Prison Theatre, or the use of theatre and drama in corrections, is a rapidly growing area of interdisciplinary practice and research internationally, with evidence that participation in drama-based programs can contribute significantly to offender rehabilitation and recovery. In Australia however, this work appears relatively limited and under-reported, with evidence of only a handful of drama-based programs being offered to adults in correctional contexts. This paper is a preliminary report on the findings of a Theatre Action Research project that was undertaken in Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre, Queensland and Balund-a Residential Diversionary Program, New South Wales in 2010-11. In each site, a series of drama workshops was offered to residents that aimed to develop skills in drama/theatre, as well as personal development outcomes such as positive communication, group collaboration and confidence/self-esteem. The programs were called Living Stories. Participants engaged in drama workshop activities that included experiential games, improvisation, and devising and scripted work. At the end of each program, there was a showing of work to peers and staff within each centre. Preliminary findings suggest that participants found the drama extremely valuable in developing their social and communication skills, emotional literacy, confidence and stress management. In BWCC, participants also saw the drama workshops as a unique space in which they were free to be themselves and experience positive interactions and collaboration with others. In Balund-a, participants valued the drama workshops as a means to have fun and laughter without the need for drugs and alcohol. Responding to the conference themes, this paper therefore suggests that drama may have provided women and Indigenous participants in BWCC and Balund-
a with a unique and engaging opportunity for personal development, and that the workshops worked effectively along side criminogenic and vocational education and training programs to support rehabilitation and recovery.
Background

Purpose and Origin of the Study

This study is situated within the field of Applied Theatre – an area of practice and research that has been expanding over the past two decades, and one that explores theatre and drama forms that are motivated by some kind of social purpose, whether educative, political, celebratory or therapeutic (see Nicholson, 2005; Prendergast & Saxton, 2009; Prentki & Preston, 2009). Prison Theatre is a specialist area within Applied Theatre that has also developed considerably in recent years, although much of the work that is being done in this area excludes Australia (see Balfour, 2004; Taylor, 2009; Thompson, 1998. Prison Theatre covers drama- and theatre-based activities that take place in both community and custodial correctional contexts, and the literature indicates a range of different models by which these might be offered. These include drama education as part of the prison education curriculum (see Moller, 2003/2004; Williams, 2003a/2003b), professional artists mounting theatrical projects within prisons (see Billone, 2009; Clark, 2000/2004; Heritage, 2004; McKean, 2006; Poole, 2007; Warner, 2004; Weaver, 2009), and the use of drama therapy, psychodrama and role-play within criminogenic programs (see Baim, Brookes & Mountford, 2002; Balfour, 2000; Balfour & Poole, 1998; Goldstein et al., 2004; Goodrich, 2004; Mountford & Farrall, 1998; Peaker, 1998; Stamp, 1998; Watson, 2009). However, at this point it seems that there is only a very limited amount of documented practice and theory that addresses arts in correctional contexts in Australia (see Clark, 2000/2004) and in Queensland, drama is only beginning to emerge as a viable program activity (see Queensland Department of Community Safety, 2006).

Within the broader field of Applied Theatre, there is a strong body of evidence for its instrumental benefits to participants who have experienced trauma, hardship and/or marginalization (see Bundy, 2006; Woodland, 2009), at-risk youth (see Conrad, 2005; Gattenhof, 2006; O’Brien and Donelan, 2008), and those experiencing mental illness and physical/learning disabilities (see Cattanach, 1996; Eckard & Myers, 2009; Hatton, 2009). It is widely acknowledged that engagement in drama activities not only provides participants with skills and competencies in the art form, but also develops vital life skills such as problem solving, positive communication and group collaboration and enhances personal attributes such as emotional literacy, positive self-esteem and self-
efficacy (see Baim, Brookes & Mountford, 2002; Johnston, 1998; Nicholson, 2005; Taylor, 2003; Wagner, 1976). Additionally, drama and role-play have developed alongside psychotherapy as a highly effective experiential approach to mental health and psychological well-being (see Blatner, 2000; Boal, 1995; Emunah, 1994; Landy, 2001; Moreno, 1975). A range of international Prison Theatre projects has either explicitly acknowledged this raft of potential benefits and aligned with a rehabilitative agenda (see Baim, Brookes & Mountford, 2002), or been instrumental in achieving rehabilitative outcomes through their commitment to the idea of arts as a cultural right (see Hughes, 2008). Either way, overseas studies suggest that arts programs contribute significantly to improved attitudes within custodial institutions and a reduction in recidivism (Hughes, 2008).

