

# artwork

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Published by:  
Community Arts Network of SA  
278 Halifax St Adelaide SA 5000  
Ph (08) 8232 4343 Fax (08) 8232 4336  
SA country freecall 1800 245 678  
Email: cansa@camtech.net.au

The Community Arts Network of SA is a member based organisation. It forms part of a national network of sister organisations in most capital cities across Australia.

#### AIM

The Community Arts Network aims to support arts development and creative expression at community level towards the ideal of diverse and vibrant community cultures.

#### COMMUNITY ARTS

Arts practice and creative expression are at the heart of a community's vitality. People have always come together to sing, tell stories, enact rituals, to celebrate, to mourn and to mark significant events in their lives. Besides being able to see great art, people need to actively participate in these activities. This is what is meant by the term community arts, it might be a new name but it is not a new idea.

#### LOCAL CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

It is through the things we do together as groups and communities that we gain a sense of collective identity, a sense of place and a sense of belonging. When we value these things a positive concern for our social well being follows and we begin to take charge of our present and shape the future to meet our aspirations.

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# c o n t e n t s

## SOUNDS OF THE STREET

1

Maria Leonardis reports on a unique music program helping young homeless people in Sydney take control of their lives.

## COMMUNITY, CONTEXT AND THEATRE

6

Nick Hughes debates a changing role for community theatre and the need for a broader interpretation of 'excellent' and a deeper understanding of the context of the work.

## HEATWORKS: MOVING STORIES

12

Theatre, health and education in the Kimberleys - an innovative and brave program for and by Aboriginal people explored in this article by Celia Moon.

## WORKING WITH DIVERSITY: THE NEW ERA OF MULTICULTURALISM

18

Deidre Williams talks to Vincenzo Andreatchio a musician and member of the Australia Council Community Cultural Development Fund, about the directions of arts funding policies and the challenges of nurturing a culturally diverse society.

## THE COMMUNITY ARTS: WHY IN AND WHY STAY?

22

Graham Pitts reflects on his discovery of and dedication to community cultural development.

# sounds of



# the street

MARIA LEONARDIS

**Maria Leonardis reports on a unique music program helping young homeless people take control of their lives.**

*Locked into the bright lights and street life/  
Only to wind up a statistic if they live that  
long/They get around through the day and  
night/ Selling their bodies to support their  
addictions...Wanting to get out of the hole  
that they dug so deep/Loosing the concept of  
a normal life/Wanting so badly to change  
and make wrongs right/Will it ever  
happen/Or is it all an illusion in their  
mind/Living in fucking Kings Cross  
(G Dean/C Campbell)*

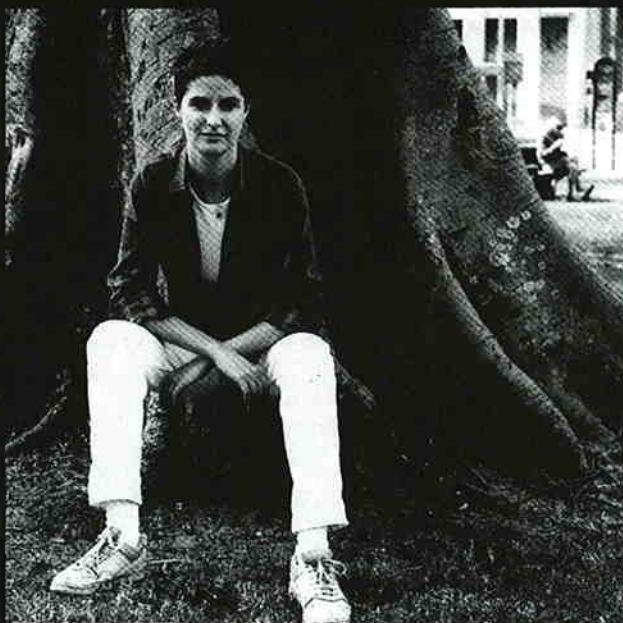
**S**ydney can offer a young person forced out of home, a fast route to homelessness. Without a support network, the skills to get a decent paying job or the basic literacy levels required to fill out an application form, a young person faces displacement and poverty.

Leaving home usually for reasons of sexual, physical, emotional and psychological abuse - what they may simply describe as 'not getting along' - young people often drift to Kings Cross because of its history and hype.

*I roller, ecstatic highs/to lows that crunch  
your bones inside/In vice-like grips/feel like  
they're squeezing life out of you... (A  
Condren/S Bull)*

Images from Sounds of the Street CDs: top - Hereditary, middle - Zone, bottom - Unscarred

'...Out on the street they might be a whore or a junkie (as they refer to themselves) but at SOTS they're a singer, an artist or a poet. The focus is not on the negative aspects of their lives - what's wrong with them or their problems - it's on potential and achievement.'



Ally

**O**n the street these young people are exposed to further violence and abuse, as they are prime targets for pushers and pimps. Drugs and alcohol become a readily available escape, while the boredom of life on the street - being a no-one, having nothing and nowhere to go - deepens a young homeless person's negative self-image.

Ignorance regarding safe-sex practices, irregular patterns of eating and sleeping, compounded by the difficulty of maintaining personal hygiene, leads to health problems. Hanging out on the street and doing crime to survive means that at some point, they will come in contact with the police and have to deal with legal issues.

Homelessness is not just about someone losing a roof over their head or a place to put their stuff. It's about losing the social networks that they've built up over a lifetime, a sense of who they are and where they belong.

