

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Trauma Focused Theatre Arts for Young People in Custody

A Report by Patrick Moffatt
2008 Churchill Fellow

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INTRODUCTION

This fellowship enabled me to study in the United States, Canada, and Germany with people and with groups excelling in the areas of trauma, theatre for children, and theatre for young people in custody.

I wish to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia for giving me the opportunity to undertake this study.

I would also like to thank my referees for their on-going support:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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My fellowship was undertaken between 15 October 2008 and 14 January 2009 and my aim is develop a trauma focused theatre for young people in custody in Australia. I participated in workshops based on American psychiatrist Sandra Bloom's work at the Andrus Centre for Children and then took classes at the Institute for Drama Therapy where they teach drama. Then I worked with the Mammalian Diving Reflex Theatre as they developed a new production in a secondary school where they are artist -in-residence. Finally, I assisted in rehearsals on the Aufbruch Theater's performance performed by a group of young men in prison.

Highlights

- Opening night in Berlin of Aufbruch Theatre's, 'Kaspar Hauser', was very moving.
- Become a pen pal to one of the young men in custody.
- Generosity of the staff from the Institute for Drama Therapy as they helped craft my NY experience.
- The respect and immense creativity of the Mammalian Diving Reflex Theatre in their relations with young people.
- Potential future co-productions with Aufbruch and Mammalian Diving Reflex Theatre.

Lessons

- Traumatized clients have a window of time in adolescence where it is possible to reverse some of the devastating hardwiring of the brain that is the result of severe trauma.
- A thorough understanding of the effects of trauma is the key to creating the content and form of a theatrical project for this client group.
- Theatre projects have the potential to re-traumatize clients through the usage of autobiographical content.

Implementations and Dissemination

- My study will help develop a program for juveniles in custody through my employer the Department of Human Services.
- I have also been asked by DHS to develop a similar program for men in the adult system in Victoria.
- The work will be disseminated by DHS publications, public presentations, and the induction of new workers to assist in the program.

PROGRAM

15-25 October, New York, USA

- Andrus Centre For Children
Institute for Drama Therapy

26 October - 16 November, Toronto, Canada

- Mammalian Dive Reflex Theatre

17 November - 9 January, Berlin, Germany

- Aufbruch Theater

14 January, Return to Melbourne, Australia

TRAUMA

Effects on clients - the past haunts the present and determines the future.

Trauma is a central organising principle of human thought, feeling, belief, and behavior that is largely overlooked in existing explanations of and responses to human behavior.

Communal and family life becomes organised around the denied, suppressed, and dissociated memories, feelings, and experiences of the past, and are then relived in the present.

Unresolved individual and collective trauma shapes our 'mental models' – the way we view reality. These mental modes or hardwiring of the brain have devastating consequences for young people. The client group we work with in juvenile custodial centres often exhibit the symptoms of this hardwiring - or in psychological terms - this loss of 'executive functioning'. Trauma stunts the development of the frontal areas of the young person's brain - the location of executive functioning. This is reversible to varying degrees, however, success depends on early intervention. After adolescence it becomes more difficult.

Here are some of the resulting consequences and challenging behaviors displayed by many young people in custody due to their exposure to trauma:

- Attraction to high risk behavior
- Inability to trust one's emotions
- Difficulty learning from experience
- Inability to plan or set goals
- Unaccepting of delayed gratification
- Lack of impulse control
- Limited sense of humour
- Loss of ability to deal with complexity
- Inability to concentrate
- A loss of various motor skills
- A heightened apprehension about the physical and social environment

- A preoccupation with death
- A retreat into dependency

Effects on staff - Healing relationships are the best medicine for growth.

I attended workshops at the Andrus Centre for Children. It is a non-custodial residential centre that works to rebuild the lives of severely traumatised children and rebuild the often traumatised organisations that also work with that client base. They use the Sanctuary Model theory of trauma by Sandra Bloom.

Without a clear and consistent model for delivering care that takes into account the impact and nature of trauma, we can inadvertently recapitulate the very experiences that have proven to be so toxic for the people we are supposed to be helping. Not only has this a detrimental effect on the young person but it can lead to vicarious trauma of staff, leading to burnout and other attendant problems like demoralised staff and wastage of resources. It can lead to view that the people receiving the services are the cause of the problem and that the client's situation is hopeless and they cannot be helped.

Therefore, my work at Andrus clearly points out that relationships between clients and workers is key to bringing about healthy and lasting change in a young person suffering the effects of trauma.

TRAUMA INFORMED THEATRE

- **Trauma informed theatre content**

At the Institute for Drama Therapy (IDT) I participated in classes that employ the Sanctuary Model in the teaching of drama. Two key lessons I learned here were, first, an understanding of the potential for a theatre program to re-traumatise a client and, second, that content for a theatre program can be highly effective as a healing tool when based on the actual behavior/actions of the client group involved.

Often drama therapy has been used to explore a client's person history; their family background, their criminal and anti-social histories. The traditional belief has been that this benefits the client; it engenders empathy and/or remorse in the client, and this has benefits for the community. Often these drama practitioners are not from a psychology or psychiatric background. A young person in custody has many opportunities to discuss with clinicians from these fields. The IDT clearly rejects any examination of a client's personal/criminal history within the content of their theatre practice and teach practitioners to spot these

'autobiographical incursions' in to the work and transform them. The Sanctuary Model suggests that this type of content has negative results. For example, in any new experience, most people are drawn to take in and remember only the information that reinforces their existing view of the world. It is like wearing a pair of glasses that will always give you an impression of the past.

