theory from the University of Bristol (UK) ( 2020). He has a Bachelor of Education (Honours) from Makerere University, Uganda. George moved to the UK in 2011.

### **'We Will Never Forgive and We Will Never Forget'**

Millions of people suffered loss during COVID-19 pandemic, which transformed the world into a new reality marked by grief and uncertainty. When the tremendous loss requires time to heal, the looming danger of nuclear war almost annihilated the processes of collective mourning with a new existential threat. Mourning has been declared in dozens of cities and towns in Ukraine after the bombarding and massacres of citizens by the Russian army. The pace of escalation leaves no room for the traditional rituals to support the grieving process, which makes it even more difficult for society to cope. While people struggle to cope with unprecedented levels of death and grief brought by the



pandemic and modern warfare, the state encourages the display of stoic heroism in the face of grief and loss. The expression of grief is transformed into a powerful tool to strengthen and unite the nation. For instance, there is only one news channel on television in Ukraine, which unites all the news channels that existed before. There is a confrontation with mourning: how to express the complex set of emotion in the middle of war? Famous Ukrainian author Andrei Kurkov writes: 'But it seems strange to grieve in the middle of a war. Indeed, after a period of grief, life should normally return to normal...Waves of hatred are sweeping across Ukraine, pushing Ukrainians to search for internal enemies. They are looking for blood'. With prolonged war ahead the unresolved grief turns into anger and rage. It is time to think how we can handle our emotions more gracefully, seeking catharsis instead of turning the event of loss into revenge and allowing it power over us. As people often seek more private and safe spaces to process their sense of grief can performance practices provide escape from the dehumanising effects of war?

**Dr. Olga Danylyuk** works as researcher, director, dramaturg, curator. Olga completed her PhD using PaR methodology at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, under the title: 'Virtually True'. Intermedial Strategies in the Staging of War Conflict (2015). Olga continued her research by conducting fieldwork in the war zone in Eastern Ukraine. She worked with CIMIC Ukraine and different volunteer organisations in the Zone of the Antiterrorist Operation. Her performative research resulted in a large-scale promenade performance with 16 teenagers from the war zone: *Letters to an Unknown Friend from New York* (2018) and performance project *Contact Line* (2020). Her new documentary performance *A Visit to the Minotaur* has been presented at Voila Europe Festival, London. Currently, Olga is a British Academy Research Fellow in RCSSD and Research Fellow at Birkbeck School of Arts, London, Member of the Law and Theory Lab, University of Westminster. She is also a director of I- DO Lab performance company in Kyiv, Ukraine.

### **Performing Public Apology: Grief as Political Responsibility**

In January 2022, the British actor Rory Kinnear wrote powerfully in the *Guardian* of his realisation that the day in the spring of 2020 that his family buried his sister, Karina, was the day UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson violated lockdown laws by holding a garden party at 10 Downing Street. Karina had died of COVID-19 and Kinnear wrote in 2020 about the new forms of grief that his and many other families had had to navigate; he described digital communication technologies substituting for physical touch during his sister's final days and those that followed. If Kinnear's first piece drove home the impact of the isolating trauma of pandemic grief, his 2022 piece served to politicise this grief. As biomedical events mediated by emergency legislation restricting the gathering of bodies, death and grief in the COVID-19 pandemic are at once private and political. Experiences of grief in this context exemplify Judith Butler's observation (vis-à-vis military deaths) that instead of being 'privatizing', 'solitary' or 'depoliticizing', grief whose cause has a collective dimension 'furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order' (*Precarious Life* 2006, 22). Fundamental notions of shared vulnerability underscored new registers and choreographies of grieving during the pandemic, and more recently, Butler has noted that COVID-19 demonstrates vulnerability to be 'not just the condition of being potentially harmed by another. It names the porous and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives' ('Mourning Is a Political Act' 2000). While Butler does not refer directly here to responsibility, it was a failure of responsibility – personal, moral, political – that forced Johnson to issue a public apology in 2022. This paper examines Johnson's public apology, setting it alongside other performances of political contrition (for example, to the indigenous victims of invasion and systemic violation; the victims of child sexual abuse; the complicity of nations in acts of genocide) and their mobilisation of collective grief.