Becoming homeless disrupts every aspect of a young person's life and is particularly detrimental to their education and training, at a crucial point in their lives. Their employment prospects are drastically reduced, and this in turn

decreases their ability to become independent and take control of their lives.

#### **Gimme shelter**

Creating a safe place for young homeless people is a start. Providing them with a stable environment to explore something they're interested in, which has an achievable and real outcome, can help young homeless people feel capable and in control.

Sounds of the Street (SOTS) is a course run for young homeless people, which tackles the serious issues and offers participants a safe place to heal, tell their story and achieve something through music.

The project was initiated by Phil Nunn, who is employed by Sydney City Mission as the manager of Creative Youth Initiatives, an umbrella program which provides creative outlets for homeless young people through arts courses such as SOTS, Artworks (visual arts program) and Face-to-Face (drama program).

A registered psychologist, Phil has worked at the Mission for seven years. Before this, he worked for ten years as a professional musician. 'In the last seven

years working with homeless young people, I've found that a lot of them have had very poor education experiences, and they don't read or write very well. The probability of them going back to any formal schooling is very unlikely.'

About four years ago, he hit on the idea that if the young people were offered an activity they were interested in, such as music, they'd want to learn about it. And so, Sounds of the Street began, by taking a group of ten young homeless people with no musical experience, and helping them to write, produce and record their own music.

Phil considers himself lucky to be able to combine his interests in music and creativity with psychology. As I was leaving SOTS' new home in Little Albion Street, I asked which he considered himself first, a psychologist or musician? Just the other day he said, he was talking to his supervisor about his training needs and the kind of skills needed to do his job. He came to the conclusion that ten years on the road as a musician - touring, dealing with agents and sleazy venues - gave him the skills he needed to do what he does at SOTS, much more than his psychology degree.

While the Mission covers Phil's wage and gives him carte-blanche with the programs, it is up to him to hustle the money needed to run the projects and employ staff. When I asked Phil why they moved away from the Cross (the hub of the action), he explained it was a financial consideration - the rent had gone up to \$800 a week.

Recently, Creative Youth Initiatives suffered - along with many other crisis intervention agencies - from Howard's cutbacks, hence their move to Surry Hills. How ironic, a project to combat youth homelessness is forced to relocate to survive.

But, bringing some of Phil's positive perspective to this crisis move, the project has survived and continues to attract financial support from corporate sponsors who make a pretty impressive list - Sony, Deutsche Morgan-Grenfell Bank and Calvin Klein. And, aside from their new home being conveniently located behind the Children's Court, they are closer to the refugees.

*No escape from one's misery/Like a room with no doors/Life presents itself as a damn dark world/that has no escape...*  
(M Hunt/T Powles)

**T**he Sounds of the Street project continues to exist not just because of Phil Nunn's successful hustling, but its relevance. For the homeless participants, there is a real need to express their stories and through this, begin to reinvent themselves into who they want to be.

Phil used to run the Mission's crisis centre for three years. 'People go there because they're homeless, drug fucked or whatever. When the young people go to SOTS or Artworks, they go because they're making music or because they're doing art. Out on the street they might be a whore or a junkie (as they refer to themselves) but at SOTS they're a singer, an artist or a poet. The focus is not on the negative aspects of their lives - what's wrong with them or their problems - it's on potential and achievement.'

SOTS started in 1993 with a small grant of \$16,000 to run a ten week course. They took ten young people from the street, showed them how to play an instrument and gave them access to recording equipment so they could put out a tape of their music. It went so well SOTS received an Anti-violence Project award from the Keating government, as it was seen to keep young people off the street.

SOTS now runs two 20-week courses a year, with the participants recruited from the refuge circuit. Usually there's a waiting list to get in. Once into the course, the young people quickly realise that it is a genuine opportunity for them to make music the way they want it and that the SOTS team is there to help.

What Phil looks for in applicants is not previous musical experience, but a person's desire to tell their story creatively. In psychologist's terms, the storytelling is narrative therapy, 'Everyone has a story about who they are. You have various roles in that story, perhaps a partner to somebody, a son or a daughter. All the stories of who you are form a narrative of your life.'

'These young people have a narrative - it might be I'm a junkie or a whore, or I'm HIV positive. What we try and do is get them to tell their story through a creative medium, and rewrite that story.' The course aims to provide young people with a positive learning experience. This has proven to shift their perception of who they are, thereby helping them discover a new sense of self. Through this process, their drug use often goes down.

The participants selected attend three full-day sessions a week. As individuals they learn to play an instrument of their choice and receive tuition in songwriting. They have the option of collaborating on songs and as a group work towards producing a CD compilation of their music at the end of the course.

With the nature of their lifestyle, it is usually difficult to get young homeless people motivated and committed to

**Homelessness is not just about someone losing a roof over their head or a place to put their stuff. It's about losing the social networks that they've built up over a lifetime, a sense of who they are and where they belong.**

Jani  
(C Campbell/M Williams)

Jani was a good girl, generous in every way  
Mum and daddy loved her, never had nothing bad to say  
Standing in the school yard, mum and dad were late  
To pick her up and take her home  
As they did every day  
Sound of wheels screeching  
As they skidded off the road  
The horror on their faces  
They could not have known  
Not long after the funeral, she had to move away  
To a place in the country, where she did not want to stay  
Her uncle was the only relative she had  
How could she have known  
His intentions were all wrong  
All through the night  
There were screams that no-one heard  
He played with her mind  
So she would not say a word

From *Voice of Evolution*

**The course aims to provide young people with a positive learning experience. This has proven to shift their perception of who they are, thereby helping them discover a new sense of self. Through this process, their drug use often goes down.**

an intensive three month course. But getting and keeping the young people in is the easy part Phil explained, 'In a sense we are working for them, we're helping them create stuff which they want to create and their motivation is not a problem. When I've taught personal development classes for young people, they never turn up. But, if you say here's your chance to make music and play electric guitar or paint, and it's all free, they're waiting on the doorstep to get in!'

