

## **Regional Arts Victoria's 2009 Symposium**

**Geelong Sat 3 October**

**Plenary Session 2: The role of the arts in helping us deal with adversity**

**Facilitator: Jill Singer**

### **Panel Members:**

- Tim Gooden (TG); Geelong Trades and Labour Council
- Rick Connors (RC); Photographer / Filmmaker
- Rosalie Hastwell (RH); Royal Children's Hospital
- Alice Nash (AN); Back To Back Theatre
- Mahony Kiely (MK), City of Whittlesea

**TG:** I am not your usual Union Secretary accountable to members, but rather I provide logistical, tactical campaign support for 33 unions in (the) Geelong area and that often includes not only industrial issues but social and welfare issues of workers in general.

Trying to get any campaign message out to a range of people requires pretty broad lateral thinking. The asbestos campaign one would think was pretty simple - "it kills you, we have a government, we have laws we have a police" - why is it still happening? It's quite complex to take up a whole of society issue like that so when Donna Jackson said to me let's bring *Dust* to Geelong, I could not have thought of a better way to help our campaign of ridding Geelong of asbestos and setting up an asbestos support group.

**JS:** Do you think something like a play, that packs a political punch, is more effective than a union campaign of public awareness?

**TG:** For me it's like an emotional anti-war song. I think if you can inspire your own emotions through something else, whether it's football or whatever, that is what keeps people going everyday. I know that people are more committed to a campaign a) if they understand it and b) if they are emotionally inspired by it. People do things because they care and if they don't give a shit about something or understand it, they don't get involved and if they don't get involved we can't change anything.

**JS:** Rick Connors, can you tell us about the work you do in Shepparton; what does a community artist do?

**RC:** I've been working for the last five years in partnership with Berry Street, they are the social welfare part of it and I'm a photographer and a filmmaker and together we work primarily with young people but often Indigenous and some of the disadvantaged adults in our community as well. We will work from month up to a year with a particular group which might result in that group having a fairly powerful voice around an issue they are facing.

On November 19 (2009) we have an exhibition opening at Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum. We have been working with some young Indigenous people assisting them in connecting with their elders and connecting back into their community. We have taught them how to take photos, use a video camera, record stories of their elders in their community and how to display them in a museum context.

**JS:** How are you including the refugee population in Shepparton in your programs?

**RC:** I am currently working on a project with the Shepparton English Language Centre and again it's around developing skills in using new technologies so that these young people have a way of telling their stories. They don't often have a good grasp of English but through visual arts are able to tell their stories through film or with photography.

**JS:** Rosalie Hastwell (RH), can you tell us what you are doing with the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH)?

**RH:** I have been working at the Festival for Healthy living at the RCH for about 18 months so I am about half way through a three-year project funded by the Australia Council. The aim of that program is to research, direct and evaluate a training program for artists who work within schools and communities to promote the mental health of children and young people. Essentially I view it as a way of looking at what artists need to be able to operate successfully within school environments to start with.

Anyone who has worked in a school environment will know that has opportunities as well as real challenges, so often the relative rigidity of school environments impedes a creative approach. But more than that, the program comes from the point of view of really wanting to promote the mental (health) of children and young people so the artists working with us understand what mental health is and what actually contributes to mental health. They step beyond their immediate area of expertise and get their head across a number of different frameworks and work out how they can work successfully.

**JS:** How do you find the artists and what is involved in their training?

**RH:** We generally try and draw artists from local areas. The aim is to find local artists who you don't necessarily have that whole set of skills. We bring the whole state-wide collection of artists together for two-day intensives and we look at a range of issues theoretically but we also work creatively. We put artists side-by-side with teachers and health professionals and get them to actually work together on hypothetical classes and issues.

**JS:** Alice Nash (AN), can you tell us about Back-to-Back Theatre?

**AN:** Back-to-Back Theatre is a 22 year old professional theatre company based in Geelong. We are probably best known because we premiere our work in high profile

contexts, most notably the last work premiered in the Melbourne International Arts Festival. We also have an ongoing community program in Geelong working with young people with intellectual disabilities with whom we make both large and small scale experimental works. We respond where we identify a need to work with communities in Geelong and further a field where people request a collaboration.

In terms of the company's practice, we view ourselves predominantly as a contemporary arts organisation but we are grounded very much in our seven actors who have intellectual disabilities and we operate from the perspective of outsider art. So in terms of our relationship to adversity, we are operating from a position of marginalisation. I would say speaking to something that is outside marginalisation and trying to open up perspectives for audiences about what is and is not possible in the world; it's quite ambitious.

