



# Expanding Cultures

Arts and Local Government Conference

July 24-27 2007

Chapel off Chapel, Prahran, Victoria, Australia

## **PRIORITISING PROCESS OVER PRODUCT**

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### **Abstract**

The utilization of arts based community programs within a social inclusion agenda is increasingly regarded as being complicit in bringing about social support in the process of substantial personal change for people at risk. But does it? As a single intervention proposition, will a short-term infusion of creative forms such as visual media substantially alter emotional damage or bring about vocational change? Or does a 'here today, gone tomorrow' project, become just another way for participants to feel let down or abandoned? Most of the literature and rhetoric concerned with community art projects for people at risk focusses on the benefits and makes claims for long term positive outcomes. This paper challenges these assertions.

This paper draws on recent observation and research associated with the Plan B Theatre Project, 2006. I will introduce the project, discuss its main aims and outcomes and will argue that the process of sustained participation in an arts project such as Plan B may, in the long term, have the capacity for social inclusion and personal change. But short-term projects initiated as an outcome based play, exhibition, mural, etc, with an emphasis on the final product gives little or no long term benefit to people who have been exposed to multiple risk factors of jail, homelessness or substance abuse. Also important in this context is the way in which funding bodies favour a short-term, professionally produced outcome based project, rather than a longitudinal process with smaller multiple outcomes. This has a significant impact on project planning and funding strategies.

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### **Summary**

This paper is drawn from my participation in the Plan B Theatre Project at the invitation of project organiser and Artistic Director Sharon Jacobson. As part of my research into the process and outcome of arts projects designed for people at risk, I became a participant observer for the first two months of the 2006 production and then an observer for the remaining four months of the project. A conceptual and methodological framework informed by qualitative inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 2000) is employed for this paper and includes field-based data collection, questionnaires, interviews, personal experience, stakeholder input and performance.

Proceedings of the 'Expanding Cultures' conference, Melbourne, July 2007

Hosted by the City of Stonnington, supported by the Cities of Yarra, Melbourne, Moreland, Maribyrnong, Moonee Valley, Boroondara and Port Phillip and the Cultural Development Network

[www.culturaldevelopment.net.au/expandingcultures](http://www.culturaldevelopment.net.au/expandingcultures)

There is an assumption that violence and institutionalisation is endemic within the prison system. Prisoners, ex-prisoners and prison visitors concur in the observation that 'prison makes you worse' (Foucault 1977, Zdenkowski and Brown 1982, Stern 1998, Heilpern 1998). Community rhetoric acknowledges the shortcoming of imprisonment, but few have detailed knowledge of the experience or effects of the de-humanising impact upon prisoners, particularly those who were sentenced as adolescents or served lengthy prison terms. Prison 'imposes an unnatural existence' through isolation and useless work, and then brands the former inmate with the label 'criminal' as s/he re-enters society with a 'prison record'. (Foucault 1977/264)

Plan B was created as a Post Release Theatre Project for men, with the aim of helping offenders manage their transition from custody to community. By creating a theatre piece that explores the link between personal experience and broader social issues, there was an opportunity for post-release men to make connections to others, develop personal capacities through commitment to the creative process and raise public awareness. The project was also seen as a vehicle for a mentoring process. It was intended that participants would be mentored to develop a range of skills in the arts and/or project management, according to their interests. This training focus was in line with the broader aim of handing on the project at the end of the three to four-year period for participants to run themselves. In fact it ran for three years, 2004 – 2006. It has now been handed over to the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) and its future will be in their hands.

Jacobson's background was in prison theatre. 'Off the Map', the company she initially established after arriving in Melbourne from Sydney, initiated theatre projects in several prisons around Melbourne. In 2002 Jacobson grew tired and disillusioned with the difficulties of working within the prison system. The culture of control and power within the prisons worked actively against Jacobson's agenda of transformation for the incarcerated through the theatre experience. In a climate of dislocation and de-humanisation, promoting dignity and self worth towards eventual social integration proved too difficult. (*Interview, 2006*) While Jacobson continued with some small prison theatre projects, in 2003 she began The Plan B Theatre Project for men who had done time.