The length of the course is substantial, allowing the time needed to deal with the serious issues, namely, accommodation: 'A lot of the young people sleep in the park or in squats. So while they're doing the course, SOTS tries to find them stable accommodation and deal with health and legal problems [by utilising] the other services of Sydney City Mission.'

For many participants, the SOTS course plays a vital part in re-establishing trusting relationships with adults. It connects them with adults who are not telling them what to do or trying to enforce authority.

Phil's attitude is that he's not there to save the young people, but to build relationships with them. 'When the trust is there, the young people start to share their story.'

But his open approach has landed him the criticism of condoning sexual behaviour and drugs.

'If someone is using intravenous drugs, I try and create an environment where they can talk about it, without expecting a lecture...I'll talk about clean needles and tell the young people where to get them.

'The way I look at it, young people are going to have sex, they're going to use drugs and there's very little I can do to change that. But if I can create a trusting relationship...where they will ask questions, then I can give them information and resources which enable them to be safe, and ultimately to make their own choices.

'You usually find if you talk to people openly, without being coercive or pejorative, they will say "this what I liked about it [drugs] and this is what I don't like about it". To be blunt, it's only when the negatives outweigh the positives that they are going to change. Creating an environment where they can look at both sides of the equation honestly and openly, is how you do it.'

Consequently, the participants don't get ear bashings - after all, they're there to make music, not listen to a lecture. And what's expected of participants is simple, 'if you turn up and you're not stoned or violent, then you can have a go.'

He also doesn't tell them what to write about, or impose any censorship. The young people have total creative control. This means they not only learn from their tutors, but use them as professional musicians (which is what they are, for example the bass player works with Jenny Morris and the drummer is ex-Divinyls). When the young people can't achieve a particular sound, they can direct their tutors to play a certain way to get the sound they want.

### Street Stories

'One of the participants was 17 and he'd been on the streets for nearly five years. His father was a violent alcoholic and used to beat him up, so he left home for the streets and hadn't seen his father for five years. He heard on the grapevine that his father was dying of cancer. He wanted to have contact with his father but he didn't want to talk to him so he wrote a song and sent it to his Dad.'

*We try to talk, but always seem to argue/I guess we're both too proud to admit that we're wrong/Heated moments we shared far*

*too often/Cause I'll wake up one day and know that you're gone/And I won't have the chance to say/Dad I'm sorry/I know you did the best with what you had/And I will always be glad/That you're my dad (N. Petersen/T.Powles)*

Releasing feelings they may not have been able to express before, is a cathartic experience. Phil says that on each album, at least half of the 18 songs have a very personal meaning to the young people. The other songs are understandably about drugs or trying to give them up, suicide and abuse. And while much of the subject matter is dark, there are also songs about finding love and hope for the future.

The musical styles vary incredibly - the latest album *Hereditary* for example includes some haunting pop melodies, metal, hardcore techno and grunge.

The array of musical styles is as diverse as the group. There are participants who are from different cultures, HIV positive, mentally ill and intellectually disabled. Emanating from often quite different worlds with their individual histories and issues, they are united at SOTS by a common desire to be creative, share their experiences and make music.

**D**uring the course the participants quickly bond as a group and they start to look out for each other. They share food, money, clothes - and this increases their sense of being safe.

At the first meeting, Phil gets the group together to work out its own set of rules and limits. From that point, the group becomes self-managing. Being straight at the sessions is a common rule, as a lot of the participants try and stay clean while they're doing the course. There's an understanding that if someone turns up off-their-face and aggressive three times in a row, they're asked to leave.

### Beating the beast inside

*I was only 16 and doin' fine/till I met the white lady/she took over my mind (J Marr/K Ariki)*

'I had a guy [Shaun] on one of the earlier courses...he was an IV drug user and got into it quite heavily. He managed to get off the streets and get himself a job in Caringbah. He'd been out there three or

four months when he called me up and said "Phil, I want to come and see you to write a song". I let people come back and do this so I told him to make an appointment, we'd hang out and do something.

'He called me up an hour before he was supposed to be here and said, "I was going to come and see you but I don't want to come into the Cross because I'm starting to hang out for heroin again. I know if I come in there, I'll have a shot". I said, Shaun don't come in, I don't want you to take any risks.'

Shaun put down the phone and ten minutes later changed his mind and went into the city. He kept his appointment with Phil and they worked on a song called *The Beast Inside*; it was about drug addiction. After they had finished, they had a coffee and Shaun went home. He rang Phil later and said, 'That's the first time in four years I've come to the Cross and haven't used heroin...the buzz I got out of the song was better than the heroin which would have cost me a hundred bucks.'

'So, there you go' Phil said to me, 'there's success.' Phil objectively estimates their success rate as 70 per cent, 'in the sense of lessening drug use, getting young people stable accommodation, sorting out health and legal problems, and generally getting them to feel a stronger sense of identity.'

