



# CONFLICTING FEMALE IDENTITIES IN OLD AGE: THE REPRESENTATION OF OLDER WOMEN IN DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE'S *RIPCORD*

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Inesa Sheuchenko

Universidad de Lleida

**I**n the last decades, ageing has become one of the most important social issues to attract the attention of academics from the social sciences and the humanities. As an interdisciplinary research domain, ageing studies allow scholars to explore the meanings of old age through the various fields that intersect with it. As one of those intersections, theatre offers unquestionable opportunities to analyse its portrayals and to dispute the dominant “master narrative of decline” based on a vision of ageing as an inevitable biological, psychological and social decay (Gullette 2004). Despite the increasing interest of scholars in the analysis of old age in widely-acclaimed classical and contemporary plays, scant attention has been paid to the representation of older female characters in lesser known dramatic texts. While their thriving visibility in the contemporary plays is undeniable, the portrayal of older female characters is rather ambiguous as often based on ageist stereotypes. This paper offers a close reading of *Ripcord*, a comedy by the American playwright, lyricist and screenwriter, David Lindsay-Abair, winner of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Rabbit Hole*. Foregrounding issues of care related to senior living facilities, as well as aspects of old-age identity and of later-life creativity, this study interrogates liminal

and stereotyped categorizations of older female characters in contemporary plays through one particular case study.

**Keywords:** ageing; theatre; gender; old-age identity; later-life creativity

## 1. Introduction: On Theatre and Ageing Studies

In the last three decades, reconsiderations of ‘old’ and new socio-cultural interpretations of ageing have awakened the widespread interest in ageing studies. The inter- and multidisciplinary nature of this field—that “emphasizes ‘the inside of ageing’” (Katz 2014, 20)—has united the academics from the social sciences and the humanities in search of the answer to the complex and demanding question: what do ageing and old age mean in the contemporary world? In spite of the acknowledged benefits for both fields, one of the evident challenges for this inter- and multidisciplinary alliance is to find “common ground” for fruitful research (Lipscomb 2012, 118) taking into account cultural, narrative, performative and material conceptualisations of age (Swinnen and Port 2012, 12). Some drama and performance scholars unanimously assert that these approaches “may be beneficial at one research cite: the theatre” (Lipscomb 2012, 118), and highlight its close and direct connection to ageing studies (Basting 1998; Bernard and Munro 2015; Fuchs 2014; Lipscomb 2012; Mangan 2013; Switzky 2016). Theatre’s complicity with the construction of social and cultural ideologies is evident (Mangan 2013, 9). It is, “among other things, a sign-system [that] draws on and quotes the signifiers, codes and modalities of everyday life” (*ibid*) and among these are ageing and ageism. First coined by Robert Butler in 1969, the term “age-ism” refers to discrimination and prejudice towards people of a certain age group. The cult of the youthful body, the general lack of ambiguity in understanding as well as portrayals of old age—which is commonly associated with physical and mental decline, dependency and approaching death (Gullette 2004)—trigger society’s anxiety and fear of ageing. These “stereotypical designators for life in old age” (Kunow 2010, 307) “reflect a dominant gerontophobia” (Woodward 1991, 7) and spark ageism.

Valerie Barnes Lipscomb considers theatre “a fertile ground for various theoretical angles in age studies” (2012, 117). She has suggested combining critical, narrative and performative approaches for theatre-age scholarly research that would be beneficial for both fields. All in all, this combination can raise society’s awareness of ageism, reveal and shape social attitudes towards old age, and help to better understand the notion of performativity of age, which is a natural component of theatre (Lipscomb 2012, 117-121). Núria Casado Gual has added another advantage that can emerge from the interdisciplinary theatre-ageing coalition, the one of theatre’s exchangeability, through which “academics, artists and the community” can re-construct “an integrative, more complex, and also more enriching discourse of ageing” (Casado Gual 2019b).