Context of the Study

The two sites for the project were the Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre (BWCC) – a government institution that falls under Queensland Corrective Services, and Balund-a Residential Diversionary Program located in rural New South Wales that houses predominantly young Indigenous offenders of both sexes and is governed by Corrective Services New South Wales. Not only do these sites fall under different government jurisdictions, but also Balund-a is non-secure residential community program whilst Brisbane Women’s is a secure custodial institution. These sites were chosen arbitrarily due to my own pre-existing contacts and initial expressions of interest from staff within the centres themselves. Each centre has a different purpose, and different approaches to offender programming, although both share a similar commitment to offender rehabilitation and recovery, and both deliver some of the same criminogenic programs.

These two sites are both vastly different, yet they represent areas of genuine need within the Australian criminal justice sector: women and Indigenous peoples. Howells et al. (2004) describe these as two special groups that are underrepresented in mainstream offender programming. Some studies have identified a range of needs within these groups that differ from the general correctional population which call for specialised and innovative approaches to rehabilitation (Jones et al., 2002; Sorbello et al., 2002). These authors suggest that programs should be focused on well-being rather than risk management or relapse prevention (see also Birgden 2002), and those that take a holistic, multi-modal and strengths-based approach as opposed being
focused solely on criminogenic needs (see Chavez & Dawe in Dawe, 2007; Day, 2003; Howells et al., 2004; Ward, 2002; Ward & Brown, 2004; Ward & Stewart, 2003; Willis & Moore, 2008). Graffam and Shinkfield (2006, p. 60) describe these as programs which are directed towards the whole person, rather than conceiving individuals in terms of skill deficiencies and character defects. Indeed, policy documents in both Queensland and New South Wales corrections have begun to reflect this emerging focus, acknowledging these two specialist groups and articulating policy objectives in response to their needs (Queensland Corrective Services, 2008; Department of Corrective Services New South Wales, 2003/2006).

Drama has the potential to engage the ‘whole person’ in experiential, group-based learning and skills development that celebrates individual strengths, and promotes collaboration, empowerment and creativity. Situating my drama programs within BWCC and Balund-a provided an opportunity not only to explore a drama-based approach with these two important groups, but has presented a case for complimentary drama programming that sits within a multi-modal and holistic model of offender management for these populations in Australia. It therefore seems at this stage of the analysis that a certain alignment may be achieved between the rehabilitative goals of the correctional system, and a drama-based approach.

Research & Practice Design

For this practice-based study, I delivered a series of drama workshop programs in the two sites from December 2010 to June 2011. In both cases, the programs were called Living Stories Drama as a way of emphasising the workshop or process-driven nature of the work, as opposed to being fixed to a performative outcome or staged play. In Balund-a I offered three programs, each one 4-5 sessions long. Due to the intensive nature of Balund-a’s daily schedule and the remoteness of the site, these sessions were offered as evening recreational classes from 7-9pm, Monday-Friday. For these programs, I had an average of 6-10 participants of mixed gender although predominantly male, all under 40 years of age and all but two identifying as Aboriginal. At BWCC, I ran 24 concurrent 2-hour sessions, once or twice a week from 8.30-10.30am. Here, the participant group was made up of 5-10 women aged from 21-59 and from a range of cultural backgrounds. Living Stories was explained to both staff and participants as aiming to develop skills in drama/theatre, as well as personal development outcomes such as positive communication, group collaboration and
confidence/self-esteem. Participants engaged in drama workshop activities that included experiential games, improvisation, and devising and scripted work. At the end of each program, there was a showing of work to peers and staff within each centre.