At the end of the course, the achievement of putting out a CD of their original music is huge thrill for the young people, and this translates into a positive change in their self-esteem.

It's not just the buzz of learning to play and record music in three months which is important. To someone who maybe can't get together one piece of ID because they can't read or write very well, having their story pressed onto something as concrete as a CD and then played on radio, is a big thing.

This year the group played a graduation concert in front of 3000 people for the Mission's annual sleepout at the Opera House supporting well-known bands, Skunkhour and Custard. The young people really felt a sense of achievement. 'Basically, if you can get somebody to achieve something like that or to have a song played on the radio, it contradicts

the negative image of who they are, [they'll realise] "I can't be so dumb if I can do this" or "I'm standing in front of 3000 people singing a song I wrote, I must be worth something".'

On the day I met Phil, he had just been to a Calvin Klein/SOTS press launch. SOTS have just made a deal with CK, whose plan is to get in touch with the youth of today and expose (in the tradition of the Body Shop and Espirit) their social conscience. CK are producing t-shirts with part proceeds going to SOTS. Phil said, 'it works for them and it works for us.'

*You've got to search within yourself, you've got to look beyond your inner self...listen to what your soul can say...seize the day (D Garcia/ C Campbell)*

One of the participants who was part of SOTS 18 months ago went along to the Calvin Klein launch. He was kicked out of home at 15 for telling his parents he was gay. He's now 19 and HIV positive. His contribution to the album *Zone* was a song called *Resist*, which he sang at the launch. Since the project, he's found himself a job, a new boyfriend and he's sharing an apartment.

Aside from working on the individual's negative image of themselves, Creative Youth Initiatives attempts to break down the persistent negative stereotype of young homeless people as 'lost forever'. And while the programs Phil runs may still be considered left-field by conservatives in government, who don't see the arts as productive, the paradox is that such art programs are extremely marketable to corporations, because they can show young people making good.

The end result of the programs is a quantifiable product (whether it be an artwork or CD), which demonstrates that the young people *are* capable.

### Phil's story

For the last three years Creative Youth Initiatives received funding from DEEYA (Department for Employment, Education and Youth Affairs) to support its programs, until last November when the Federal government cut SIP (Special Intervention Project) funding altogether. This almost pulled the plug on both SOTS and Artworks. With the programs



Gavin

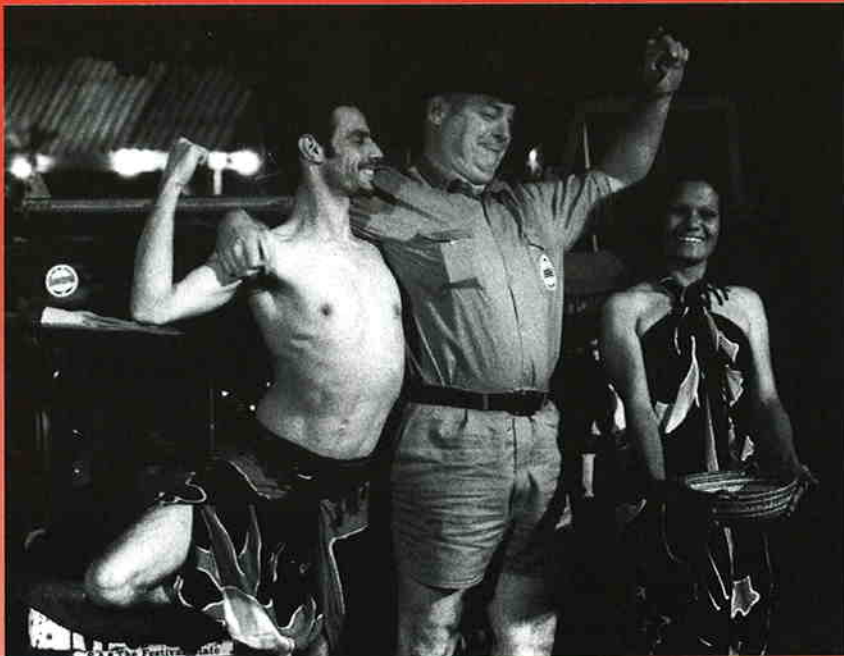
over \$100,000 in debt, it looked like the young people and staff would have to be told that the doors would close.

As a desperate measure, Phil went on a special SBS program on the effects of government funding cuts. On the show Phil openly described Creative Youth Initiatives' predicament - their only chance at survival was to hustle large corporations for money. The next day Phil walked into the CES to do some follow-up on young people. The manager approached him, shook his hand and said 'Hi, I saw you slagging us off on TV last night'. Slightly taken aback at having to explain himself, Phil said, 'Well I can't run my programs without funding.' The CES manager offered him alternative funds from another source outright. SOTS regained some funding. The positive power of the media, so much for years of plodding away, filling out grant applications!