The 2006 production began in early May and continued until the final night of the play '**The Blight**' that ran for two weeks in October. The first two months were taken up with workshops where ideas were discussed around agreed central themes and then brainstormed to create story line and plot. The setting of the play was the Old Magistrates Court in Russell Street, Melbourne, so the action was designed around a court case in which the defendant was on trial for his absence of humanity. The central theme of criminal as monster was constructed within a wider series of debates relating to alienation, lack of control of the defendant and the outdated procedures and conventions of the court system. Running concurrently within this narrative was the public perception of guilt; that once labelled you can never really be part of society, so freedom becomes a dubious concept, tempered by the improbability of belonging.

*'It's about the snowballing effects of being pigeon holed or labelled, it depends which side of the fence you get put on. Once you are on the wrong side you can never become a fully fledged member of society again.'*  
(*The Blight* program, 2006)

The second phase of the process was taken up with writing the script and editing with the participants. In the final phase the script was rehearsed with participants, professional actors and theatre crew. From the first day, the participants agreed on the necessity for the play to contain black humour, illusion and magic. **The Blight** became a surreal romp between burlesque and sideshow, and in keeping with its name, portrayed the malignant tentacles of societal judgement eroding adolescent promise and adult redemption.

Much has been written about theatre in prisons and post release for its value as a transformative agent, (Goffman 1959, Barba 1999). In the words of Michael Balfour in his introduction to *Theatre in Prison*: 'Theatre, in particular, can be made to be useful. It can be fashioned into a tool designed to re-educate, re-socialize, and 'rehabilitate' people. Or it can try.' (Balfour, 2004/2)

For the participants the theatre experience was, in the first instance, fun, allied to commitment and engagement, but it also involved the danger of exposing vulnerability and it was hard work. However, without some sort of challenge and outcome, change can be easily resisted when risk has been your way of life. Progressively, the smell of the greasepaint, the roar of the crowd, the challenge of learning lines and acting with professionals overcame the methadone rush and to some extent the prison persona. In the place that once exerted power (The Old Magistrates Court) the participants were finally able to claim some back.

*'There's an irony in the justice system. It's easy to get caught up in the system and once you're in there it's a minefield you don't have any control over.'*

(Participant comment in *The Blight* Program 2006)

The issues Plan B sought to address with a theatre project were as follows:

- To help men who have done time to stay out of prison by creating new relationships to identity and public life.
- To educate the public about prison-related issues.
- To encourage community responsibility about social issues that lead to imprisonment.
- To humanize the image of prisoners and ex-prisoners in order to promote curiosity and openness in the community about prison-related issues.
- To create high quality theatre that the participants can feel proud of.
- To create a play that will touch the heart and mind of the audience.
- To create theatre in a way that gives participants ownership of the process.
- To build skills that may be applied to potential employment and social activities in the broader community.
- To create opportunities for men who have done time to contribute to debates about crime and punishment. (Plan B website 2006)

Jacobson's vision for Plan B was the creation of a project that eventually would be run by the participants. She envisaged that over the three to four year period of the project, some participants would continue to be part of the process as a skill based learning opportunity for acting or backstage crafts. She believed participants could take roles of co-facilitators, stage managers, or assisting with lighting and acting coaches and eventually act as mentors to new participants. Also that ex-prisoners would be well

placed to take information into the prisons to encourage men who were about to be released to consider the program as a post-release option. (Interview 2006)

But this did not happen. In 2006 only one participant graduated from the previous year and took an active role in the workshop process but he was a long way from taking any serious responsibility. The six months on six months off operational structure of Plan B meant that participants drifted away and if they did not return to prison during that time hopefully they got jobs. The participant who took part over 2005-6 did not have a job. Ironically one of the problems for recruiting participants to Plan B was that finding a job was paramount for post-release men and being involved in a six months project with nothing to do at the end of that time was not a feasible proposition. So the men who became involved generally wanted to act or learn backstage crafts. The five participants who took part in Plan B in 2006 all believed they could be actors or could learn a skill that would be useful in their post-release life.

The reason for the six-month break was funding or lack of funding. As a one-person organization, it took six months to apply for all the funding needed to run and stage a high quality theatre project, book venues, find production staff and locate and interview participants. No funding body would come to the party to fund a hiatus period where perhaps some educational information could be produced, talks could be given, some experimental theatre could be tried, maybe a film or documentary could be made. Anything that would have given the men something to do and somewhere to go for the time between major productions, making the play part of the process instead of the end of the process.