The research design and methodology for the study advances a participatory form of action research that has been proposed by James Thompson (2003) – Theatre Action Research – which acknowledges the potential for applied theatre to become, not only the object of research, but a research methodology in itself. Thompson invites comparison between Applied Theatre as a form, and approaches to action research put forward first by Kurt Lewin and subsequently Kemmis & McTaggart (1988) and Greenwood & Levin, (2007). Such a design meant that I was involved simultaneously in the development and delivery of the drama program and the investigation of its effects. Reflective Practice was integral to this framework, which informed the program’s development, explored participants’ responses to the drama processes being used, and worked with participants to create an empowering evaluative framework for the outcomes of the program.

Outcomes

Introduction

The Theatre Action Research design of the project placed an emphasis on participants articulating their own versions of positive change, personal development and program outcomes, and I was therefore careful not to present too many preconceived notions of what these might be. The workshop and interview processes used therefore invited participants to set personal goals for the programs, as well as articulate the process and program outcomes in their own words. This paper focuses on those preliminary findings that respond to notions of rehabilitation and recovery as articulated by the participants themselves. It therefore does not align the outcomes with any particular psychological or educational theory, but rather aims to empower the participants as authors of their own versions of these concepts. I have, however, made a distinction between the outcomes that have been focused on art form skills, and those that can be loosely gathered under the heading of ‘personal development’. The findings here focus on the latter, and have begun to suggest an alignment of drama-based approaches with the rehabilitative goals of both correctional sites.
Drama and Personal Development

Perhaps one of the most expected outcomes of the programs was the development of confidence and self-esteem in participants. A lack of confidence and self-esteem has been identified as an issue for both women and Indigenous offenders (see Callan & Gardner, 2005; Easteal, 2001; Howells et. al, 2004). Drama is widely seen as a vehicle to foster these qualities in children and young people (see Catterall, Chaplau and Iwonaga, 1999; Hughes & Wilson, 2004; Wright, 2006) and similarly for adult participants (see Emunah, 1994). For many participants in Living Stories, this encompassed trying new experiences, going outside their comfort zone and enjoying the freedom to be themselves. One male participant at Balund-a commented that he was usually a shy person, but he felt proud that he was able to overcome this to participate in the drama workshops: ‘I reckon it opens up your eyes that you can do anything if you have a go at it.’ A female participant felt that participation in the drama had given her confidence to give a speech during a Judiciary visit to the centre: ‘It worked wonders for me, and it actually brought out my confidence.’ At BWCC, one older participant actually attended the workshop program as a way of overcoming her social anxiety. By the end of the program, she observed: ‘Coming to drama, I had to be somebody, so I might as well be me.’

On several occasions, participants in both sites observed that the drama activities were encouraging them to think, or to think differently from the norm. The spontaneous problem solving required within improvisation games was clearly engaging these participants on a new level, as was the creative process of devising scenes in response to different stimuli. Some participants in BWCC appeared to relish this as an opportunity to break with the routine of the prison and apply their abilities in new ways. Early in the program, one participant observed: ‘It was good to see people problem solving. We actually used our brains for good. It was good to be able to say ‘I’ve got this task’ and get on with it. I liked using my brain.’ Other participants at both sites described the activities as ‘exercising the brain’ and ‘making you think’, with one young woman at BWCC reflecting at the end of a session: ‘I feel intelligent today’.

Along side self-esteem, Emunah (1994, p. 34) suggests that participating in drama can develop ‘an awareness and appreciation for the qualities of co-participants.’ This was articulated regularly throughout both programs, where an atmosphere of supportiveness was fostered, and people voiced their appreciation for each other’s
talents and strengths. Additionally, the programs promoted the development of new relationships with peers, and an improvement in positive communication and collaboration skills. An education staff member at BWCC observed of two participants that since participating in the drama, that they had become much more capable of focused, positive communication towards that staff member than they had been previously. A programs officer at Balund-a observed that the residents who participated in the drama had begun to be more supportive of each other: ‘They’ve opened up and started to smile more, interact more with each other.’

