

Arts : get 'em talking through theatre

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¹Creative Regions

About Creative Regions

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Creative Regions is a not for profits arts production company based in Bundaberg. We have been operating for nine years and currently have four full time staff and one part time event coordinator. Our three core programs include Place Activation, the Crush Festival and Socially Engaged theatre—our newest program evolving from learnings over several previous productions.

Introduction

Here at Creative Regions, we know that theatre can play a vital part in influencing discussions in the community. Whether at home or abroad, theatre is a powerful tool in communicating a message or highlighting an issue. No better example can be shown than Lin-Manuel Miranda's production of 'Hamilton' the musical (1); which weaves America's compelling history of revolution, constitution, battles and slavery in a conservative art of theatre using modern music of hip-hop and rap. Such is the power of this production that it is now influencing how history is taught to high schools. As it is cast by predominantly black and latino cast members, students who see this production in thanks to The Rockefeller Foundations' financial support are experiencing a changed view of themselves and their country.

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Bundaberg may not quite be Broadway fanfare, but the fundamentals are still the same—home grown content, local issues and creative response. In the years 2012 to 2015, a main focus of our company was the development of a theatre production and children's resource to address the endemic growth of domestic violence in our region.

Why delve into domestic violence?

The cost to the nation of domestic violence runs to billions of dollars a year. In 2009 the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, worked with consultants KPMG to quantify it, using longitudinal research. The report, *The Cost of Violence Against Women and Their Children* estimated the cost at \$13.6 billion in 2014 with an estimated increase to \$15.6 billion by 2021. This means that in Bundaberg, where Creative Regions is based, the dollar cost of domestic violence was about \$58.85 million in 2013.(2)

Domestic violence is one of the most insidious issues in the regions, and even as it is addressed through primary support organisations, the incidents keep growing.

Creative Regions came to this issue after a board member, Anne McWhirter, then a senior manager with UnitingCare Community, argued for something extra to be done to address the problem. While the primary service sector was resolved to implement strategies, nothing seemed to be curbing the

violence. McWhirter felt that a more creative, proactive approach was needed to open community conversations about the issue.

Former Creative Producer for Creative Regions Rod Ainsworth led extensive consultation with members of the Bundaberg Domestic Violence Forum and agreement was reached to ensure privacy and confidentiality of clients. The outcome was to create a piece of Verbatim Theatre to have victims' stories heard by the community teenagers entering an age of exploring relationships and potentially breaking a domestic violence cycle.

Stories were collected from victims in safe and supportive environments alongside counselling staff. It was critical in the process that there was no further harm created considering the chilling and tragic nature of their experiences. Though the team was well aware of the 'cycle of violence', most of those interviewed reported that the violence began after a pregnancy—and there were other similarities that quickly became threads in the structure of the play.

It was very clear that the voices in the play should all be women—even where male voices were required. The strength of the women and their stories—their struggles with dangerous relationships that remained hidden and/or ignored for many years demanded the utmost respect.

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The play, ***IT ALL BEGINS WITH LOVE***, became a five-hander, featuring women of various ages, each identified by number rather than name, to suggest statistics, the predictability of the cycle and the nameless and silenced worlds within which they live. Some of the characters were direct from individual interviewees—some were amalgams of numerous stories recounted.

The play was read by five local women in May 2013, at a Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Month function, attended by more than sixty representatives of the DV sector and community. The feedback was heartening. A local senior sergeant said that he has attended many professional development sessions with role-plays and theatre in the past, but this was by far the best he'd experienced. Bundaberg magistrate Deborah Vasta said, 'I think this is a wonderful project ... because I think, down the track, it saves a lot of money, a lot of tax payers' dollars imprisoning these people, prosecuting them. I think education and rehabilitation is the key... to get people to recognise domestic violence and do something about it before it's too late... we need to do everything we can to stop these cycles. Surely our kids' futures are worth it.' UnitingCare Community and Lifeline Counsellor, Alex Johnson said, 'The best part was that it gave an unsanitised version. I think too often we have a very sterile description of what happens and that was so real... it really punctuated exactly what it is that people have to deal with—with such power and clarity. It was great.'