Theatre has always mirrored the world’s social and political issues (Billington 2007; Lipscomb 2016, 154; Quilter 2015; Casado-Gual 2019a). The theatre’s innate ability to mirror reality can explain a significant increase of plays focusing on the older characters and the process of ageing in the last decades. Through her selective survey, theatre and age studies researcher Bridie Moore notices a considerable growth of new age-centred productions in British mainland theatre in the 2011/12 autumn/winter season. Nevertheless, according to the scholar, this boost does not necessarily assure a subversion of the adverse images and meanings ascribed to old age (Moore 2014, 190). The intersection of age and gender is a decisive component in the theatrical context that needs attention from the triple theatre-age-gender perspective. Some critics and researchers claim that theatre and drama, as part of popular cultures, are considered male dominant environments (Aston 1995, 3; Byrski 2014, 17; Cousin 1996, 67; Curb 1985, 304; MacArthur 2015). Moreover, the portrayal of older female characters in contemporary plays is rather partial, incomplete or ambiguous as it is often based on ageist stereotypes. The majority of the plays analysed by the aforementioned theatre and age critics are mainly commercial plays (many of them winners of the Tony or Pulitzer Awards, or nominees for the Best Play category in those awards), as seen in the seminal monographs of Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (2016) and Michael Mangan (2013). Lesser known works are, unfortunately, not given proper attention, even though they form part of the so called “women-conscious drama”, to borrow the

term from Rosemary K. Curb, that is, plays either by or about women which reflect various aspects of women's lives from a socio-political perspective (1985, 302).

## 2. On the Play

This paper offers a close reading of *Ripcord*, a comedy by the American playwright, lyricist, librettist and screenwriter, David Lindsay-Abaire, winner of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Rabbit Hole*. It examines how the play reveals and subsequently interrogates liminal and stereotyped categorizations of older female characters in contemporary plays through one particular case study. Foregrounding issues of care related to senior living facilities, as well as aspects of old-age identity and of later-life creativity, this study analyses the ways in which the play intends to move away from the socially constructed ageist patterns regarding older women.

Commissioned by Manhattan Theatre Club through the Bank of America New Play Commissioning Programme, *Ripcord* received its world premiere at Manhattan Theatre Club (New York) on October 20, 2015. Set mostly at the Bristol Place Senior Living Facility, the comedy uncovers opposing, at first sight, personalities of two widows, Abby Binder and Marilyn Dunne—both in their seventies-eighties—, who are forced to share the same room in the nursing home. Marilyn, an altruistic, amicable, incessantly talkative and diabolically sweet woman never gets angry because “[i]t always leads to an ugly place” (17). She takes on a challenge of living with her grumpy roommate who reminds Marilyn of her deceased husband: “He was all pushback and bluster too. And I got very good at working around that. It’s sort of my area of expertise. If I lived with him, I can certainly live with you” (44). Abby, her solitary, taciturn, sharp-tongued and, above all, unafraid coeval claims that fear, as well as other things in life, disappear “when you live long enough” (30). She openly expresses her dislike of Marilyn and the wish to stay in ‘her’ room alone: “I don’t like you. It’s that’s simple. I don’t like you, and I want you to go. Look, some people like having someone around. I’m not one of those people” (42). The two women decide to participate in a no-rules competition in which Marilyn must get really angry and Abby – be really frightened: “How about this, I try to find something that makes you scared, and *you* try to

find something that makes me *angry*. That'd be fun!" (30) If Marilyn wins, she will have the bed by the window; otherwise, she will leave the room all for Abby. Their apparently innocent bet turns into a dangerous game that reveals not only their peculiar sense of creativity, but some troublesome truths that each of the women would rather keep undisclosed. Even though the play has received somewhat ambiguous criticism—having been called as an “expertly engineered situation comedy”, “an amiable if simplistic crowdpleaser”, “a lazy piece of writing without [...] freshness” or “a non-essential and not very funny new comedy” (Broadway World 2015)—, this theatrical piece is worth considering from the interdisciplinary perspective of theatre-age-gender studies due to the complexity of its older female characters and their ambiguous representations in the play.

