

## CREATIVITY – THE GREAT EQUALIZER

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### KEYWORDS

*Theatre, Education, Art, Performance, Creativity, Environment, Health, Abuse, Prison*

### ABSTRACT

*Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company had its beginnings at Fairlea Women's Prison in 1980. The first shows in the prison contained the seeds of all future work; women coming together to create and perform their own stories, music and art. The shows were always devised by the women themselves to which outside public audiences were invited into the prison to attend. The work extended beyond the prison walls in 1990 and Somebody's Daughter Theatre had its first public performances outside of the prison in 1991.*

*Since 2001, Somebody's Daughter Theatre has been working in collaboration with Upper Hume Community Health Service and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on an intensive creative arts-based education program with a small group of rural teenagers called 'HighWater Theatre'. All of these young people are aged between 12 and 16 years, are not in the formal education system and haven't been for some time. Most are or have been homeless or are or have been in Foster Care. The reasons for their precarious situations are predominantly related to histories of abuse and family trauma.*

*In this paper, I will discuss my journey through theatre over the past 25 years or so. It's been a journey that has literally exploded me time and time again as I witnessed just how powerful and subversive the whole process of creating performance can be.*

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## BACKGROUND

Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company had its beginnings at Fairlea Women's Prison in 1980. The first shows in the prison contained the seeds of all future work – women coming together to create and perform their own stories, music and art. The women themselves always devised the shows and outside public audiences were invited into the prison to attend. The work extended beyond the prison walls in 1990 and Somebody's Daughter Theatre had its first public performances outside of the prison in 1991.

Since 2001, Somebody's Daughter Theatre has been working in collaboration with Upper Hume Community Health Service and the Department of Education and Training on an intensive creative arts-based education programme with a small group of rural teenagers called HighWater Theatre. All of these young people are aged between 12 and 16 years and have not been in the formal education system for some time. Most are, or have been, homeless or in foster care. The reasons for their precarious situations are predominantly related to histories of abuse and family trauma.

The core of the programme consists of workshops in drama, music and art. This is complemented by a specialist full-time teacher employed by the Victorian Department of Education and Training who works one to one with participants on literacy and numeracy and in negotiating pathways back into education or training. A part-time Young Person's Advocate is employed by Upper Hume Community Health Service to support the health and welfare needs of each young person.

## A PERSONAL VIEWPOINT

Today I am going to talk about my journey through theatre over the past 25 years or so. It's been a journey that has literally exploded me time and time again as I witnessed just how powerful and subversive the whole process of creating performance can be.

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I began as a drama student, passionate about creating theatre. While I'm still passionate about the theatre the world I find myself working in today is light years from where I started – *it is with those who have usually never even been to theatre in their life and where the creative process can be an awakener to reclaim life itself.*

The theatre I still find myself creating began within the perimeters of the prison walls.

Prison is about destruction of human spirit and soul, in order for a prison to function there must be a systematic and deliberate regime of oblivion to the individual soul needs of those that it houses.

Ironically theatre for me is all about heart and soul, about arrivals at places that can only be navigated by heart and soul. Theatre is all about "humanness" and my work has taken me to an understanding of how potent the act of creating is – not only for finding connectedness as humans but also for survival.

Since 2000 SDT has been working with a group of young people in Albury/Wodonga – we call this first official offspring from Somebody's Daughter Theatre – HighWater Theatre.

HighWater Theatre grew out of a pilot where we were asked to run an 8-week project for young people for who nothing else worked. These young people were nearly all in foster care or refuges and had not been regular school attendees for years. While it was one of the most demanding, debilitating and frustrating projects I have

ever embarked on, the outcomes were wonderful and it was the only thing that ever worked for this particular group.

It was clear that the pilot needed to be taken further. It was also glaringly obvious that a teacher was needed to work with us. One young boy thought he couldn't read or write, but during times of writing up improvisations, or the guided imagery, or when it came time to read and comment on bits of emerging script before taking it onto the floor to rehearse – he found that in fact he *could* read, he *could* write. What emerged so clearly was that all of them wanted to learn, but had found school and the cards they'd been dealt in life were totally incompatible.

So, there were many, many meetings and the outcome was that a collaborative formed between Somebody's Daughter Theatre, Upper Hume Community Health Service and the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DEET). Mary Delahunty, who was both Arts and Education Minister at the time, ensured a teacher for the programme for three years – and so, HighWater was born.