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The actors you saw there were the amazing Penny Everingham and Susan Prince.

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Following the show, some of the cast and a counsellor lead an audience discussion about the issue of domestic violence. This allowed for debriefing and sharing. It was a formula deployed throughout the 2015 Queensland tour that went to 17 venues across the state.

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The film and an education kit were developed in order for schools to engage with the play. This and an independent evaluation of ***IT ALL BEGINS WITH LOVE*** can be found on the Creative Regions website. There was also an article recently published by Arts Queensland based on the evaluation.

Impacts of the play

Dr Wendy Madsen of Central Queensland University conducted a formal evaluation of the impact of the play during the 2015 tour. (3) Madsen found a 100 percent satisfaction rate from survey respondents.

Audience members said things like,

'It was gut wrenching'

and

'I found this quite confronting to actually see it 'on stage' and being acted out'

In addition, and most comforting to the producers in terms of the impact of the work, Madsen wrote of the survey respondents that '91% indicated the performance had prompted them to want to talk about domestic violence with friends, family and colleagues; and 72% indicated they wanted to talk about domestic violence with their children (23% did not have children). Ninety-one percent indicated they wanted to act in some way to change the situation around domestic violence'.

Finally, the play's effect on people who had obviously experienced violence in their lives was most heartening. It was clear that the play provided a healing function to current or previous victims of violence. And the choice to ensure cultural diversity in the casting was affirmed. The following comment is one of many from an audience member.

The performance gave me comfort that I was and am not crazy. I heard snippets (sic) of my stories today, it's nice to hear I'm not the only one. What strong women we are. I absolutely love that there were women of different cultures performing. Family violence is not racist. It's important to include all stereotypes. All begins with love. Dependency. Trauma. I felt story was very real. Did a good job.

Another critical outcome was the development of a new resource for children.

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My Big Bear Story

In 2014, Creative Regions was working in the area of creative recovery following the devastating floods and tornadoes that hit the Bundaberg Region in 2013. This was our first exploration of the field of narrative therapy. In partnership with UnitingCare Community, we delivered two programs that tapped into this discipline. The first was a publication of stories written by people traumatised by the natural disasters through a therapist-supported series of workshops. The second was digital animation workshops with children through schools. The Counselors attending the sessions would read from the illustrated children's book ***A Terrible Thing Happened*** (5). This book was used as a tool to open up discussion with children in a gentle way, encouraging them to share their experiences.

As explained by Alice Morgan (6),

“Narrative therapy seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counseling and community work, which centres people as experts in their own lives. It views problems as separate from people and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives.”

This practice focuses on questions and guided conversations in safe environments. Former UnitingCare Community Counsellor Kate Hassell, a contributor to the *My Big Bear Story Project*, described Bibliotherapy or using books as an expressive therapy at a forum. (7)

“It uses an individual’s relationship to the content of the book. Identification with a character can lead the reader to psychological catharsis, insight and an alternative position from which to view their own issue.”

The effectiveness of using an illustrated children’s book as a tool became central to discussions within the domestic violence service providers in Bundaberg. A steering group was formed including UnitingCare Community and Phoenix House Counselors who offer counselling services for children, along with the artistic team. The artists chosen to work on this project had a special connection to the issue including local author Cherie Curtis and illustrator Jacqui Read who had both either experienced or witnessed domestic violence in action.

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This committee developed a plan for gathering raw data to make a meaningful publication. Of the utmost importance was anonymity and providing a safe environment for children to share their stories. Worksheets were developed for use in counseling sessions that included a body map. Through guided questioning, children shared their thoughts about the body signs—physical and emotional sensations—they experienced when feeling unsafe on the body map page. Counselors would then guide them through a discussion about what they do to feel safe again and keep safe, leading to safety plans and supports. The emotive information that emerged was gathered together and presented to the author as source material for the book.