The practitioner's task is to transform this type of experience into something else, something outside of the client's frame of reference that is challenging and something they will feel safe attempting. This new stimulation will literally light up sections in the front of the brain, challenging old neuro-pathways and forging new ones.

In one IDT workshop I watched a client bullying another. The text they were using was not about their pasts, but nonetheless, the bullying action itself, of course, was. The person running the workshop transformed what was happening into something quite remarkable. The bullying client was asked to stop what he was doing without explanation and was asked to think of a song that he would like to sing - any song - and sing it to the other person very slowly and softly. The client responded to this. The action of the 'Play' was completely uprooted to incorporate this adjustment because of the 'offending behavior'. The content of the piece had built into it a flexibility that allowed for this. This workshop was not just about telling a story, it was about engaging the client with surprising and challenging action - and the cumulative effect of that process - *is* the story. The trauma informed theatre practitioner needs to be extremely vigilant as clients will, quite naturally, present with much more subtle variations on this.

A deep understanding of trauma helps to determine the content and form of a theatre project. For example:

A traumatised young person may appear to function at a low level in the classroom environment. He may, however, be of high intelligence, but suffer from a common symptom of trauma - an inability to learn. It is important not to confuse low functioning with intelligence. Therefore, in the theatrical context that young person may be re-traumatised by being asked to learn a large volume of text or if asked to write a scene. A challenging and stimulating theatrical experience for this person could be a performance without words, without having to learn any text. It could be a feat of gymnastics or a performance on a set of stilts, for example. This maybe be perceived by the young person as a risky thing to do, in itself, and may well satisfy their attraction to high risk behavior - another symptom of trauma. This approach can help change their world view dramatically from 'I'm not good at learning anything new' to 'I can walk on stilts'. This latter view of the world is personal and small but it is very powerful. It directly challenges the client's assumptions about learning and at the cellular level creates new pathways in the brain that challenge old patterns of being.

- **Trauma informed theatre structure**

As the IDT created content based on the clients' trauma symptoms, Mammalian Dive Reflex Theatre work with non-custodial young people to determine what issues are important to them, then create a very intellectual premise for the work,

but create a very non-intellectual piece of performance. They tend not to use tradition performance spaces and often make simple performance events.

These discussions with the young people allow them a measure of input into the shape of the performance or event. They acquire ownership of the work.

One work by the company is called, 'Haircuts by Children'. Out of discussions with a group of young people the concept of adults trusting - or not trusting - children seemed to strike a chord with the group. The director of the company distilled down a premise that the group could use to develop a piece of work: 'Do we trust our children with the future?' Out of this, the group developed a very non-intellectual performance event: 40 eleven year olds cut and style 40 elderly people's hair with no audience in a large city space. What the director was interested in was the conversations between the two groups.

Often, before a performance by the young women I have worked with, one of the clients will erupt in anger and assault another client or staff. Usually, it is simply a way of having their day leave cancelled; a way of not having to perform. These performances were always off site and always in front of a large audience. Mammalian try to eliminate this anxiety in their young people and yet still create a performance that is personal and within the group context.

- **The group experience** - we are wounded in relationship; we are healed in relationship.

The Aufbruch Theatre Company work with young men in prison. They create performances that are more like traditional plays: set, costume, lights, an audience, scenes, text, and a narrative plot line. However, they are focused on the performer as part of the group; as a worker in something bigger. Their approach is not unlike that of any major drama school. There is a focus on the voice and physical skills, strength and flexibility. The process is framed by routine and discipline. They are interested in dissolving the individual into the group. Their approach is an attempt to heal through the group process:

'Trauma damages the fundamental fabric of social life and damages the bonds attaching people. It damages our sense of communality. Collective trauma works its way slowly and insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with 'trauma'. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realisation that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared... the 'I' continues to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. 'You' continues to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But 'We' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.

□ In individuals this manifests as a numbness of spirit, a susceptibility to anxiety and rage and depression, a sense of helplessness, an inability to concentrate, a loss of various motor skills, a heightened apprehension about the physical and

social environment, a preoccupation with death, a retreat into dependency, and a general loss of ego functions.'

Kai Erikson, psychologist and sociologist.

Conclusions

Unresolved individual and collective trauma shapes our 'mental models' - the way we view reality.

Mental models thus limit people's ability to change.

Being 'trauma-informed' means changing basic mental models about violence, emotions, learning, communication, growth, and change.

Trauma informed theatre should adhere to these principles. It should create a safe working environment where a client can witness and experience the potential of human action. Where a client can explore action beyond their normal frame of reference, action that is determined by the client's own symptoms, by their ownership/investment in the project, and by the common understanding that their role in the group is essential to the outcome.

Arts therapy programs have the potential to heal and the potential to re-traumatise young people. A deep understanding of trauma combined with a very flexible approach to the content and form of a theatrical performance is needed to allow the client to experience something better.

Recommendations

I will recommend to DHS that a pilot program be started for the young women in custody at Parkville Youth Residential Centre. The event will not be about the young person's history but be rich in content, intellectually challenging and will attempt to dismantle the barriers between individuals.

This program can be a model for other juvenile centres around Australia.