**Emma Cox** is Reader and Head of Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her work examines the intersections of migration, memory and place in contemporary performance. She is the author of *Performing Noncitizenship* (2015) and *Theatre & Migration* (2014), editor of the play collection *Staging Asylum* (2013), co-editor of the interdisciplinary volume, *Refugee Imaginaries: Research Across the Humanities* (2020), and contributing editor of the Digital Theatre+ video and publishing collaboration, *Performance and Migration* (2021).

### **Panel: Grief Personal and Social**

#### **Emotion in the apocalypse: trauma-informed sound for performance projects in lockdown**

I will share how myself and my fellow artist colleagues with lived experience of disability created multidisciplinary works in 2020 and 2021 that were intended to support audiences to process their experiences as they were happening. In particular, I will explore my own use of sound in these projects, as a trauma-informed approach grounded in lived experience of long term mental distress.

Works excerpted/discussed will include:

- 'How to Hold, Behold, and Be Held' a large digital project for Wellcome Collection disseminated on social media in winter 2020-21.
- 'The Microscope Sessions' an online performance and live painting piece created with Tim Spooner and performed for The National Gallery, The Place, and Southbank Centre during 2020-21.
- 'Exposure' a film screening and performance presented by the vacuum cleaner (premiered autumn 2021).

**Rhiannon Armstrong** is an interdisciplinary artist making wide-ranging work in varied contexts since 2006 under the lifelong series title Instructions for Empathetic Living. Rhiannon is an Another Route International Fellow (2022-23) and was awarded the Adrian Howells Award for Intimate Performance (2019). Working across relational performance and interventionist digital practice their recent project 'The Slow GIF Movement' has been touring the UK since 2019 and has a global reach of over 45 million. Rhiannon's most recent commissions include a BBC Culture in Quarantine commission broadcast on Radio 3 ('The Soothing Presence of Strangers') and 'Monstrous Delicacy' a film accessioned into the Wellcome Collection that explores what it's like to access Wellcome Collection holdings on psychiatry as a person with lived experience of long-term mental distress. Rhiannon was a founding member of the Artists' Sounding Board at Battersea Arts Centre (2014-2021) and Associate Artist at Oily Cart Theatre (2019-21). [www.rhiannonarmstrong.net](http://www.rhiannonarmstrong.net)

#### **Mart(y/i)n: a Practice-as-Research Performance of Grieving Through a Ghost**

Edward Martyn (1859-1923) was an Irish benefactor of the arts, and founded the Irish Literary Theatre (1899) alongside W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, which would become The Abbey, Ireland's national theatre. Despite his significant contribution, however, Martyn has both been forgotten, and actively erased, within Irish dramatic history, largely due to his suspected queer sexuality. Upon discovering Martyn in my research during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the first year of my PhD, a kinship formed between his legacy and my own past traumas related to queerness and isolation. My devised performance, Mart(y/i)n, became a postdramatic cabaret which invited the ghost of Martyn back to the stage, so I might explore my own suppressed queer grief (Martyn's) through his experiences





(Martyn's). This paper shows how the liveness of theatre disrupted time, and allowed me to reduce the distance between two hidden queer experiences, and begin a process of grieving and healing.

**Martin Kenny** is a third year practice-as-research PhD student from the University of Galway, Ireland, focussing on queer temporalities and dramaturgies of haunting in Irish drama

### ***Another Goodbye: Navigating Loss and Grief Through Journaling and Performance***

*Another Goodbye* was developed as an audio performance for an audience of one in their own home. The piece is an intimate and tender exploration of the loss of a parent. It combines spoken word with soundscapes and gentle acts of audience self-care, and is based on the experience of my mother's death in 2020. It was co-created in collaboration with sound artist Armin Lorenz Gerold and director and dramaturg Peadar Kirk, with consultancy from Dr Kathryn Mannix. *Another Goodbye* was made to provide a space for reflection and conversation about death and grief in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and is based on journal entries I wrote as the events were unfolding. The sparse narrative begins with my mother's decision to stop intensive medical treatment and ends with the selling of the family home a year later. From time to time listeners are invited to perform small acts of self-care, such as sipping from a drink, wrapping a blanket around them, looking at the sky or tracing the lines on their hands. *Another Goodbye* was supported by Arts Council England, Cambridge Junction, Touch Radio and The Place Theatre, Bedford, where the audio version premiered in May 2021. I am now in the process of developing a live version of the piece. During the 15-min. presentation I will perform key extracts from *Another Goodbye* framed by a short introduction and conclusion, which explore the role of journaling and performance in the navigation of loss and grief. The R&D version of *Another Goodbye* is available on Touch Radio: <https://touchradio.org.uk/touch-radio-151-adie-mueller-armin-lorenz-gerold.html>