Also guiding the style of the book was a discussion around imagery. Counselors suggested the use of gender-neutral animal characters that were reflective of the body signs but still open enough to allow children to place themselves as the main character and to choose whom their safe person might be.

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The Bear is the child character with Big Bear being the parent or carer that the bear loves and still has good times with, but Big Bear sometimes becomes “Scary Bear”.

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The frightened mouse, angry tiger, sad puppy, tired old turtle, squiggly monkey and guilty goat all reflect body signs that children told us about through their counseling activities.

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Wise Owl is the adult that Bear can trust.

By communicating these signs, children can feel that it is alright to have these sensations and connect with the story. For those who haven’t experienced domestic violence, it is a way of better

understanding why a child might be behaving in a certain way. The project team particularly felt it was important to include the squiggly monkey story where the child is “misbehaving” in class to encourage people—fellow students and teachers—to explore what might be behind the behavior and not just label a child as naughty.

The context of where and how the book could be used was a significant part of the project planning. From the beginning it was decided that an Education Package would be made freely available that could assist in the counseling room and in the classroom to ensure the emotional safety of children.

Kate Hassell stated at the 2015 Forum (8):

“There are many children who witness violence in their homes who never have the opportunity to resolve their trauma within a therapeutic relationship. Teachers are well placed to provide meaningful support to children who might not otherwise receive support. The use of storytelling in the classroom can assist teachers to learn much about the children they teach.”

The Education Package provides useful links to curriculum and offers support information. It highlights some issues for teachers to think about if using the book in a classroom context including consideration of the size of the group being read to, identifying support personnel, support of parents or guardians of children known to be in a family violence situation, having a plan for children to exit the room if they need to and to watch for signs of “Activation” which include changes in body language, eyes darting, sweating, fidgeting, silliness or even not wanting to listen to the story. Using a tool such as “My Big Bear Story” involves being a very aware reader.

Over 900 copies of the book have been sold or distributed free to schools and service organization in our region and now internationally thanks to a conference presentation in Prague in May 2016. Occasionally we receive feedback about the effectiveness of this book as a tool.

“A lovely example of the insight it was hoped My Big Bear Story would offer to its reader is of a 17 year old young woman whose counselor read the book to her during a session. After hearing this story the young woman commented that for the first time in her life she finally understood herself.”

If you'd like further information you can find it on our website. I have some copies here for people to take home.

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The majority of our work stems from what the community are asking for. Future productions will focus on the value of seniors in the community titled ‘Grey Nomads VS The World’, then with teenagers and drug accessibility titled **The Back Nine** and a focus on young men’s mental health titled **The River Runs**. Some of these seem to have a really heavy tone and they do, but not everything has to have a heavy-handed delivery. The show **Grey Nomads VS The World** will be performed by seniors to seniors using music of their era to tell stories. A lot of the lyrics will be projected onto the walls of the caravans used as the set so the audience may sing along and be part of the show. The Back Nine will be a roving theatre experience walking across the 18th hole of a local golf course seeing nine different performance groups. **The River Runs** will be performed in a shed on the banks of the river in partnership with a local football club. To ensure our productions are not just for an ‘arts’ crowd, our focus is on creating **Theatre Without Walls** as you can begin to see. Mostly outdoors, in unique locations and if it’s in a place where any arts is missing, even better. If our local audiences want an experience as much as a show, then we’ll give them that in a form as old as time, theatre.

While we might be based in Bundaberg, this form of community engagement and creative outcomes can be delivered anywhere across Queensland. It's an incredibly effective way of sparking conversation and if you think you'd like to work with us on something similar please come and see Di and myself (Shelley and myself) in the foyer during the break.

Alexander Hamilton is quoted as saying 'When the sword is once drawn, the passions of men observe no bounds of moderation'. Let's tell stories together. Let's get your communities talking.

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