**JS:** Mahoney Kiely (MK) works at the City of Whittlesea which covers some of the fire affected areas working in theatre and community cultural development; can you tell us a little bit about the work you have been doing Mahoney?

**MK:** The City of Whittlesea is actually the service town for Kinglake Ranges, and so there are some burnt out areas but we also opened a relief centre in the days that followed the fires and we continue to service people who fled the fires to this today.

I was a community artist for 15 years before I went to the City of Whittlesea, so I already had a kind of theory and approach to working with community. Particularly because I lived in Alice Springs and was quite influenced by the Aboriginal mob there and I created an approach to interacting using intuition and conversation to understand something and then somehow give form to communities' collective ideas and thoughts.

In the wake of the fires there was just immediate response to really simple life and death stuff, people needed places to sleep and so forth, but quite quickly people needed to download and open up. Peoples' moods were all over the place; they needed to be able to respond to things that are practical, emotional and psychological and logistical all at once. So as an artist you need to have a kind of intuitive and responsive approach to things and trust a gut feeling; go there when it's right and don't go there when it's not right.

**JS:** None of you are mental health professionals yet you are all working with community members who have suffered trauma or adversity in some way. When you deal with a health authority bureaucracy, one of the things they are most concerned with is minimising risk and yet you are exposing them to risk, because art is about risk. What are the challenges in getting that balance right, in not compromising the art but also making sure that you are operating 'safely'?

**RH:** This is a huge challenge from where I sit in the RCH. The mental health promotion framework and the education system is at the pointy end of risk aversion so there is a very strong framework for what can be explored and how it can be

explored. It is not necessarily the way I would choose to work but it's understandable given some of the accountabilities. The mental health professionals are partnered with teachers and artists and there is a three-way cooperation between them, so what happens is a kind of negotiated creative exploration.

**JS:** Have you had any specific issue arise?

**RH:** Yes, most recently a class was exploring bullying and what happened was the kids were sort of getting off on acting out the bullying, and the artists thought "this is great" because they were being really creative, fully engaged and energetic. The health professional said "we can't actually do this because these kids might be getting some sort of gratification from acting out bullying". So then there was a long process about how to genuinely empower kids to explore something that is happening for them, but also not support them behaving in that way.

**TG:** Talking about exposing people to risk through art, I'd much prefer to see my members exposed to the art than what they have to deal with everyday; I've seen more people commit suicide dealing with *Concare* and *Worksafe* than having suffered the original injury. Having to wade through the bureaucracy, battles and legal jargon, is far more confronting than learning to speak, paint or take a video of yourself.

Just recently Trades Hall sponsored a project called *Sing Out* by four young women who weren't doing very well at school, had all sorts of dramas. (They) learned more skills and confidence being part of this project, singing songs in front of an audience, than they would have ever learned by sending them to a department for reintegration into society.

**MK:** In this current post-bushfire phase we are noticing that people are ready to tell their stories with more depth and so we are now starting to work with local health organisations. In particular, working with a group called the *Well Being* group which is a community initiative that sprung up out of the fires. We go in to sessions with them and listen and from there get a sense of what is going on for people and what needs to happen.

At the moment I am thinking about ways to capture stories or elicit them without being overt because and so we are setting up situations, like our current plan which is called *Cooking for Christmas*. In the first place it is to help people who don't have kitchens prepare for Christmas but also including a storytelling component to the site and also having a social worker present who is part of the community and wants to cook as well but is willing to offer personal support and also follow up should that be necessary.

**AN:** When we went into Nelson Park school, we went in and tried to reflect the true nature of what we thought should be an artist-in-residence. The best example I have is an artist who went into a school and discovered that the principal's office was not a place that students would go, or they did but only for a very negative reason, and

so the first thing the artist did was to line the principal's office with toast. That was kind of our inspiring example of an artist going into a situation which was very dicey, actually, but the amazing thing artists can do is just to go in and watch an environment closely and see where the catching points are, and draw those out and maybe mend some of those things. So an artistic practice brings intuition and flexibility to a community in adversity and can chip away at adversity in very heartfelt ways.

**RH:** Before the RCH I worked at the North Richmond Community Health Centre for eight years working on Victoria's largest public housing estate and was very involved with the East Timorese community there. I think the kind of special gift that the artist has is their capacity to build bridges through metaphor and symbol. Artists help us to escape the restraints of our normal way of communicating and open up another vision, another way of doing things and find the creative space from which to make decisions. I think so much of our professional engagement is verbally based and we talk a lot about what we are doing and why we are doing it and it's actually often the artist who can create a space and a set of pathways that liberate people from their constraints.