**Adie Mueller** is a German-British actress and theatre maker. Her work explores the relationship between the performer & the audience, as well as well-being and performance. Adie extensively trained in the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis, an Australian variant of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training. She has self-produced various live performance projects since 2015 and has toured the acclaimed poetry installation *My Heart, My Heart: Live Poetry Jukebox* to performance venues, and arts and literary festivals, such as Greenwich & Docklands International Festival, Winchester Hat Fair, Arts by the Sea, Lakes Alive and Ledbury Poetry Festival. Adie also works as Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Theatre at Middlesex University under her real name Antje Diedrich.

### **Panel: Health Rituals**

#### **Good Grief: Owning Pain and Embracing Joy**

*A collaboration between the Dementia Care Team at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust and Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.*

In 2021 the casual observer walking into a ward at Imperial would see closed doors, flurries of staff depersonalised by layers of PPE and distant visions of patients gasping behind oxygen masks. Heads down and an unnatural hush as staff and patients had to come to terms with this new reality. This was the narrative of the pandemic, but it was not the only story that existed. If the observer looked into a side room, they would see two team members dressed in PPE, dancing to the wedding song of the gentleman in bed, keeping him company during his wife's funeral, which he was too unwell to attend.



Nearby, a lady of 104, engages in a storytelling workshop and laughs about getting into trouble for running off to a party in the war when she was supposed to be entertaining the troops with her dance routines. Behind a blue curtain another lady is solving a mystery with a group of teenagers, supported by 2 team members wearing sick bowls as detective hats to add to the ambience of the fiction. As the pandemic began to slow, staff started the process of adjustment and of coming to terms with what had happened. Wards were still quiet and laughter was in short supply. However, it could be found, in the unexpected guise of staff coming together to make music videos in the day rooms to be shared with the 10,000 strong Imperial workforce. Teams weighed down by their experiences were lightened by a senior staff online pantomime, produced by Students and filmed in pockets of time in day rooms and offices and premiered on the wards on Christmas Eve. This talk will share unexpected moments of joy in traumatic times created by our knowledge exchange project and the impact these had on the patients and staff.

**Jo James** (RN, MSc, PG Cert Older People) is Chair, RCN Older People's Nursing Forum, and works at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust as Consultant Nurse for Dementia and Delirium. She has been involved in local and national initiatives to improve care of patients with dementia in hospital. Jo's particular areas of interest are training, rights, hearing the voice of people with dementia, pain assessment, nutrition and hydration and creative activity in acute settings. Jo has several publications on refugee care and care of survivors of torture as well as on care of people with dementia in the hospital setting and is currently collaborating on a guide to arts in hospitals with Dr Nicky Abraham.

**Ruby Colley** is a Dementia Clinical Nurse Specialist, currently working in the dementia care team at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust. Ruby has previously worked in acute and community based older people's mental health and dementia services including prion diseases, and forensic inpatient mental health services. Ruby has also worked in Parkinson's disease and dementia research, including a first-in-human clinical trial. Ruby is interested in quality improvement projects to support patients living with dementia in hospital. She has completed a project focusing on supporting patients living with dementia on surgical pathways and is looking to begin a project exploring supporting LGBTQIA+ patients living with dementia in hospital.

**Dr Nicola Abraham** is Senior Lecturer in Applied Theatre Practices at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. She has most recently been working on a range of digital applied theatre, film and virtual reality storytelling projects in NHS hospitals to develop new person-centred approaches to creating bespoke creative artefacts, including VR 360 videos, intergenerational augmented reality-based process dramas with primary school children and older adult patients living with dementia, and films to improve subjective wellbeing of patients in acute dialysis wards. She has published in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* (RiDE), *Applied Theatre Research*, *Contemporary Theatre Review* and co-edited the 2nd Edition of *The Applied Theatre Reader* (2020), *Making Hospitals Better* (forthcoming, 2022) and *Applied Theatre with Urban Youth: Witnessing Change* (forthcoming, 2023).