### 3. On the Care Home

In his seminal monograph, theatre and age studies critic Michael Mangan asserts that contemporary theatre and drama frequently recur to certain “‘stock’ settings” (2013, 199). According to the scholar, the care home has become “a sub-genre in its own right, with its own conventions, repeatable stock characters and recyclable tropes and plotlines” (Mangan 2013, 199). It is one of those dramatic environments that has recently adopted a specific meaning within the context of ageing (Mangan 2013, 199). The dubious images of residential homes either in modern culture or in the media once were the reason for the widespread negative beliefs or even the notion of crisis within the care home system (Chivers and Kribernegg 2017, 17; Mangan 2013, 199; Miller *et al.* 2017, 487-488). However, certain shifts in its contemporary representations have been traced by age-studies scholars. There are numerous examples of homelike, safe and friendly assisted living facilities that adopt qualified person-centred care, encourage their residents to pursue their own interests and provide them with certain freedom for creativity (Chivers 2012, 69; Fleming *et al.* 2017, 93; Karpen *et al.* 2016, 6).

The idea of considering nursing home as a site and a symbol that constructs society's images of ageing is not uncommon among scholars (Gilleard and Higgs 2017, 229). A relatively neutral description of the Bristol Place Senior Living Facility in Lindsay-

Abaire's Ripcord, not without occasional negative connotations, represents one of the society's greatest fears, namely that of old age. Situated next to a park, the nursing home is "fairly homey, as far as these places go" (5) with some domestic facilities. The dining room, the mailboxes and the dayroom are situated on the lower floor, while the upper floors contain both double and single rooms for those who can afford the latter. A somewhat negative opinion about the institution is noticed through Abby's complaints about food service. The care home accommodation is quite simple, "[t]here are two beds, a couple of end tables, two sitting chairs, and two identical dressers" (5). The residents can arrange their private spaces according to their wishes. Natural light fills in Abby and Marilyn's room through "[a] wide set of windows line" (5) and allows them to grow some plants. The attentive and amiable personnel do not only provide the residents with their favourite food, but respond to their specific requests, invite them to the shows outside the care home or decorate the common spaces according to the occasions. The older people are given certain flexibility which creates a homelike atmosphere within the institution. Nevertheless, these positive images of the care home are easily questioned and subsequently undermined by constant administration of medications, regular "improv classes" and "sense memory exercises" to mitigate the inmates' health problems (54-55, 84), occasional reminders of a resident's death (7-8)—all of which are signifiers of failure and decline often associated with old age. This paradoxical description of the institution fills it, in James Struthers's terms, with somewhat "conflicting images" in which the meanings of "home, hotel, hospital [and] hospice" all intertwine with one another (2017, 283). The explicit reasons behind the main protagonists' arrival at the care home are quite different. Marilyn, a proud mother of four adult children—who have successfully taken over the family business of skydiving—and an admiring grandmother, is there supposedly because of her heart impairment. For Abby, however, this place seems to be the only one she can afford and dwell in. Nevertheless, as the play's plot unfolds, it becomes clear that the residence has also become a shelter and an escape from her estranged and troublesome son, Benjamin, whom Abby has not seen for four years. It is within this context of long-term care institutionalization that two different life-course stories of the older women protagonists are uncovered and complex human relationships develop.

## 4. On Old-age Identity

These stories, that are either about or from an individual, “articulate [a person’s] identity, a so-called narrative identity” (Baars 2012, 195). According to Jan Baars 2012, the narratives about the identities of older people in particular should not be seen as mere description or portrayal of their lives, but should instead stimulate a significant reflection on changes of those identifications (173-174). Several scholars have pointed out the unfixed and developmental nature of identity as well as its close connection and intersection with age and ageing (Baars 2012, 186; Zeman *et al.* 2017, 258; Cruikshank 2008, 147; Gullette 2004, 121-139). What is more, it is commonly asserted that multiple identities are inherent to all human beings. Nevertheless, each and every one of them may either rise in importance at a different life stage of an individual (Gullette 2004, 127) or interconnect and merge with other identities at the same time (Cruikshank 2008, 147-151). It is in the light of this multiplicity and interconnectedness that the identities of the main older female characters in Lindsay-Abaire’s *Ripcord* are analysed.