**RC:** In setting up creative spaces I have found this can open up some problems. Where young people and particularly disadvantaged people can disclose things that myself as an artist is not prepared for or don't have the qualification to support what they have disclosed. So I think that it is important for us to have a network of people that can support them and also yourself. As artists we need to make sure we receive a debrief, receive support around what we have heard or what we have dealt with and to make sure that we have the support in the future if it ever happens again.

**JS:** There is also a broader sense at the moment, that it's not just those directly affected, whether it's you working as artists or its unionists working with different communities who have been directly affected by the fires, (or if) it's a broader community thing, it strikes me at the moment that Victoria is going through a very edgy stage. There is a nervousness coming into summer; I know everyone feels like there is something not right, they are scared, and there is this general psychological malaise, I think. I don't know whether you are also picking up on that sort of thing beyond just the people you are working with.

**JS:** I wonder if you could talk about some of the creative responses that you have seen from some of the people who have survived crisis?

**NG:** The young people I work with often don't have any boundaries, or they have had very broad boundaries, and we find that if we come up with a topic that is about self-harm or suicide they are more than willing to tell you everything about it down to the finest detail. Often it's for shock but often it's because they have a story inside them and they need to get it out.

So often the work created is layered with text and images and I usually, within guidelines, let them go and get their story out with their first couple of art pieces and usually find that after a number of pieces then the less obvious stories come out, and the more creative stories as well.

**RH:** There is a really distinct line between treating a subject as taboo and trying to avoid discussing it. There is that desire to hone in on a really intensely fascinating subject but then not actually explore that to a positive or hopeful suggestion of what to do next. An example was a project we did very recently in a drought-affected country town working with students from the high school. There was a video project the young people put together where they were dancing and one of the young men killed himself shortly afterwards. The intention of that work was to project it on the wall of the town hall. What was astonishing was, after discussing it with the artist, teachers and a health professional, they decided to show the work and dance in front of the video. One of the young men actually wore the pants that the boy was wearing.

What I take from that is that from an adult perspective we get spooked about talking with these young people, but it's so real for young people and so not to connect with it is extremely damaging but to connect with it in a way that is celebratory and respectful is important. The young people were just incredibly grateful for that opportunity to pay tribute in a way that was so meaningful and appropriate.

**AN:** I brought in a little bit of text which was written by one of our actors. We made a work last year called *Food Court* and it's a work about two women who try to kill a third. It has echoes of the Bulger case in the UK, where two young boys killed a toddler.

When the improvisation took place in this space, our Artistic Director, whose name is Bruce Gladwin, had really big reservations about whether the improvisation should continue. They were trying to kill the third person in a variety of ways but she refused to die and various staff members closed the door and he really wasn't sure whether it should be made into a work of art. But this is what Sarah Manwaring who played the person they were attempting to kill, she said:

*"People said how could Bruce make us do Food Court, we say (bribe?) us, we say screw you because it's art and you can do those things in art, we made it, us. We like challenging people and to be challenged in our work, peoples' perceptions see us as inferior, dependant, low status, crippled, mindless, we can be immoral, mistaken, in love, an actor, we hold strong opinions, I knew it would bring up arguments to take my clothes off, but I was confident and happy to do it because I felt accepted. I wanted to say through my body that in my eyes people don't want to recognise people with disabilities, we did not feel vulnerable, I felt powerful."*

I wanted to bring that up because I think often a lot of things are about volition and who has the right to be talking about these things. I think that piece of work really brought up a lot of issues for audiences, and it really pushed people's perceptions of what is acceptable to say on stage. Because people with disabilities were saying it, it pushed it even further, it invited people to look at their own prejudices, so I think that whole thing about who wants to say things, who has the right to say things but also who wants to receive or know about the disadvantage or adversity that people experience in their lives that can be extraordinary.

**MK:** It begs the question what is the risk involved in leaving something untouched?

As an example you have a community of people where there are a lot of men who have not spoken to anybody about their experience of bushfire. So we can say to engage them in conversation or storytelling might be risky because it could open a Pandora's box and then they have to go home and live with that and we may not have the resources to support that. However, we also know that to not engage them in that conversation is also risky. So we either engage them or we don't, we either try to manage and do our best, and maybe that won't work but maybe it will.