One of the most interesting outcomes articulated by a participant at BWCC, was the idea that the drama program allowed her to express a wider range of emotions than she was able to elsewhere within the centre. She clarified that she had been able to do this both through the roles she was playing, and in being herself within the workshop space. She felt that inside the centre, it was necessary not to show her emotions as a ‘survival mechanism’, but that the drama workshops had allowed her to ‘let out all different emotions.’ Later, when I asked her why this had been important, she replied, ‘It feels good because it reminds me I am human.’

Perhaps the strongest emotion that was associated with the drama programs by participants in both sites was happiness. The opportunity to engage safely in structured play became an important stress-release for participants, with many participants in Balund-a explicitly highlighting the importance of achieving these feelings without the aid of drugs and alcohol. Perhaps the single most commonly used word to describe the drama workshops at Balund-a was ‘fun’, with several participants describing the stress-release of playing the games and having a laugh. One older female participant observed: ‘When we come here, all our stress leaves us. It goes in the river.’ At Balund-a this was particularly important for many participants who spent their days doing core criminogenic programs. Many said that the intensity of these programs, and their demand to explore one’s own history and life choices was very stressful. The drama workshop in the evening was a chance to ‘blow off steam’ – something that the Program Manager supported as an important element of the daily routine.

All of the drama activities demanded a strong level of focus and concentration from participants in order to succeed. Additionally, Living Stories was designed to progressively build drama skills in participants to the point of some kind of performance outcome. This progression demanded a high level of commitment from participants, which not all were able to maintain. There were, however, a core group within both
sites that completed the programs and participated in the final presentations, after which several expressed pride and satisfaction at having achieved this completion. The final presentations in both sites represented not only the closure of the programs, but an opportunity for participants to showcase their skills in front of peers and staff. Balund-a residents did a showing of improvisation games, which I facilitated, encouraging audience involvement. At BWCC we had devised a collage performance of ‘Great Women from History’ in which participants each chose an inspiring female figure and portrayed a scene from her life. The giving of certificates and a celebration of the strengths of each participant also marked these presentations.

**Conclusion: Drama within Rehabilitation and Recovery**

These preliminary outcomes suggest that there indeed may have been some alignment between *Living Stories Drama* and the other rehabilitative efforts of both BWCC and Balund-a. Whilst participants did not see *Living Stories* as a conventional rehabilitative program, they consistently observed and articulated these outcomes throughout every stage. These utterances moved beyond the more superficial positive feedback that can characterise post-program interviews and surveys. They were considered observations made by participants in a range of different interactions and reflective moments, underpinned by an atmosphere of trust and openness that had been established over time. This idea of alignment was supported by nearly all staff members in both sites, and even stated explicitly by one participant in Balund-a. He suggested that the drama program provided experiential evidence that it was possible to have fun without drugs and alcohol, supporting the theory within the programs: ‘It corresponds with the Get Smart and Think First – you need that with it, I guess’.

Participants’ responses to the programs, and their level of engagement and commitment within the workshops, also suggest that drama might respond to the emerging call for innovative approaches to programming with women and Indigenous peoples. The experiential, creative and collaborative nature of drama inherently draws upon and expands participants’ strengths, and engages a range of learning and communicative abilities. Internationally, theatre and drama are offered in a range of correctional programming contexts - through drama-based therapeutic criminogenic programs, accredited vocational education, or as recreational arts activities. In all of these modes of delivery, it seems clear that drama-based approaches can be beneficial to rehabilitation and recovery. It is therefore hoped that this study assists in
advancing the theory and practice of Prison Theatre in this country, where it may become an exciting and enduring feature of the Australian correctional landscape.
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