Though the succession of Abby and Marilyn’s multiple identities may vary and the limits between them can be blurred, they may be manageably (but not conclusively) listed as follows: woman, wife, mother, grandmother, old. While the first four are gender based and, simultaneously or not, may be perceived by the heroines as their core identities, ‘old’ as a fixed identity is resisted by them. Some ageing studies scholars claim the latter to be deficient, limiting, dreaded and socially and culturally constructed (Cruikshank 2008, 149-150; Gullette 2004, 124). What is more, all of these identities would be incomplete without their racial, socio-economic, educational and locational co-identities. All of them are either maintained, revealed, protected or kept in secret and even struggled against. What differentiates the two older female characters in *Ripcord* is the way they embrace their individualities and react to the factors that affect their stability. Abby, seemingly trapped in the isolated care-home-resident co-identity, looks for loneliness and avoids speaking about her past. She is visibly annoyed by Marilyn’s talkativeness, kindness, friendly relationships with the personnel and, above all, her family. The play script reveals that Abby used to be a teacher at a grade school, she was happily married and had a son. The treasured status of a wife, a mother, a

job holder and a house owner was undermined and lost as a result of her son's drug addiction. This loss or, in Gullette's terms, "identity stripping" (2004, 130) leads to Abby's search for social isolation. Some social care researchers state that "having a place is akin to belongings" (Fleming *et al.* 2017, 93). Abby has lost all of her possessions, therefore she wants to keep the room all for herself as her only belonging. And in doing so, she struggles for maintaining her fixed co-identity of a solitary care home dweller.

Marilyn's narrative identity varies from the one of Abby in several ways. Unlike her roommate, Marilyn was not successful in her marriage. However, she is really proud of all the people she has "generated" (48), namely her children and grandson who, in turn, would do anything for her. Grandmother is an identity that slightly overshadows the others. According to Barbara MacDonald and Cynthia Rich, it is "the safest identity for an old woman [...] whose primary motive for living is to love and nourish the young" (2001, 58). Marilyn's identities of mother and grandmother are harmoniously balanced until this convergence is shattered by the offensive comments of her "not thin-skinned" roommate (40). Abby ridicules the painting of Marilyn's grandson and thus shatters and strips her 'safest' identity, which now has to be defended and restored. These examples of the women's reaction echo the common belief that people usually fight when they are deprived of their essential identity (Gullette 2004, 127-128).

In spite of these obvious differences, there is one identity that both women can equally share—that of 'old'. Even though there exists an absolute interest in keeping "a fixed identity of 'old'" among gerontologists, "age as a primary identity" is questioned by the academics (Cruikshank 2008, 149). Margaret Cruikshank, for example, refrains from embracing it as an identity on various reasons. According to the scholar, it comprises only part of a person's life, invokes negative body image connotations and makes sharp divisions between different societal groups; hence it "reinforces the dualism young/old" (Cruikshank 2008, 149). It is generally asserted that older people abhor the negative meanings that 'old' entails, especially when 'old' is the synonym of stereotypical characterization, sameness, liminality and decline. Nevertheless, contemporary society considers 'old' an "all-encompassing identity", even though chronological age is only one



of the characteristics that define older people (Cruikshank 2008, 150).

## 5. On Progress and Decline Narrative

At this point, it is crucial to remember that theatre is “an embodied art” (Switzky 2016, 137) that honestly reveals society’s feelings, and these very often include fears of old age and ageing. In one of the scenes, Abby and Marilyn are invited to visit a haunted house where they meet a clown. Lory M. Culvell accurately refers to the clown figure as “a seminal theatrical convention in society [that] will continue to “mutate” and to be present in some form as long as theatre has a society with which to interact” (n.d.). Thus, the appearance of this comic figure in the play may serve a threefold function. Firstly, it epitomizes contemporary society and its deeply ingrained negative meanings ascribed to old age through ageist comments such as “some *aged* meat”, “[d]on’t dawdle, ladies” or “my *old* friends” (29, 30, 33). Secondly, this symbolic character mocks and laughs at one of the greatest contemporary fears and angsts—that of old age. And finally, through the clown’s dramatic interaction with the audience, the reader and other protagonists in the play’s scene, this “seminal theatrical convention” (Culvell n.d.) identifies and challenges the dominant “master narrative of decline” (Gullette, 2004, 132).