HighWater Theatre *is* a classroom where we capture how our concepts of 'school/education' can move beyond physical structures. Possibly – rather than HighWater being seen as 'an alternative setting' – it could be seen as part of the *one stream* as distinct from *mainstream*. HighWater has never expected that those who are our most vulnerable will fit into structures that are convenient for purposes of resources, or middle-class understandings.

We've come a long way from the Pilot Programme in 2000, when we were asked to work with a group of foster kids who refused to go to school and for whom nothing seemed to work; the arts worked. What we found in that 8-week pilot was that while it might be that school didn't work, all of the young people certainly wanted to learn, all wanted a way out of where they were and they all desperately craved a place of belonging – a safe place, a place where they could be seen and really heard.

From this pilot it was clear that there needed to be a teacher present to work one on one – to be there at the moment an individual was ready. To take the hand of the child that wanted to learn but who would never survive in a large classroom. Give them the time they needed to make those steps beyond the shame of feeling stupid. To create the safe quiet space where the emotional torrent that raged within or numbed them could be surmounted.

The pilot definitely worked and what also worked was that individuals from this community refused to let it be just another 'nice little arts project'. I am reminded of Margaret Mead's words: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

Marg Hunter from Upper Hume and Brian Collins from DEET became the torchbearers and HighWater emerged – not with the delicacy of a butterfly but with very, very, loud and very arduous steps.

The one common thing all of the young people shared was – not only that school didn't work– but also stories of abuse, neglect and a lack of the most basic support structures that are often presumed to be in place for every child. Somebody's Daughter Theatre has been working with women in prison and post-release since 1980. The Company had a history of working with those who, in the main, had been excluded from the cultural and social life of this society. This exclusion usually started from the moment of birth into a life predicated by violence, neglect, poverty and abuse.

While poverty and abuse are easily understood as physical conditions, they are also a starvation of nurture – parts of the soul die, trust dies and the only way to get by is to numb oneself, usually through alcohol or drugs. Some cultures use the term 'soul retrieval', it is believed that with any great fear, loss, shock or abuse, part of the soul leaves the body.

Often when we first start working with young people or women in the prison they are frozen: physically and emotionally. Lips that barely move, bodies that can't bear to be touched – too often an emotional response is to hit out in anger because that is how you survive.

One thing we do know is that no one would choose these lives. The women in prison and young people in Wodonga share similar life experiences that steal from them what should be a life filled with possibilities.

The only way out is to break the pattern that repeats itself through generations. Somebody's Daughter's way has been through the arts – calling the soul, the spirit back home.

Our work in the prison had shown us how powerful the arts were in working with those that were powerless. It was in the prison we came to understand that in a world where so much is unequal – creativity is the great equalizer. And I would go so far as to say that it is the only point of equal meeting for many of the lives we work with.

Through the creative process individuals are able to take steps that were previously not possible – in the main because they had never imagined anything else possible. Their vision of themselves was limited to how they and the world had previously defined them. Through the creative process they have discovered other parts of themselves that were capable of discipline, of completion, of being the creator, of visioning a life beyond violence, addiction and abuse. However in the prison there was invariably nothing to meet this new energy to challenge the old.

As a company we also knew all of the 'feel good' outcomes from the arts – self esteem, inclusion and connection. They are fantastic but increasingly we witnessed with individuals who had worked with us, how there could be so much more – how the pattern of a life could be transformed and we knew that real choices for change come through education.

The work that we were invited to undertake in Wodonga gave the opportunity for just such a programme. The collaboration with health and education meant that solid meaningful support structures could be put in place. This collaboration was quite unique as the arts *were leading*, not simply adding on to health and education. All of the partners knew that it was important that this endeavour be long term. So many programmes are short term and are expected to transform a lifetime of learnt behaviours in weeks or months.

We also shared the vision of working toward creating something that would give real choice – so much that is put in place for the disadvantaged is 'dumbed down'. The attitude, 'that's all they can handle' or 'all they'll need' – accepting what we would never accept for our own children. Most of the women I know that broke free from the cycle of imprisonment and addiction did it through tertiary education.

Environment was a key to the whole project. The location at Gateway Village, Wodonga is perfect being an arts precinct with the natural world providing a constant source of energy. I think the importance of environment is often overlooked. The energy of the physical world can make or break not only a project but also a human being. "We become our environment," a woman in prison once said. She nearly lost her mind while at 'B' Annexe in Pentridge (a men's prison). How many projects take place in some sad back room with a few dead couches? We needed a place where the spirit was fed.