But how does Phil really define success? 'You see [the young people] grow and blossom, it's fantastic.' ■

*Maria Leonardis has experience in the arts and community cultural development, and as a volunteer youth outreach worker. She boarded the 1996 ark to Sydney, along with many other Adelaidians and landed in the Darlinghurst area, where she still resides with her dog Thelma. She writes, paints and makes things as a creative outlet.*

*For information on Creative Youth Initiatives or copies of the SOTS CDs contact Phil Nunn on (02) 9361 5727 or write to CYI, 10-12 Little Albion Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010.*



David Pearce, Michael Habib, Linda Wilson 'Bull Bar Tours' 1997 - Vitalstatistix Theatre Company  
Photo: Lisa Tomasetti

# community,

# context &

# theatre

**NICK HUGHES**

**Nick Hughes debates a changing role for community theatre and the need for a broader interpretation of 'excellent' and a deeper understanding of the context of the work.**

**T**he Australia Council is in full retreat from the activism of the seventies and the eighties. The Council used to be able to respond to threats to the Federal arts budget by lobbying for more money. In these times of generally shrinking Federal budgets, they have had to adopt the pragmatic approach of overseeing where the cuts will bite. The Theatre Fund however, seems to have gone further towards a conservative position than the rest of the Council. They appear to have retreated to the traditional high ground of professionalism and excellence and some of its officers are currently denying the relevance of the community context of theatre when judging the work of companies. It is the contention of this article that this denial could lead to a dangerous limitation in the range of work that the Fund supports.

### **Theatre Fund v Community Theatre**

Community Theatre is being starved of funds by the Theatre Fund, who now specifically exclude the local community context from their deliberations. The Theatre Fund handbook still says they aim to encourage work from diverse cultural backgrounds and from different regions but the word 'community' has been expunged from the Theatre Fund section. People can still get money to do one-off projects as long as they stress the

art and don't mention the context. 'You can do Community Theatre,' they have told some applicants, 'but not with our money. We only fund the creation of excellent and innovative theatre.' Some people might think the demise of funding for Community Theatre is a good thing. There certainly has been some bad theatre produced under the banner of Community Theatre but also much more excellent stuff. If the production of bad theatre meant a refusal to fund, then there wouldn't be any subsidised theatre in this country at all.

There are many ex community theatre companies, but few now use the term. These are companies who have specialised their audience development strategies over time and have evolved into unique companies succeeding at doing different things. Vitalstatistix at Port Adelaide have become a national production house focusing on theatre about women. Sidetrack in Sydney seek to create experimental theatre. The old Murray River Performing Group in Albury has been buried. Their community changed, developed a taste for world class theatre like they can see in Sydney and Melbourne. The new HotHouse Theatre aims to provide it. There are many more examples.

All these companies know from past experience the value of making good connections with communities, it brings in audiences. However, companies that may want to include a community based project in their program, are under pressure to concentrate their diminishing resources only on those projects that the Theatre Fund will accept as excellent and innovative. Community based projects it seems, are not included.

There are two interesting assumptions in this position. The first is that the quality of actor audience relationship that can be achieved working in a community context cannot be excellent. The sheer effrontery of this is astounding. As though any artist, working in any context, is not going to do their damndest to produce excellent work. Community Theatre work always needs to produce the most excellent theatre possible. The major things that militate against the production of excellent theatre when working in a community

context are the poor facilities and the minuscule budgets. The essence of Community Theatre is to work within the local community context and to create work that relates specifically to that context. If the resulting work resonates with local shared meanings, it is able to achieve an excellent and dynamic relationship with its audience.

### Context and theatre's role

**T**he second assumption in the Theatre Fund's position is that the political, social and cultural contexts in which a piece of theatre is produced, are very minor considerations for the funding body. It is assumed that the question: 'For whom is this work excellent and why?' is not to be entered into. One can see why a funding body would not want to engage in the nitty gritty of such difficult problems - it makes their job so much harder. Working artists however, have to grapple with these wider questions in the process of creating the work. If the Theatre Fund are going to decontextualise the work in this way, they may well cut themselves off from the real world where theatre is made.

An understanding of the context of an artwork is crucial to any evaluation of it. In fact, the concept of how and why a particular community uses a particular theatre performance is one that needs to be applied to *all* theatre in order to make sense of what is going on. This is because we all derive and test our meanings in the community contexts in which we live. It is primarily through our interactions with others that we apportion meanings to the world.<sup>1</sup> Surely we have learned in this post modern world that different groups operating in different contexts will create different specific meanings - and that those meanings have to be judged in their own terms not in generalised universals. While excellence is an essential attribute of good art, to declare that excellence is your *only* criterion of judgement is to retreat to a nineteenth century, conservative position where all art is judged against universal standards of excellence. The whole purpose of the Australia Council's stated goal of decreasing ongoing support for theatre organisations over the next three years from 75 per cent of the Theatre Fund's budget to 45

**The essence of Community Theatre is to work within the local community context and to create work that relates specifically to that context. If the resulting work resonates with local shared meanings, it is able to achieve an excellent and dynamic relationship with its audience.**

per cent, is to only support the most excellent companies. The problem is that by specifically excluding the context of the work in determining which companies are more excellent than others, the Theatre Fund runs the risk of applying outdated, regressive standards to the some of the most progressive sectors of the industry.

### Theatre, context and culture

To decontextualise the work is to deny that there are important interactions between theatre performance and the culture. It is to treat theatre as a commodity which can be displayed and sold like manufactured goods while ignoring the fact that theatre is essentially a social relationship between the actors and the audience. As such, it misses the important dynamic interplays between the work and the social and political contexts that give it its meaning.

