

Art Across India

We would like to share with you something of two recent visits to India. We hope the work can move you to consider the arts as a productive and enjoyable means of exchange and change, and of developing relationships between older and younger people, and between communities

In 2005 we had the pleasure of working as artists in communities throughout India and with organisations such as The East West Foundation, Nistha, The Mahatma Gandhi School and World Vision India. For this talk, we will be discussing a visual art and drama project we ran in collaboration with World Vision and its potential to effect change.

I am a visual artist – and a student at Victoria University. I am undertaking a PhD examining the role the visual arts can play in healing from grief and loss resulting from trauma.

For twenty years, I have been working beside many people in many situations – people who are mostly in a state of extreme vulnerability. People living with a life threatening illness; others trying to re-construct their lives after sexual assault; young adults struggling without much education to make their way in the world. Mental illness, poverty, confusion, grief.

The life situations are different, complex and often heart-breaking; the desire for beauty, meaning and connection to others, seems to cross all cultures, ages and experiences.

My partner in this adventure is performing artist, Jyoti Mukherjee., some of you may know him as Alex Pinder. He is as an actor, director and theatre teacher. He trained at The Ensemble Studios in Sydney and L'Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris. His great love is acting and the theatre, particularly physical theatre and comedy, and sharing this passion with others.

From very early in his career Jyoti was interested in working with people from the “other side of the tracks”. He performed for, taught and directed many disadvantaged groups, first in Sydney for Sidetrack Theatre, and touring outback areas of Northwest NSW with the New England Theatre Company. He later ran workshops for disability groups in Melbourne with organisations such as Arts Access and The Footscray Community Arts Centre. More recently has been working in Singapore.

Jyoti's background is part Bengali, part English, and as a result he spent his early years living between India and England. He had always wanted to work in India, but the chance never arose. Until recently India seemed too poor, and too in need of the basics to deal with someone interested in performing, theatre or running mime workshops.

That is, until a small conversation I had with World Vision Australia, offering them an arts workshop in Calcutta, where we were soon heading. They connected us to a project supporting teenagers from disadvantaged backgrounds – all had been recently living on the streets. The girls now lived in a hostel, and all received an informal education. Their exposure to the arts was extremely limited; the performing arts was through folk dance and song, and basic needlework was the extent their visual arts practice.

We had some apprehensions leading up to these workshops. How would we pitch them? Would they be interested? Would they get Jyoti's sense of humor? He had his pockets full of his red clown noses. The group were – at first - very shy towards us until Jyoti asked what they had done over the Christmas break.

They had been to the circus. Bingo! we had something in common! the noses came out of the pocket and Jyoti performed a clown improvisation. Everyone broke into laughter. And in response, they performed their dances and songs for us.

This three-day workshop with the children and staff remains the most memorable part of that trip to India, and it became the springboard for the tour in November.

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India has a population of roughly 1.02 billion people, we worked with a few hundred. For every comment and observation we make about India – believe me, there are so many other points of view, but on the comments we make about the art and its potential - here we feel on solid ground!

The potential for learning and personal development revealed by the earlier project motivated the organisation to work with us, to create a visual and performing arts project which would come to involve five different communities of disadvantaged children, their community leaders and teachers.

In just over three weeks, we traveled great distances – as did many of the participants – running programs in Calcutta, Delhi, Gaziabad, K and M. Participants traveled on overnight trains from the States of Assam, Utter Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and various nearby cities to join us.

I will talk a little of the background of the people, and of the aspirations for the work, but will focus mostly on the art, what we were trying to achieve and how we believe this creative work can affect change.

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We worked groups from: Area Development Programs (ADPs) and two schools for the deaf.

Few of ADP children had been to school. Many had lived on the streets and had current or recent experience of child or bonded labour. Through an informal education, they receive practical lessons to develop skills required for a productive work life; their education includes basic literacy, numeracy, as well as learning about social issues – like AIDs and health awareness.

One of schools for the Deaf was affiliated with a private school – although there was very little evidence of any private school trimmings; and the second was in the midst of a struggle to find funds to continue operating after Sept this year.

Although we planned to work with 20 participants, there was mostly 20 to 30 children, plus around ten teachers and community leaders in each group. At one place, we found ourselves staring into the expectant faces of more than 70 children wondering what was about to happen, before someone gave us the hurry-on!

I am sure at times we were considered prima donnas for balking at working with large groups; Indian teachers routinely instruct 50 children. However, the point of this program went beyond classroom teaching. It was a chance for teachers and students to learn together- to develop creativity through individual and group work, to generate and expose skills and ideas. This requires time and space – for us to teach, to look, guide and inspire, as well as interact meaningfully with students.

At each location, everyone knew somebody, but no-one knew everybody. Our first aim, therefore, was to create a community, a sense of belonging, a group. It is essential to create a space of trust, where we can all be comfortable working and creating together.

The first steps of an education in the performing arts are taken through movement and being physical. Ice braking games develop a sense of playfulness. They help us get to know each other,

warm us up ready for the work ahead and establish that this is a time for pleasure. We relied on these games to start off each new project.

The aim of drama is to bring people into themselves. Games, mime, and physical comedy techniques help the students move their bodies and stretch themselves in many different ways. This technique was named “a non-psychological approach” by Jacques Lecoq – the leading, French theatre educator. Participants are encouraged to tap into their intuition.

Although these children owned very little, they did have access to PAY-TV. Watching Mr Bean and silent movies had already provided them with a good education of slapstick and clowning – and these are great skills to break down any language barriers!