So much of our work at HighWater, and this is for all of us – teachers, young persons' advocate and artists – is to transform the usually depressed energy that prevails in a young person's life. Here the environment itself inspires, uplifts. There's space for working through things, space to play, space to dream and space to find those parts of yourself you need back. As someone said, "There's bits of me missing and I need them back." The world here gives spirit the space for the reclaiming of those parts.

Then there are the practical tasks that are crucial. The young people are picked up and dropped off every day and lunch is provided, as are many other needs. This is common sense, given the chaos of the young peoples' lives. It is important to note that every young person chooses to be here – most come in hating drama –some have to go away before they choose to come back, before they really recognise that it is their choice. It must be a safe place and this is quite vital as there is usually so little safety in the rest of their world. No one size fits all. While the expectations of respect, safety, not coming stoned or drunk etc are overarching, every individual is dealt with as an individual.

For the first six months, *education* was very unstructured – quite frankly it was chaos. But there was a resolution in that chaos – a belief or stubbornness to hold onto the vision that each young person would have more choice because of the programme. Reflecting I think how hard it was for our first teacher – Brian Rock. In those first months every day was a frontal assault – added to this, was the lack of space. We all worked out of a shop front.

Abuse and fighting were the norm. It seemed that no one knew how to talk except by screaming or verbal assault. I have strong memories of chasing a young woman along the Hume Highway, who in turn was chasing two of the boys with a huge stick. She was very strong; it wasn't pleasant. One young woman would stand in the centre of the room jabbing the keys of her mobile for two hours at a time. But we kept on doing what we know – everybody must come to the circle and if that meant spending fifty minutes out of every sixty pulling people up from the floor (which it did) – that was what we did. It meant bodywork, voice work – no matter how slowly or how small the step – always working towards cementing the tools that make performance possible.

There were small victories – the day the girl, who had the stick said, "Look at us eating lunch together. We used to just yell, now we talk."

When one of the boys who had been so difficult when he first came, interrupted his 'pah pah, pahn' voice work and said to the newcomer, "Look this is what we do and if you don't like it leave now."

Gradually the young people themselves owned this world and the more that happened, the more possible it was for the teaching to begin.

There have been some very defining moments. We had gone to Aireys Inlet for workshops, the Daughters and the young people. It had always been a great place of exploration and creativity for Somebody's Daughter, but this was sheer hell. After two days of abuse it came to crunch time and it could well have been that the Albury /Wodonga connection died right there.

There was a huge meeting that went on for some four hours. The point was that this group of young people treated everybody like 'workers'. In their view a worker is there simply to do your bidding and be your punching bag. Women in SDT said, *Uh! Uh! You've had a tough life – so have we. You expect us to work with you, trust you enough to go out and perform with you! Earn our trust or forget it. We have great understanding of your life but that doesn't mean we're going to feel sorry for you and treat you like a victim. This isn't about therapy – it's about theatre. It's not about you – it's about us working together to create something that is bigger than all of us!*

Change happened from this day.

That doesn't mean that all was easy sailing. It meant a slight shift and that is what we have always worked with – acknowledging the shifts in consciousness no matter how subtle.

All of SDT shows are very fragile in their opening days. It is not only because they are new works but because of the constant variables that the company contends with. The first production with the young people was something only The Daughters would have endured. Some things I remember – there were a number of brawls during the weeks directly leading up to performance. During performance we would be holding our collective breath because a couple of cast members were likely to attack one another. We needed to guard the doors to

make sure that the young person who had recently hooked up with the speed dealer's daughter wasn't heading down to the river to score.

Again why do it? Because, unless the group went through the process, they would never understand what the journey of performance was. It was from this time that there was the clear understanding that they were the voice for so many like them. It was after the first performances that the programme really started to have some structure.

In looking at why the programme works we've covered:

1. Having the key players in place – health, education, arts
2. Environment
3. The space to see each person as individual

Then there's

4. Humour.

All of the individuals we work with are highly sensitive – many carry a very depressed energy. Many feel safe with conflict – in fact many are expert at creating conflict and divisiveness. Humour is a secret weapon. Being tricky – coming up with the unexpected, finding ways to deflect the anger. Often over time someone's pattern can be named and dealt with in good humour.