The community context is central to the meaning of a performance. You cannot divorce an art work from its context and expect to be able to fully comprehend its meaning. When, in the ancient Greek

**Theatre really does enable us to reflect on and consider aspects of our society. It really does play a vital role in the development of our culture; locally, regionally and nationally.**



Anna Linarello and Nick Skibinski 'Flowers and Chocolates' 1993 - Junction Theatre Company

theatre, the writer Aristophanes pilloried the leaders of Athenian society who were sitting in the front row where everyone could see them, the political and social contexts were an integral part of the performance. When Louis XIV stepped out of a cloud machine with a dozen other courtiers and danced a masque for the assembled court, the context of the work was again intrinsic to its meaning. When a traditional Aboriginal Inmar is danced and sung, its full meaning is apparent in the local community context. In all cases, the meaning of the work is found in the context of the community of people present at the performance. Art works of course, can and do have meanings attributed to them beyond the community context in which they were created, but they can only acquire other meanings within other community contexts.

A theatre performance creates, by its very nature, a community context. The audience becomes a community each night. When *The Summer Of The Seventeenth Doll* is performed at the State Theatre Company of SA, its meaning is generated by the community of theatre goers that go and see it. The audience, as

participants in a live, shared, face to face meeting with the actors, become a community. They are part of the larger community of all the people who came to see the performances of the play. And, they are part of the still larger community of theatre goers in their city. However, that larger community of all theatre goers, is still a relatively small section of all of society. Theatre always has been, and remains, a niche market.

**N**onetheless, it is a significant niche, for theatre is one of the media with which societies express and develop their culture. All the performing arts play a vital role in the continual re-creation and development of our dreaming. They provide us with images and meanings that contribute to our world view. We need the Theatre Fund to understand the important role that theatre plays in the development of community culture and to adopt policies that facilitate that role beyond the development of mainstream companies. Theatre really does enable us to reflect on and consider aspects of our society. It really does play a vital role in the development of our culture; locally, regionally and nationally.

### **Theatre Development and Cultural Development**

There is considerable interest at the moment in improving and promoting the processes of Theatre Development - which essentially means employing dramaturgs, directors and actors to help playwrights creatively develop their work. This is a welcome maturation of theatre process in this country. It is however, expensive and, if it's going to be effective it could well mean devoting more of the scarce arts resources to fewer plays.

Let us hope that this will produce a few really excellent productions. But let us also realise that these will be aimed at, and will primarily appeal to, a small section of the population - a niche market. The big hope is that they will be immensely successful and appeal more widely. But how much more widely?

Even if they are immensely successful, in theatre terms, they are probably never going to permeate much beyond the existing theatre going public. It is a comparatively small niche in each capital city that gets to use the theatre to reflect

on and examine society. And it's possible that more and more of the available money will go to improving the standards of this theatre.

So the relevant question in terms of Theatre Development is: 'Theatre Development for what?' Is it for the sake of producing better art, or do considerations of producing a better culture enter into it? Is it about polishing the artefacts of the mainstage companies or can other communities benefit from it too?

Community cultural development practitioners have much to contribute to this debate. Again, one can understand why the Theatre Fund would prefer a narrow definition: the interactions between theatre and society are complex. But a democratic, pluralist society needs cultural policies in this complex area that cater for all the groups within them.

### Community Theatre and diversity

**T**hese complexities can be seen reflected in the diversity of Community Theatre practice. Community Theatre has been typified as a *movement* precisely because the range of practices within it are so diverse. Community Theatre is an attempt to broaden people's access to using theatre; to reach out to people who would not normally experience theatre; all sorts of different people in different communities. And every different type of audience with its own unique political, social and cultural contexts demands a distinct approach, style and form. It is not surprising that the companies that created theatre with and for these different and distinct communities evolved a whole range of models. There are almost as many models as there were companies.

When artists step out of the theatre and engage with people in communities, all of these factors and the methodology they use, will impinge on their work. Only by working with these complexities are they able to engage with communities in meaningful ways.

### An overseas perspective

It is instructive to examine the ways in which community cultural development practice has developed in other countries around the world.<sup>2</sup> Australia has an extremely high reputation in this area. Overseas practitioners are surprised to learn of the low regard in which that work is currently held. I have recently been exchanging e-mail with a London based correspondent who is connected with *Creative Exchange, the forum for Cultural Rights and Development*.<sup>3</sup> She has been telling me about some recent work funded by the British Council.<sup>4</sup> They call community cultural development 'Arts and Development' and they send British artists all over the world to work in a variety of contexts. The British Council are currently working on a policy on Arts and Development which is due to be clarified in the near future. They have already held workshops in Africa and the UK to further define the subject. The e-mail correspondence I referred to, discussed the process versus product dilemma, which goes to the heart of the criticism of Community Theatre in this country: that bad art has been justified in the name of good process.

### Art with other agendas

My correspondent cited two projects where she thought the social outcomes of a project were more important than the art outcomes: the Mines Advisory Group in Africa who use theatre to raise awareness of land mines and how not to step on them, and some people who have been working in Bosnia to help children deal with the psychological aftermath of the civil war by writing poetry. 'Surely,' she said, 'the quality of the poetry in this case does not matter.' As a working artist committed to producing excellent work I had to disagree. If the commissioning body has some social agendas that it hopes the commission will achieve, then excellent art is far more likely to achieve them than bad art. The production of bad art indeed, will undermine them. If it's bad art, the participants will intuitively know it's a crock of shit. My correspondent of

...we have learned in this post modern world that different groups operating in different contexts will create different specific meanings - and that those meanings have to be judged in their own terms not in generalised universals. While excellence is an essential attribute of good art, to declare that excellence is your only criterion of judgement is to retreat to a nineteenth century, conservative position where all art is judged against universal standards of excellence.

