

Theatre making for social change

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Introduction—check in

Lovely audience, this is Theatre Making for Social Change. My name is Avril Duck and I am going to start with an essential part of the process, and that is Checking in. One of the main purposes of “Check In” is to hear everybody’s voices in the space. Often we say our names and respond to another question like: “how are you?” Or “what do you want to sort out in this rehearsal?” Or sometimes we might tell the circle what animal we feel like or if it’s a large cast, check in might involve numbering off.

Today we are in an forum and it’s tricky to organise a circle, but it would be great if you could all put your voices in the space. This check in exercise is called: “Call and Response”

You respond to my call, by calling back to me the opposite of what I said. That’s “Call and Response”.

Avril: I say “up”
You say “down”. (audience joins in)

Avril: I say “left”
Audience: right

Avril: Romeo?
Audience: Juliet

Avril: Tall
Audience: Short

Avril: Short Romeo
Audience: Tall Juliet

Avril: Left Romeo!
Audience: Right Juliet!

Avril: Juliet right Romeo
Audience: Romeo left Juliet

Avril: Cardboard
Audience: ??? (explain we all have different ideas)

Avril: Now
Audience: Then

Avril: Here
Audience: There

Avril: East
Audience: West

Avril: Top
Audience: Bottom

Avril: Mr East Top
Audience: Mrs Westbottom

Avril: Left up
Audience: Right down

Avril: There down left Here
Audience: Here up right there

Avril: Down down down
Audience: Up up up

Avril: Up down
Audience: Down up

Avril: Left off
Audience: Right on!!!

Theatre making for social change—genesis of practice

I'm hoping to inspire an interest in using theatre as a community development tool and a font of ideas about the work theatre can do for social well-being and the intrinsic action of theatre on the individual and community.

I have been making community theatre over the last 15 years in FNQ and developing my own methodology or practice which is the basis of the concept of Theatre Making for Social Change. Interestingly, my whole approach has its seeds in a feeling of rejection. Back when I first returned to Cairns fresh from studying and full of energy and ideas, I could not find a place that I fit into or anyone who would give me a go. I felt rejected. It was not good for me, not healthy. So, unable to resist the urge or calling within myself, I started making my own theatre, on my own terms, in my own way.

It became my burning firebrand to make theatre which *included* anybody and everybody who wanted to be involved. It was crystal clear to me that if I couldn't find a place to fit in—I was an educated and energetic, young, enthusiastic white woman fresh from Melbourne University, supported by parents, willing to work hard—and if I couldn't find a pathway in, then how could anybody? Especially if any of your social determinants were barriers to participation! The journey of discovering a type of theatre which can be welcoming to individuals and beneficial to community has led me to Theatre Making for Social Change.

Last year I lead a Professional Development program for Tropical Arts, funded by the Regional Arts Development Fund which asked key questions like:

- What is social change?
- What is the intrinsic action of theatre on the individual and community?
- Where and how does social change occur?
- Who changes and why is that a benefit?

The group of 7 participants worked in various roles in collaboration within the Tropical Arts large-cast, inclusive theatre production of *“The Taming of the Shrew”* as part of the 9th annual *Shakespeare at the Tanks* season. They were engaged as actors, trainers, OHS officer, musicians, assistant directors and social change observers.

What this Professional Development articulated:

Umbrella Artform

Theatre is an umbrella artform requiring collective creative collaboration from a wide range of production areas as entry points: the theatre needs actors, of course, as well as people to make sets and costumes, people who play in musical ensembles or manage backstage pulling curtains, organising props, people at front of house and in merchandise, marketing, make up, lighting designers and sound technicians and older ladies who want to help can keep a sign in and out register...

Theatre has such a wide variety ways to join in, that it becomes a mode of looking at the world. When inclusive theatre-makers meet people, we wonder how they can serve the production.