### **Presentation: Funerary Rites**

#### **'The Singing Undertaker'**

**James Murray** is a Welsh funeral director and singer who doubled his services during the pandemic, in response to government restrictions on funeral attendance, by also singing during services. Colloquially known as 'The Singing Undertaker', in his presentation, James will have a conversation about his work and the importance of music to mourning.



## **Keynotes**

### **1. 'Where Do I Put All This Grief?': Pandemic Loss and Collective Mourning in a Time-space of Contestation**

With the COVID-19 death toll in the United States having surpassed one million and mandates largely removed, the question of how to commemorate still unfolding monumental loss arises, stirring empathy from some corners, indifference or impatience from others. In this talk, I examine the schismatic politics of pandemic remembrance in the US: who is responsible for remembering individual lives when so little responsibility for collective death goes acknowledged? What national narrative of loss is possible when the causes, conditions, and consequences of death remain so contested and mis/disinformation flows so freely across social media channels? Drawing on ethnographic research conducted at the public art installation, *In America: Remember*, staged at the National Mall in Washington D.C. in the fall of 2021 and its archive of memorial inscriptions, alongside virtual and in-person commemorative events held over the past two years, I consider what it means to tend to the memory of the dead in such an unsettled time-space of mourning. The 'where' of this process has proved especially troubling for many of the bereaved who lament the absence of a place to set their sorrow—that is, on an abstract level of 'where do I put all this grief?' as one surviving relative phrased it, and, more concretely, in light of the lack of physical memorial spaces or sites. COVID remembrance opens up questions of (in)visibility and recognition in the face of contested experience.

**Sarah Wagner** is a Professor of Anthropology at George Washington University. She is the author of *To Know Where He Lies: DNA Technology and the Search for Srebrenica's Missing* (2008) and *What Remains: Bringing America's Missing Home from the Vietnam War* (2019), winner of the 2020 Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing. She is also co-author of *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide* (2014) and co-editor of *The Cambridge Handbook of the Anthropology of Death* (forthcoming). Funded by the National Science Foundation, National Endowment of the Humanities, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation and awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, her research focuses on post-conflict societies, memory, forensic science applied in the wake of war, and, most recently, on COVID-19 death and mourning. In addition to her scholarly publications, she has written opinion editorials and blog posts for the Washington Post, The Hill, Baltimore Sun, and LA Times.

### **2. Experiences of Bereavement during the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Development of the Good Grief Festival**

People bereaved during the initial COVID-19 crisis faced extraordinary challenges: COVID-19 deaths are often sudden and unexpected, infection control measures limited contact prior to death, social support and mourning practices were profoundly disrupted, and the threat of the virus was omnipresent. In many ways, COVID-19 conflicts with our cultural conceptions of a 'good' death and grief – not least due to the social isolation experienced by the bereaved. In October 2020, in this context of profound, ubiquitous grief and separation from friends, family and community, Good Grief Festival launched online. The festival aims to normalise conversations about grief, bring knowledge and research to the public and offer community, solace and support to bereaved people. In this presentation, Dr Lucy Selman will present findings from her research into grief and bereavement during the pandemic and reflect on her experience developing the Good Grief Festival.



**Dr. Lucy Selman** is Associate Professor in Palliative and End of Life Care at the University of Bristol, England, and Founding Director of [Good Grief Festival](#), a public engagement initiative which has reached over 26,000 people since October 2020 and received global media attention. Good Grief provides solace and support to bereaved people as well as a platform for Dr Selman's programme of research in bereavement. From 2020-2022 she co-led a mixed-methods national study of bereavement during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on bereavement support services, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Dr Selman leads a research group at the University of Bristol and over the past 17 years has published extensively on experiences of serious illness and how to improve end-of-life care; decision-making and communication; family care-giving and bereavement; and widening access to services.