VITAL STATISTICS THEATRE COMPANY

# BULL BAR TOURS



A THEATRICAL TOUR DE FORCE!

**...the interactions between theatre and society are complex. But a democratic, pluralist society needs cultural policies in this complex area that cater for all the groups within them.**

course, was not arguing the case for bad art and agrees that the quality of the art is important. She was making a very valid point about the importance of the quality of the creative process of participation in this sort of work. She added that in the Bosnian example, a good process was used and good poetry resulted. And when she told me that the project had been conducted not by professional poets but by professional 'art therapists' I started to wonder about the connection between art and therapy.

## **Art and therapy**

**I** was initially a little alarmed by this connection because quite a number of Community Theatre projects have been commissioned by welfare agencies. But the commission is always to produce good art which might have associated social outcomes. The artists are commissioned to make art rather than to do welfare. Somehow, in every project, a balance has to be struck between the artist's needs and the commissioning body's other agendas.

Initially, I believed that therapy has nothing to do with art. A therapist, after all, has not only to make a decision about who is damaged and why - which in the case of the Bosnian children is reasonably straightforward - but also has to judge the far more problematic question of what exactly constitutes being normal. But when I started to think about it at a societal level, I realised how ridiculous it is to deny that art has a therapeutic role in society. One of the primary ways that a dislocated community can re-establish itself after traumatic damage is through the recovery and recommencement of their usual cultural practices. Surely Aristotle was drawing attention to a therapeutic effect when he identified catharsis as one of the primary effects of tragedy.

## **Society, damage and growth**

All societies can be seen as more or less damaged. When you look at their various social and political histories, this becomes obvious. Everyone has had to respond to traumas of some sort. The daily news coverage is primarily the documentation of the

recent damage, and the very stuff of drama is the examination of how people deal with the consequences of damaged social relationships. This need not be done in a negative way however, it may be presented as a celebration of the capacity to self repair that human societies have. For, damage is only part of the story, the other side of the coin is growth.

**A** culture can be seen as the sum total of all the individual consciousnesses within it at any given moment. And consciousness is a living thing and is constantly regrowing itself anew in every individual in a culture. Dynamic societies are continually remaking themselves - like a coral reef that is constantly growing a new layer all over. It is this quality of continual growth (and re-growth in response to damage) that makes cultural development a complex topic.

Societies can also respond to and combine with influences from other societies and produce a more diverse and different sort of society. This is what has happened in Australia, where there are now many cultural contexts within the same polity.

### Theatre and the republic

Australia it seems is on the cusp of growing itself into a republic. Personally, I would like to live in a republic that values and celebrates not only the Anglo Saxon and Celtic derived portions of Australian culture but also those of the Aboriginal societies and of every other culture that is a constituent part. A republic that is a celebration of the equality of its citizens is a republic that's worth having; and a theatre that functions as a diverse collection of forums for the creation of shared meanings is an essential component of such a republic. The work and the experience of Community Theatre practitioners will be invaluable in creating such a theatre ■



The Bunker, Bribie Island Qld, 1997

#### FOOTNOTES

1. "Community is that entity to which one belongs, greater than kinship but more immediate than the abstraction we call 'society'. It is the arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and substantial experience of social life outside the confines of home... community is where one learns and continues to practice how to be 'social'... it is where one acquires 'culture'." Cohen, A. (1989) *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Routledge, London, p15.
2. In particular, the CURED program in South Africa is very instructive. This is the Cultural Reconstruction and Development Research Program of the Human Sciences Research Council in Pretoria. They have published what is virtually a handbook of community cultural development on the Net. You can find it at: <http://star.hsrc.ac.za/socdyn/cguide.html>
3. The British Council also co-ordinates the Creative Forum which is a world wide electronic forum for discussion of issues arising from community cultural development. Creative Exchange, the forum for Cultural Rights and Development can be accessed via: [creative.forum@conf.gn.apc.org](mailto:creative.forum@conf.gn.apc.org)
4. The British Council has an extensive web site at: <http://www.britcoun.org>

*Nick Hughes is a freelance writer, director, actor and dramaturg based in Adelaide.*

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the companies whose names or images appear with it.*

**To decontextualise the work is to deny that there are important interactions between theatre performance and the culture. It is to treat theatre as a commodity which can be displayed and sold like manufactured goods while ignoring the fact that theatre is essentially a social relationship between the actors and the audience.**

# HEAT works



## moving stories

**CELIA MOON**

**Theatre, health and education in the Kimberleys - an innovative and brave program for and by Aboriginal people explored in this article by Celia Moon.**

**B**roomie WA, Sunday. I arrive mid-May during an unseasonal downpour, the side swipe of a cyclone offshore. It rains nearly all week. Friday is hot and sweaty and rehearsing under the hot tin roof of the HEATworks shed, I realise how the theatre group got their name. HEATworks stands for Health, Education and Theatre Works, the innovative health promotion unit of the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service's Council and they are constantly working in the heat.

