

14th October 2005

Melbourne University

Risky Business Symposium

Hello everyone

My name is Margaret Sztajer. I was one of the three artists along with Ken Firth and Angus Cerini facilitating the 15 week program at Malmsbury Youth Training Centre working with young men in custody to create a musical theatre production. Kiersten Coulter PhD Criminology candidate was the researcher.

The sessions comprised of workshops one full day a week from 10.00am till 4.00pm. An average of 10 young men attended the workshops on any one day. Guidelines were discussed by the group. Respect, respect for each other and respect for the work was expressed as the base of our foundation.

Initially it was important to establish with the young men what issues and types of themes they wanted to present in the production. Discussions were held and ideas were presented by everyone in the group.

Over the fifteen weeks the young men wrote their own material, scenes were created through improvisations, they created and choreographed their own movement and dance routines and wrote songs.

The boys seem to want a series of disciplines. They enjoyed the songs, games, warm ups and improvisations. They wanted and needed to know the journey of the day, where they were heading and what they were going to be doing. As an artist it made

my role clearer. The group knew what they were going for and the work produced became the tangible outcome of the day.

The young men would present material written by them during the week to the next workshop and those that found it difficult to write would work one on one with an artist and a monologue would be formed.

The music was a great attraction; everyone in the group loved to sing and wanted to write a song of their own.

On one occasion a young man called “A” just for this discussion was so thrilled about having written a song, he asked Ken the musical facilitator a number of times to get me so I could hear what he had written but on that occasion I was with the other boys and Ken didn’t want to call me over till I was finished which made “A” even more impatient and he eventually came over and asked me to hear his song. ‘I’m only here for the music, he said, I love it’. And I loved his enthusiasm towards the music. I try and develop interest and passion with each and every one of the boys and juggle how I can meet their needs and aspirations while at the same time creating confidence to disperse their fears. As the workshops progressed I saw their excitement as willing participants while exploring the development of scenes. Their interaction with each other was greatly supportive and created positive and inspiring outcomes as the weeks progressed.

Another young man lets call him “B” who had a background in dance indicated early in the workshops that he wanted to focus on dance, scene development and dialogue. B had a good working relationship with the rest of the group and become an

inspiration to the other young men bringing commitment and a surge of ideas and efforts. This young man “B” on entry to the group said ‘I don’t want to write personal things and expose myself’ and the following week came to the workshops with writings of his inner most thoughts.

It was wonderful to be able to work with someone like “B” whose fluid dance movements mesmerise the room enticing eyes to shift to his motion. His poetic imagery aligned with my artistic taste and gave us both a creative platform and direction of how we wanted to work with the material in a unified vision.

“B” created a dance movement for the following week and Ken the musical facilitator wrote a piece of music for the dance and presented it to the group. While viewing this beautifully presented piece of movement I felt so lucky to be working with this level of talent. “B”’s creativity not only excited me as an artist but everyone around him and his motivation towards the project along with his leadership skills encouraged participation from the rest of the young men. Some young men came in to the group and did not complete the journey through to performance either because of other commitments for example conflict with education programs or they were released and unable to commit upon release. Those young men who could not be part of the final production expressed their desire to have their material remain as part of the show and in this situation others in the group were generous in willing to undertake the written work so the material could remain. As a result of these workshops the theatre production “Four Walls For Boys” was created and presented in front of an invited audience at the Open Stage Theatre.

It was a joy and inspiration for me to work with these young men and see them grow from week to week in self esteem and confidence. One of the many challenges that I faced as an artist was to meet their high expectations of producing an exceptional show and together with everyone involved I felt I satisfied their wishes and desires as I did my own.