I once completed the casting process in an IGA carpark. “Hey, aren't you interested in the arts?” I called across to a busy woman my age, a new acquaintance when I saw her driving past after shopping... “Yes, I studied a bit at Uni” she says I had to cut to the chase because there were other cars behind hers ... “Lady Capulet—we need someone to play Juliet’s mother—are you interested?” and she has gone on to perform in 6 Shakespeare productions, has become Secretary of the organisation & volunteers coordinator, her daughter has joined in too, her husband helps out as well in planning and development..

The umbrella of theatre causes the community to reach out.

No perceived lack—strength-based approach

Focusing on the *theatre production* as the *golden outcome, the aim, the reason for doing all of this in the first place*—combines everybody’s best efforts. To get to the theatre production, we focus on what participants are good at or they want to try or are interested in and that is what we ask them to contribute to the production. It’s a strength-based approach. The key here, and the fundamental difference that arts focus has to health focus, is that there is no focus on any “perceived lack”. In theatre making for social change, nobody is being “fixed”, “cured” or “helped”—but everybody is being supported to shine in their job as part of the theatre production.

Through the collective wish to achieve a creative vision, along the way connections occur, voices are heard, skills are learned and social change occurs. The production is the focus at all times. Collective creative endeavour is the mode and the changes which occur are difficult to pre-empt or measure, but they are often profound, personal and unheralded.

We collect the stories as evidence. In the second Shakespeare at the Tanks production, in 2009, a homeless indigenous man, Dez, was asked to help out with the opening scene musical score because of his passion for film soundtracks. A keyboard was found and he produced a very beautiful piece. He went on to write the filmic soundtracks for the next 7 productions, got on stage from time to time and over the duration, overcame his paranoia of strangers, made a new circle of friends, went from homeless to housed, received a grant for film-making and computer equipment and has worked on a variety of film and musical projects as a paid professional. Theatre had a role in this. However it is not our job to say how much of a role, or what Tropical Arts did for Dez—the point is, this change

occurred and Dez wrote our fantastic soundtracks because we focused on his strengths, not because we wanted to “help” him—quite the opposite, the show needed him.

Diversity as an aesthetic

The aesthetic of Theatre Making for Social Change is premised on diversity. This means that the audience is thrilled to see the local Cairns community on stage and each participant is valued for their unique individuality. In mainstream or professional theatre, there is a politically correct approach called “colour-blind casting”—which aims to ensure that “actors of colour” are ostensibly able to act in more roles which have traditionally been cast with caucasian actors. But in Theatre Making for Social Change, I prefer to adopt the mantra of “colourful” casting. Our community cast needs to reflect the Cairns community in which it is located. So we need diversity onstage. This opens up the need to seek actors from a wider range of people.

In 2010 Tropical Arts articulated the idea of our community theatre being inclusive, It was then that a partnership with ARC Disability Services occurred. This gave us the colourful attribute of differently abled actors who attended ARC and had already been trained in drama by Velvet Eldred and were hungry for opportunities to get onstage. Suddenly our audiences got it! Ohhhhh! This is community. It took the inclusion of these people who often experience barriers to access, for us to feel what it was we were building. We have also had partnerships with TAFE, Indigenous Performing Arts and Deaf Services Queensland to facilitate the diversity we are reaching for. In this process, nobody is replacing anybody else or taking jobs, but adding a colour to the palette—the colour of age, ability, cultural background, experience, height, strength, gender, humour and much more. Once diversity is the aesthetic, there is a natural striving to find pathways for more and more people.

Caring as a strength

The varying abilities and experiences of the cast means that “*caring*” becomes recognised as a core skill. People opt in to the cast and crew because they want to work with people with disabilities. Some people really want to care and give. Some call it “giving back”, whatever the reason, *Caring* is a strength, so we find ways to plug that in to the production—focusing on the show.