First theorized by the pioneering age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette in *Aged by Culture* (2004), the decline narrative articulates ageing in terms of deterioration, impairment and loss (54). Moreover, it is frequently considered gendered (Greer 1992, 335-336; Holstein 2018, 6; Woodward 1991, 8) because contemporary “[s]ociety is much more permissive about ageing in men [than in women]” (Sontag 1972, 31). Therefore, ageism has some gender-based meanings (Marshall 2006, vii; Greer 1992, 286). Both the decline narrative and ageism have been widely applied in the theatrical context. The former, Mangan claims, can be frequently expressed in plays and performances as the human body, which “is always of a specific age”, is “the primary medium of theatrical performance” (2013, 8). The latter, according to the theatre and age studies critic, “is articulated and perpetuated [...] through stereotypes; and theatre and performance has always made

extensive use of stereotypes and stock characters” (Mangan 2013, 23). Lindsey-Abaire resorts to some stereotyped images in his portrayal of both older women. The examples of these stereotypes are seen through Marilyn’s infantilized behaviour at the scary house, her childlike excitement when waiting for her family — “You’ve been waiting like a kid at Christmas for them to show up.” (60)—, the excessive talkativeness— “It’s been three weeks. And she never stops talking.” (7)—and constant little bets with Abby— “That woman is troubled, Scotty. I think there’s something wrong with her. She’s always trying to make little *bets* with me.” (9) Her companion is not deprived of this adverse characterization either. Abby is seen as a grumpy, stingy, stubborn and silent loner. What is more, both women are involved in gossiping about the young caretakers’ affairs. In the grand scheme of things, in spite of Marilyn’s unlikeness with Abby, the two women resemble each other in different ways. They share not only the room, the age, the civil status, the stubbornness and the capacity to face the challenge; but the subject of their narratives of decline, which is primarily male, namely Abby’s worrisome son and Marilyn’s violent husband. Nevertheless, some scholars assert that there have been certain changes in contemporary theatre in recent years. Theatre has not only started to move away from the dominant focus on decline towards the so called “progress narrative” (Gullette 2004, 17), but has done it through the increased portrayal of older women (Henderson 2016). The main protagonists’ progress narratives in *Ripcord* develop through the ways both women confront its binary opposition or, with reference to Gullette, through “the collective resistance to decline forces” (2004, 17). Thus, Marilyn survives her victimized wife identity, challenges her roommate who reminds her of her deceased transgressive husband, and in doing so, the woman recovers from the previous victimization. What is more, the protagonist continues to develop her true mother and grandmother identities by helping Abby recover her family. Abby’s progress narrative can be traced through the shift of her identities, namely from ‘a mother of a drug addict son’, towards ‘a mother of a recovered from drug addiction son’ and, finally, to the ‘safest’, grandmother identity.

## 6. On Later-life Creativity

The binary of decline and progress narratives exemplified through the older women's identities would be incomplete without one more essential characteristic inherent to both protagonists, that of later-life creativity. The definitions of creativity vary noticeably among the scholars. While some refer to it as "the ability to generate novel ideas" (Riley 2018, 474), others move further away from this focus on a human capacity. Hence, creativity is understood as "spatio-temporal nexuses of doings and sayings" (Schatzki 2014 quoted in Gallistl 2018, 94), a competence "emergent from assemblages of relations between the human and the non-human (things, ideas, social formations)" (Fox 2015, 523), or "a crucial organising principle of Western societies" (Reckwitz 2017, 2). Despite this diversity of interpretations, the majority of the scholars seem to agree that creativity should not be rigorously limited to the arts, but should instead encompass all aspects of everyday life (Hickson and Housley 1997, 544; Reckwitz 2017, 41). As seen in the play, the peculiar sense of creativity revealed through the variety of tricks and pranks the older women play on each other replicates this belief. Moreover, through Abby and Marilyn's ingenuity, the playwright undermines another ageist stereotype reinforced in today's youth-oriented society. This time, the limited characterization questions creativity in old age which is generally attached to younger generations. However, various scholars underline the interconnectedness between creativity and old age as well as the benefits this interrelation offers to both, the ageing individuals and society (Chivers 2012, 69; Cohen 2001; McCormick 2017; Price and Tinker 2014, 282-283). Older people can self-realize their ageing selves (Gallistl 2018, 94) and, at the same time, express what they really are or, in other terms, reveal and/or develop their true identities (Baars 2012, 169-197; Dollinger and Dollinger 2017, 49-64; Fisher and Specht 1999, 459). These theories find their manifestation within the context of *Ripcord*. Abby and Marilyn alternately express their real selves by means of their creative bet. For the older residents, creativity is "a process of liberation" (Gallistl 2018, 98) from their fears and anger. These are not only deeply ingrained in the selves of the older women, but prevent them from developing the women's true identities. In their 1999 study, Bradley Fisher and Diana K. Specht identify four ingredients that