Tied in with this is making sure there are lots of 'feel-good times' (some might even call it bribery) – coffee together, dinner together, treats. We also consciously expose young people to situations that are not their norm – always 'nice' places – so they know they are worth it, so they can experience it and because it broadens what is possible. How do you know something is possible if you have never experienced it, or if you're crippled by embarrassment or inadequacy because that world is for 'nice people'. We knew we were on the right track when in an improvisation someone suggested a 'latte' rather than a 'cone.'

The word *consequence* is very interesting. Punishment means very little – care does.

5. It is paramount for all workers to be energised, which means they need to be nurtured and cared for. This means continual debriefing, massage, psychics, ocean retreats – whatever it takes to refuel, re-find your own centre, build up your own vibration. Some would say it is staying in contact with your own song or source. The human psyche is so fragile. It is too easy to absorb another's pain, to feel inadequate, overwhelmed, and powerless to want to make the journey for someone when they alone can do it.

It is essential to ensure that there is 'debriefing', discussing, processing so that you can remember that a hit out is not about you, that angry words, tantrums, are not about you. Or that you don't feel 'guilty' about your life or that you don't try and 'save' someone – that you don't fall into becoming the martyr, the saviour, or the guru. Then there is the continual check-in to ensure that you are not being played off, by discovering the 'veracity' of stories. The nurture of self is often the last thing in place.

6. Belief. The belief to keep going – to believe that you will meet the deadline when it feels nothing short of madness to keep going forward. It is important to constantly remember what has been achieved and not absorb the expectations or views of the world that have no understanding of the intricacies of yours.

The Bullshit Detector – which is better at some times and needs to be alert to all kinds of seduction and the lulling of self delusion because it's easier, less work and can eventually become someone else's problem *and* ...

Finally there's...

7. **The creative process** – which I think is profoundly important and makes all the difference.

To begin – working truly creatively you can't work with inequality. There can be no 'us' and 'them' – working creatively means an equal meeting place. It means really 'seeing' and really 'hearing' someone. This might sound pretty basic and that this is what happens in all human interaction – unfortunately it does not and it is less likely to happen in situations where there is a strong imbalance of power. In really 'seeing' and 'hearing' there can be no room for stereotypes. You can play with stereotypes, play with masks but that is all they are; the faces we use to survive.

Theatre is about voice. This is very important especially for those individuals who are totally outside of our polite structures. Having your own voice, not someone speaking for you, about you and defining who you are, be it – workers, lawyers, judges, psychologists, policy makers - but speaking your own truth and being heard.

A lot of time is spent on breathing, finding your own breath, finding your centre. To breathe deeply puts us in contact with what we're really feeling, for many we work with this has never been safe – to stay with what they are really feeling.

Much of the work is body work – being in your body, allowing the body to be massaged, allowing the body to run, roll on the floor. Abuse goes with the territory as most we work with – young and old – have been abused. How often the words echo, 'fly away, numb myself... I must leave myself, must never enter my body.' Theatre work is about being totally inside the body, reclaiming your own body, feeling your cells come alive.

Theatre is about creating a world woven with an individual's own stories – that's the bridge, that's the meeting point. Not moving away from who you are, where you've come from, but claiming it and finding that there are thousands of others that are not only interested but many who have lived it also.

I know that many saw HighWater as a dumping ground. Some still do. But for the young people that come here and find a safe place – even if it is only for a few months, for the young people who have completed year 12, now embarking on tertiary study, currently working as a dental nurse or apprentice – it is not only a haven but also their classroom.

None of them could do school but they could do HighWater. People are amazed at the transformations. *I'm amazed at how people don't get it. What we do works. It won't fit a formula. It works because it is all about being human. It is about connection. It is about heart and soul. In HighWater there was a gap in the circle for me to fit in. I did feel different. I looked around and there'd be heads of pairs of people. And I'd look beside me and there was no one there. Everything at that time made me feel different. Being alone made me feel different.*

**Maud Clark AM**

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## **AFTER WORD**

This paper was written for delivery as a Keynote Address at a Conference for Education Leaders in Wodonga, April, 2008. A growing volume of literature supports Maud's reflections about the transformative power of creative processes. A comprehensive report on the *HighWater Theatre Partnership* (Osmotherly, J. HighWater Theatre, the Partnership, report to the Australia Council for the Arts 2007) – the focus of Maud's speech – contextualises her personal experiences and observations within literature in the field including the following:

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