But the problem by Jacobson's own admission was also one of ignorance and ambition as much as lack of funding. Producing high quality theatre with professional actors and skilled crew is not cheap. And as each year passed it became more difficult to attract participants. While Jacobson retained a profile inside the gaols, (which she did in the first year of Plan B) she was able to make contacts, which resulted in word of mouth referrals and some inmates experiencing theatre which they wanted to enlarge on. But in 2006, with just five participants taking acting and backstage roles, five professional actors were employed to take roles and act as coaches and mentors and five technical and support crew were involved with lighting design, set construction, stage management and production. As participants were also paid for their involvement, this added up to a large financial commitment for a one-person project with no additional income.

Jacobson's initial vision for Plan B was a theatre production that allowed men who had done time to explore personal issues of prison and post-release, and this vision was achieved. As an observer over the six months of the 2006 project I saw men who had been in gaol for (in most cases – counting juvenile detention) half, if not two thirds of their lives, put on an amazing performance. I saw guys who had no acting experience at the beginning of the process push themselves to create singular characters choreographed to a standard that would challenge 'Dancing with Stars' meets 'Phantom of the Opera'. They took their place beside professional actors and they never let themselves down. The issue of creating high quality theatre that the participants could feel proud of and that touched the hearts and minds of the audience was definitely achieved and Jacobson facilitated all of this. But as the production date drew closer it became obvious that the final curtain would come down on more than the end of a play. 'What are we going to do when this is over?' was a constant refrain. (Field Notes 2006)

In interviews conducted after the production finished, all the participants were asked what they had wanted to gain from the process. All said they wanted to act, wanted to do something that was different from their everyday lives and they wanted to meet and talk to people who were different, people they wouldn't normally have contact with. (Interviews with Participants 2006) And for every one of them, their time with Plan B achieved all of this as well as many of the goals Plan B prioritised, particularly in the area of publicity. The play attracted a large audience every night, and media coverage in the form of newspaper and radio interviews leading up to the production.

At handover of the project to VACRO, all participants expressed an interest in the ongoing process. One participant stood out for his leadership qualities and his eagerness to be involved in the implementation of the handover process. Repeated recidivism had invested a hard-won experience, as he discussed the Plan B program as he envisaged it for the future as an ongoing process: 'If we can grab them in the first three months, that's the danger period for going back inside. Then if we can keep them occupied with acting, maybe some educational programs, give them somewhere to go and a reason to stay out, I think we've got a chance to keep them out'. (Interview with participant 2006) Sadly the program did not go on long enough to keep him out.

In my opinion, no short-term art project designed for people at risk has the ability to effect significant change. But in this particular participant's case, I thought I was wrong, and I wanted to be wrong. He got out of gaol on day release to turn up on the first day of the project. He took a challenging role in the play and succeeded beyond his expectations. At the end of the project he was offered another role in a short play, and stepped forward enthusiastically when the project was handed over with many ideas for future projects. Maybe, with a long-term process in place and an ongoing commitment of support and funding, many of the ideas he had may have come to fruition and in doing so given this particular participant a reason to take a different path. Maybe. As Michael Balfour said 'it can only try'. At this stage there seems little chance that Plan B will go on and the few remaining participants of the 2006 production have drifted away.

### **In Conclusion:**

The Plan B Project certainly met some of its aims and priorities but a key finding of the evaluation carried out at the end of the project found that the aims of the project were not conceived around a community development model but rather formulated as a possible by-product of a theatre production. 'If a highly professional drama performance is considered to be the most important outcome, it is not possible to adequately balance other priorities consistent with the wellbeing of the client group. Some short-term benefits will be achieved along the way, but ultimately the broader needs of the participants will be sidelined as the production gathers momentum towards the final performance and then comes to an end.' This finding did not conflict with the expectations of the participants who took pride in the final outcome, but it does conflict with their transitional needs at their most vulnerable time when on-going support and engagement should be the highest priority.

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This paper contains excerpts from field notes and interviews with participants and project staff. 2006

Plan B Website [www.offthemap.com](http://www.offthemap.com)

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