Two years ago, Cleo, a very beautiful young blonde Canadian woman came to the production with exactly that desire. Although she could have easily managed a lead, she was given a small acting role but became the cast support person for two young actors with a disability—her team—keeping them on cue and caring about their costume, hydration, awareness and comfort. This helped to make the whole backstage area calmer and more integrated, with professional carers able to focus on actors with higher needs. Cleo naturally facilitated interaction between her team and the full cast—which in turn made further connections amongst the diverse cast of 40. Her caring assisted the production and by focusing on the production, social change occurred.

The intrinsic action of theatre on the individual and community

The work of theatre-making develops some invaluable personal and community building skills. Theatre Making for Social Change accepts these as the key components for social change. We all know that performing enhances personal confidence and self-expression but there are more benefits which occur by focusing on the production and the artform,

- Each individual is valued. Your voice is heard. You are seen. You are necessary. You are a part of something bigger than yourself.
- There is discipline—deadlines approach, lines need to be learned, times and schedules adhered to, physical discipline and personal discipline, disciplined communication
- We are asked to contribute, to add ideas, to collaborate through the “play”—Viola Spolin, was a world expert in improvisation for theatre and wrote numerous books about improvisation and theatre games. She believed that everybody has the capacity to act and that “play” is a powerful way to experience our humanity. Viola Spolin wrote—“Play touches and stimulates vitality, awakening the whole person—mind, body, intelligence and creativity.”
- New skills can be acquired in working with mask, music, lights, venue etc
- There is exploration of emotional range in a safe environment.
- Teams are built and these teams achieve great things together.
- Creativity as currency—making and accepting offers, problem solving, adding layers, direction as guidance, understanding and controlling impulse.
- We practice compassion—stepping into another person’s shoes, trying to understand the given circumstances of the characters and world of the play.
- We take risks—which are not life-threatening, but have all of the thrill and all of the experience.
- Sense of community—a way to feel and understand a model of an inclusive community at work.
- Rising to expectations—a sense of achievement

Enhanced sense of community: thrill of performance

In rehearsal, the work slowly manifests through a chaos of organisation and stitching ensembles together. The process builds through bump in—the time when the theatre is transformed into a stage and the backstage becomes another new world. Backstage is where the actors onstage become a community of players and work in sync now with all of the other production areas.

When the show is on, the feeling of the community is palpable to audiences. The people who come to see these productions are moved in many ways. Our audiences are as diverse as our cast. Deaf audiences come to see Deaf actors perform in their own beautiful language. Family’s come to see their loved ones. Schools come. Shakespeare lovers come. And there is a genuine, authentic sharing of the essence of community.

The performance itself is the precarious balance where everything and everyone is working at once. It is dangerous, immediate and beautiful.

Debrief and follow-up

After the production season, the community of the play celebrates with a party on the last night and an awards ceremony a week later. Throughout the process, participants are used to checking in, so the debrief and check out processes are very important.

We know each other in the street. We can look each other in the eye. We can speak and be heard.

This is Social Change.

Presenter

Avril Duck is a community theatre director and community arts and cultural development worker. She has been at the heart and foundation of two iconic Cairns community cultural events, both occurring annually: *Shakespeare at the Tanks* theatre productions and *Shadows of the Past* dramatised evening cemetery tours. For over 15 years Avril has led a wide range of theatre-based community projects and workshops in Far North Queensland. She builds partnerships with the community in collaborative creative work and has forged a practice of theatre making for social change. Avril grew up in regional FNQ in the small town of Herberton and after completing her Bachelor of Education at Melbourne University, studying Drama and Chinese, Avril returned to FNQ. She then gained a Certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, which she has taught for over 20 years to support and compliment her theatre-making. Avril's approach is always naturally inclusive because diversity is her aesthetic. She is known as a leader, a teacher, a creative and a doer in the community. Her work with people from diverse backgrounds was acknowledged in 2015 when she was awarded the Cairns Regional Council Australia Day Cultural Award.