are necessary for creativity development in later life. These comprise a combination of motivation, positive attitude towards art and life in general, imagination or inspiration of an individual, and finally, but not less importantly, time and health (466-467). Besides the women's apparent desire to have the bed by the window or, in Abby's case, the room for herself, both characters are motivated by negative events experienced during the life course. To make Marilyn angry, Abby spreads the humiliating arrest records of her roommate's husband; while Marilyn resorts to Abby's lost family, her sore spot, in search of Abby's fears. The "late bloomers" (Goldman and Mahler, 1995) are equally inspired and imaginative. Neither lack of time nor ill health interferes with their creative process. The women's creativity, as "late freedom" and reflection of their own life narratives (Gallistl 2018, 97-98), is a constant expression of Abby and Marilyn's real selves and, therefore, a mirror of their creative identities.

## 7. Some Conclusions

The way in which older people are portrayed in culture may have a twofold effect. On the one hand, their representation can foster society's awareness of the process of ageing and enhance, in this way, the social, political and cultural meanings of old age in our contemporary world. On the other hand, it can cause ageism and hence reduce, undermine or represent the experience of ageing in a discriminatory way, especially when this representation is mediated through the stereotype. Highlighting the topics of old-age identity and of later-life creativity within the care home context, the paper has offered an illustration of the ways in which older women are portrayed in contemporary theatre. The relative lack of ambiguity in society's understanding of ageing may be the cause of stereotyped and stigmatized labelling of older women as "devalued and frequently invisible" (Clark 2008, 460). The increase of plays depicting older female characters might not assure an undermining of the ageist scripts, but it may, "to a degree, inadvertently amplify the normative construction of old age" (Moore 2014, 190). Even though the playwright resorts to some stereotyped labels attached to the advanced age, these may be interpreted as ways of identifying, analysing and resisting its declinist images. Remembering

Lipscomb's notion of the transformative power of theatre (2012, 130), *Ripcord* can be called an anti-ageist play on various reasons. Firstly, it moves away from the unfavourable images of care homes as "a failure of the system, a desperate measure, or at least a last port of call" (Chivers 2012, 56), and reveals it as a "micro-complex of architectural, administrative, financial, clinical, familial, symbolic, and emotional interactions and power relations" (Katz 2005 quoted in Zeman *et al.* 2017, 248) where recovery, self-discovery and self-expression through creativity may happen. Secondly, the play explores the multiplicity of female identities as, in Gullette's words, "an achieved portmanteau 'me'" that combines "private, self-defined traits, relationships, heartbreaks, and desires" (2004, 125). These identities are in constant development and, to different degrees, embrace the binary of progress and decline. Thirdly, the play foregrounds the issue of late life creativity as inherent to old age, and in doing so, it establishes the new meanings of ageing. Referring to Barbara MacDonald's observation, Cruikshank has reasonably asserted that "a woman in her sixties is still in process" (2008, 150). The two widows, though in a much older age group, are "still in process" as well, namely in the one of creativity, self-discovery, self-realization and identity construction. Taken together, this combination is a powerful means of making sense of older women's lives.

There is much to be gained by examining the portrayal of older people in culture, and theatre in particular. Further research on the topics of ageing and old age in myriad cultural settings and contexts is required. It can definitely incite new understandings of ageing and invite all generations to rethink this complex process in the life-course. Even through Lindsey- Abaire's *Ripcord* "is ultimately not a play about jokes" (Haugland n.d.), the playwright uses humour as a corrective tool to recognize society's fears and anxieties concerning old age and to negotiate them. After all, ageing may be recognised not as the end, but as the ongoing process of development of creative identities.

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