Thank you for coming

My name is Sarah Woodland – drama practitioner and researcher

Currently PhD at Griffith University

Living Stories – drama with women and indigenous participants in 2 correctional sites

Preliminary report

CLICK!
Background
Purpose & Origin

- Applied Theatre
  Theatre & drama for a social purpose e.g.
  educative, therapeutic, celebratory, political

- Prison Theatre
  Drama- and theatre-based activities in
  community & custodial contexts
  A range of models

First I’ll give some background to the study.

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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.

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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, professional artists mounting theatrical projects within prisons, and the use of drama therapy, psychodrama and role-play within criminogenic programs.

Limited amount of documented Prison Theatre practice in Australia and particularly Queensland: QSE – Borallon; Somebody’s Daughter – Melbourne; SA Corrections – John Bergman. More?

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Background

Purpose & Origin

- Applied Theatre: instrumental benefits
  *Skills in the art form PLUS life skills e.g. problem solving, positive communication, group collaboration, emotional literacy, positive self-esteem, self-efficacy, mental health, well-being.*

- Prison Theatre: rehabilitative outcomes
  *Improved attitudes within institutions; reduction in recidivism*

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, at-risk youth, and those experiencing mental illness and physical/learning disabilities.

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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, mental health and psychological well-being.

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A range of international Prison Theatre projects has either explicitly acknowledged this raft of potential benefits and aligned with a rehabilitative agenda or been instrumental in achieving rehabilitative outcomes through their commitment to the idea of arts as a cultural right. Either way, overseas studies suggest that arts programs contribute significantly to improved attitudes within custodial institutions and a reduction in recidivism.

Geese Image

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The two sites for the project were the Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre

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– a government institution that falls under Queensland Corrective Services, and Balund-a Residential Diversionary Program

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-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.

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These two sites are both vastly different, yet they represent areas of genuine need within the Australian criminal justice sector: women and Indigenous peoples. The Howells report (2004) describes 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

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Some authors suggest that these programs should be focused on well-being rather than risk management or relapse prevention and should take a holistic, multi-modal and strengths-based approach as opposed to being focused solely on criminogenic needs.

**Background**

**Context**

- Specialised approaches to programming
  - Focused on well-being: holistic; multi-modal & strengths-based
  
  (Birgden, 2002; Chavez & Dawe in Dawe, 2007; Day, 2003; Howells et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2002; Sorbello et al. 2002; Ward, 2002; Ward & Brown, 2004; Ward & Stewart, 2003; Willis & Moore, 2008)

- Directed towards the "whole person"
  
  (Graffam & Shinkfield, 2006)

- Potential of Drama
  
  Engages whole person; experiential; collaborative learning & skills development; strengths-based

Graffam and Shinkfield (2006) 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.

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.
I’ll now just give a brief background of the practice-based approach to this study.

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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.

CLICK – picture

Due to the intensive nature of Balund-a’s daily schedule and the remoteness of the site, the sessions were offered as evening recreational classes from 7-9pm. Here there were 3 x 5-day programs. 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 in the mornings. Here, the participant group was made up of 5-10 women aged from 21-59 and from a range of cultural backgrounds.

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.

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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.

Such a design meant that I was involved simultaneously in the development and delivery of the drama program and the investigation of its effects, all with on-going input from participants and staff.

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For those who don’t know what Action Research is, here is a very simple diagram. EXPLAIN plus participatory.

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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.

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.

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 and Drama is widely seen as a vehicle to foster these qualities in children, young people and adults.

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 Balundra 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.

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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’...

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...with one young woman at BWCC reflecting at the end of a session: ‘I feel intelligent today’.

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Outcomes
Drama & Personal Development

- Positive Communication & Collaboration
  Supportiveness; peer relationships; relationships with staff

“They’ve opened up and started to smile more – interact more with each other.” (Program Support Officer, Balund-a)

Along side self-esteem, drama therapist Renee Emunah suggests that participating in drama can develop ‘an awareness and appreciation for the qualities of co-participants.’

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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, they had become much more capable of focused, positive communication towards that staff member than they had been previously.

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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,’ She said.

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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.

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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.’ Interestingly, this observation was also made by a participant in the QSE’s Borallon program at a recent public forum.

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Later, when I asked her why this was important, she replied, ‘It feels good because it reminds me I am human.’

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Outcomes
Drama & Personal Development

- Happiness, Fun & Laughter
  Safe play; stress release; fun without drugs & alcohol

“When we come here, all our stress leaves us. It goes in the river.”

(Participant, Balund-a)

Perhaps the strongest emotion that was associated with the drama programs by participants in both sites was happiness.

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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.

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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.

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Outcomes
Drama & Personal Development

- Commitment & Focus
  Within each workshop: working towards final presentation

“If I start something, I want to finish it.”
(Participant, BWCC)

All of the drama activities demanded a strong level of focus and concentration from participants in order to succeed.

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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 was, however, a core group within each site 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.

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When asked why she persisted with the program, despite a number of personal setbacks, one participant said simply: ‘If I start something, I want to finish it.’

CLICK
Drama within Rehabilitation & Recovery

- Alignment between a drama-based approach and rehabilitation with women and Indigenous participants
  Supported by both participants and staff

“(Drama) corresponds with Getting Smart and Think First – you need that with it, I guess.” (Participant, Balund-a)

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.

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Whilst participants did not see Living Stories as a conventional rehabilitative program, they consistently observed and articulated these outcomes throughout every stage.

This idea of alignment was supported by nearly all staff members in both sites, and even stated explicitly by one participant in Balund-a.

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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 [sic] 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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Thank you so much for listening – now I believe we have about 10 mins for questions if you have any?