### **Theatre: holistic education**

The seeds for what was to later become known as HEATworks were sown in 1989 following a research project undertaken by the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service's Council (KAMSC). Three hundred people around the Kimberleys were interviewed about their attitudes, knowledge and behaviour in relation to HIV/AIDS. The interviews targeted 15-25 year olds in remote communities, the alcohol rehabilitation centre and the prison. Undertaking the research, KAMSC faced the barrier of the shame job for Aboriginal people of talking about sex. There was, too, limited knowledge or understanding of the topic. The idea of a theatre based approach evolved from the knowledge of indigenous theatre and the research findings themselves which revealed that people had very limited knowledge of HIV/AIDS.

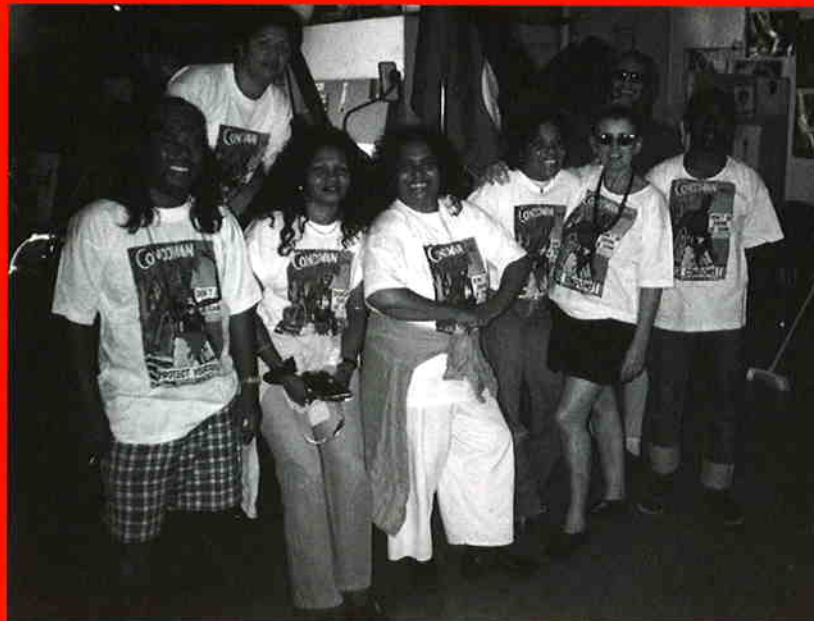
Alli Torres and Heath Burgess, No Prejudice 1995

Most forms of education are very individualistic. Theatre has the capacity for a much more holistic approach that can embrace the social, cultural, physical and spiritual in a communal dialogue. The HEATworks' philosophy is that when focussing on Aboriginal health it is imperative to utilise the holistic framework. In Aboriginal society, health doesn't just mean the physical wellbeing of the individual, but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community. Or to put it another way, if Aboriginal individuals are well, then the community is well. The aim is to support the whole person to achieve wellbeing.

KAMSC is an organisation of Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people controlled by Aboriginal people. HEATworks are a group of performers and health professionals who work in Aboriginal communities using theatre to create awareness and action on health and lifestyle issues. When they go to a community, they don't expect the people to come 'to the theatre'. They perform wherever people are. If there is a campfire scene, they join in when invited, singing songs, encouraging people to come along. They fit into the community's activities. If there is law or sorry business going on they do not enter the community. They only go into communities on invitation.

The impetus for using theatre for health education within the Kimberley context, grew from a growing concern that conventional information-based methods of health promotion such as posters, pamphlets and even videos, were not having a strong enough impact in getting health messages across to Aboriginal people in the Kimberleys. Coupled with this is the recognition that a lot of people in the Kimberleys don't have radio and many don't have television or electricity. The use of strong, vibrant, dynamic theatre is therefore an obvious choice of medium because of its immediacy and ability to be interactive and adaptable to the community context.

Late in 1990 with a Federal Government grant from Commonwealth Aids Prevention and Education, the play *No Prejudice* was born out of the desire to provide everyone from granny to little ones with new knowledge of HIV/AIDS



1997 Heatworks gang, Condoman

and to involve the whole community in the theatrical event, so the whole community got the same message. *No Prejudice* was scripted and directed by Richard Mellick with Ningali Josie Lawford as the cultural adviser and Pat Lowe as script editor. Apart from planting stronger seeds of awareness about HIV/AIDS, the play also looked at domestic violence, alcohol abuse and relationships between men and women. Since 1991, *No Prejudice* has toured the Kimberleys, the Pilbara, the eastern states and the Northern Territory, receiving national acclaim. A test of its durability and continuing relevance is its restaging in the Kimberleys in 1997, to ensure that the children who have grown up since 1991 continue to get the message.

When *No Prejudice* was first staged in 1991, condoms, posters and pamphlets were handed out at performance. At the same time there was a massive condom distribution through the 24-hour petrol outlet, general stores and by taxi drivers handing them out to visitors. This was all very new. Previously the stores didn't even stock condoms on their shelves. The

difference now was that everyone participated in the distribution because they saw this as a community project and wanted to do their bit for their community. A small act that continues to make a big difference.

**T**he medical service acknowledges that one project doesn't realistically make lasting change and they have been working on HIV/AIDS since 1986. They are proud that there are still no known cases of HIV/AIDS in the Kimberleys despite its prevalence in surrounding regions. The national success of *No Prejudice* has had an important impact locally, boosting local pride and strengthening the commitment to using theatre as part of their ongoing strategy to keep issues such as HIV/AIDS on people's agenda, to keep presenting people with current information and to keep confronting them with STD issues.

HEATworks recognises that theatre can't in itself change people's behaviour, that it's like smoking, people have to consciously decide to give it up. For