### **Workshops**

*Attendees must choose one of the following:*

#### **Workshop 1: Gathering Around Grief (Keynes Library)**

This workshop is based on the Grief Gatherings that are part of Fevered Sleep's project [This Grief Thing](#). It's a conversation about grief, with a particular focus on mourning dress and how grief and bereavement is signalled by, or manifested through, clothing and material cultures. Participants are invited to bring an item of clothing that belongs to someone they've grieved for, or a totemic object that has meaning to them in relation to grief, that they'd be willing to talk about.

**David Harradine** is co-artistic director of Fevered Sleep ([feveredsleep.co.uk](http://feveredsleep.co.uk)) and Professor of Interdisciplinary Practice at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London.

#### **Workshop 2: Creative Re-Membering (G10)**

This interdisciplinary workshop draws on the relationship between objects and words. Participants are requested to bring an object and/or document important to their own family history that we will use for creative exploration...(or to bring a copy of object or digitized image if actual object feels too precious to bring). Through creative writing, actions and rituals, we will explore the role of creativity and creative arts practices in dealing with mourning, bereavement and loss. Informed by Shabazi's own multi-disciplinary practice, participants will explore their own memory archives as the basis for creative production.

**Shabnam Shabazi** is an interdisciplinary activist, a maker and enabler of creative projects, working across a range of art forms through a solo and collaborative arts practice. In her solo practice she works with objects, video, digital media, text, performance and installation. Shabnam's work is autobiographical and archival, harnessing 'stories from within, stories from ourselves'; animated by notions of home, place, displacement & the question 'Who Am I'?... Ongoing research is idea of 'body as house', and more recently: 'body as home.' Her signature theme is 'home'. Key themes of her practice are 'artistic practice of exorcism' and 'art as a guarantee of sanity'. Developing an ongoing body of work across a range of disciplines inspired by her ancestral heritage & key memories of her life.

Previous solo works include: 'Snail Portrait'; 'Body House'; 'Speaker's Corner'... Collaborative works include: 'Firestarters'; 'There Ain't No Black In The Union Jack'; 'Terra Nullius'; Revoluton Arts. She has



worked with: Magic Me; Pacitti Company/Spill Festival; Live Art Development Agency; Artsadmin; Metal; Red Room; Pan Intercultural Arts; Hackney Empire; Chat Palace; Out of Joint; Theatre Centre; Paines Plough; Goldsmiths & QMUL Shabnam is currently Associate Research Fellow in School of Arts at Birkbeck, University of London.

### **Digital Commission**

*Danse Macabre* is a binaural interpretation of Emily Dickinson's poem CXVI. CXVI explores a speaker that looks at and measures other people's grief. *Danse Macabre* reinterprets this speaker as Emily, a gender-questioning presence in a flat during the second COVID-19 lockdown. Join Emily for a dance with their analytic eyes.

Commissioned by the Performing Pandemic Grief: The Arts of Losing Symposium, supported by Wellcome Trust ISSF, Birkbeck Centre for Contemporary Theatre, the Peltz Gallery and BiGS (Birkbeck Gender and Sexuality).

**Aya v. O** (a.k.a. Yanik Riedo, they/them) is a translator, director and performer and graduate of MA Text and Performance (Birkbeck/RADA). Their work as a performer spans theatre and audio formats. Previous performing credits include *Leben Lügen Sterben* (Theater am Neumarkt, 2014), *Schafe* (TedxZurich, 2018), *Chronik der Zukunft* (Rote Fabrik Zurich, 2018) and *I See You as I Am* (Aya v. O, 2022).

**Bruno Vilhar** (he/him) is a sound designer, audio producer and musician. He currently works in film, TV and video game post-production. This post-production work includes *The Witcher* (Season 2), *Scenes From A Marriage* and *Hitman 3*. He also created the sound design for Elliot C. Mason's poetry collection *City Embers*.

**Emily Dickinson** (she/her) is an American poet who lived from 1830 to 1886. Her poetry often deals with themes of death, loss and immortality. She lived much of her life reclusively and most of her poems were published after her death.

### **Support Services**

If you find any of the material explored in this symposium upsetting, and would like to speak to someone qualified to listen, we encourage you to consider contacting some of the support services recommended by [Mind](#).