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Child Labour is an issue which confronts and affronts many. It affects the lives and livelihoods of millions of children and their families throughout the developing world. The reasons why children work are many and complex – and not the subject of this talk except to say for those of you who are not familiar with child labour in India, it is a not uncommon to see children working alongside parents at the market; carrying water, selling vegetables; to see children picking over the rubbish; they break rocks, work as tailors, roll bedi's, tend families, farms and animals. We saw children working at a mill in conditions similar to those which inspired Charles Dickens to write on the subject of child labour 150 years ago; they work as beggars, and serve in shops.

Governments, NGOs, Community leaders, and families themselves are striving to find ways to successfully eliminate this practice and offer children the opportunity of education, and choice in determining their future and most importantly, to have a childhood.

It is an onerous undertaking. World Vision asked that we give attention to child labour, and to some of the myriad issues which affect Indian communities. As our program expanded to include five locations, and contracted to touring for three weeks, we felt it unsound to concentrate on issues-raising before doing the preparatory work of group and skill development, and crucially, before building trusting relationships with communities and individuals.

We all recognized that this program could only be the start, a trial, and the inspiration for things to come ...

Our approach was to focus on the right to a childhood – to play, to discover, to interact. A child wants to be open to the entire world. To be happy and solid and strong. Creativity is a way to achieve this, providing the child with the tools to cope with whatever comes along.

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Experience of the visual arts was extremely limited. We set out to inspire through offering a range of materials and methods. We created precious ink drawings on tiny pieces of gold Joss paper, vibrant paintings on long pieces of fabric, and lots in between.

The images are of Northern Australian Aboriginal x-ray paintings. They are beautiful examples of work which speaks of both the external and internal; carefully executed, strong, decorative patterns, a very limited palette – ochres, white and black, exquisitely placed on the page – sheets of bark in many cases - each side of the page is touched by the drawing.

For those who have little experience of drawing and painting, these works are a great learning tool. Look carefully at what is put in and what is left out. Look at the shape, the materials, the design; think differently – you can see two things at once, the inside and the outside – which is impossible in life. Notice the care taken in the line work, and what can be achieved with so few colours ... be inspired!

We use these striking art works to stimulate new understandings of what art is, and what it can be.

In exposing the group to artwork with such a strong cultural identity, it seemed that permission was taken to incorporate and explore their own cultures. You can see this in the work, the rat, for example, where one of the two pictures has interpretations of Australian art, and the other has interpretations of Indian art.

The ideas behind these finished works grew from the Aboriginal art; however, it was the learning about materials, developing skills, working together and thinking their own thoughts which nurtured the inspiration, and enabled such delightful pictures to be created.

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CHILD EDUCATORS

Rural communities compete with larger towns and cities to attract skilled teachers to what are often poor and backward centres. Visiting some of these rural and disadvantaged communities we saw the impact of these difficulties. Our hearts went out to the three teachers of one village school confronted the daunting task of educating 275 primary school children! The Calcutta Telegraph reported a school with 300 children and NO teachers.

Older children consequently become the educators of the young. We learnt during our wrap-up discussions, that children saw the arts program as a “professional development’ opportunity. “I feel I have mastered a talent I didn’t previously know I had. I am particularly interested in taking this back to my village to teach these skills and use them within the ADP” ... Comments such as this, surprised us (to say the least).

Drama skits have widespread use in the informal education of children and the wider community. Messages around health awareness; attending school; and saving money are conveyed in this manner.

With this in mind, Jyoti spent time developing theatre skills to reflect the needs of the children as child educators. he set up a series of role play improvisations on the children’s working lives. They were based around *The Boss verses The Servant* and the very real issues of *School verses Work* and *HIV /AIDS awareness*. Through these improvisations he taught the students stagecraft - where to stand, how to project the voice, how to keep the scene interesting.

These scenes were turned into works of physical comedy - employing humour and physicality to portray what is often difficult to say. They all thought the scenes were hilarious, but we saw glimpses of the violent lives these children had led.

In Delhi, our group reflected the city’s significant Muslim population. The girls were shy and reluctant to join the loud abandonment of the physical comedy. Participants tended to prefer work with their own sex. We felt it imperative to provide a workshop which respected their restraint whilst, at the same time, challenged and nurtured their creativity.

Number three of the eight millennium development goals established by the United Nations and supported by NGOs and Governments is **to promote gender equality and empower women**. Research tells us that developing the education and status of women has the effect of developing the community as a whole.

The arts, particularly the drama component, are a splendid vehicle to assist the progress of girls and women. They are encouraged to move out of their shyness, to meet others on an equal footing, to find their ‘voice’,and expect to be heard.

A couple of things are happening in the program to facilitate this:

Jyoti and I work as equal partners in this team; sometimes he takes the lead and sometimes I do. We both help each other and support the processes being taught. We believe this communicates good male and female role models. Additional to this, is our expectation of equality within the group; that males and females participate equally, and all respect the work of others.

The nature of the drama program breaks down barriers through fun and laughter. Girls were robustly encouraged to shed the constraints of shoes, shawls, and a lifetime of propriety ... The resistance from some was, at first, fierce.

No matter how hard they tried, it was impossible to resist the laughter, and the pleasure in watching others participate. We understand the immense step required to subject themselves to performing in front of others; it can be unnerving, scary. Although people sometimes decline at first, to perform; the offer is made again throughout the workshops and people do change their minds.

This is why the earlier work of establishing a group strength, and a safe art space is crucial. It is a gradual process to draw people out of their timidity, into a place of experimentation and creativity.

There were a couple of girls who were thoroughly resistant to performing, even though they were happy to work in small groups and enjoyed watching the others comedy skits. You can imagine the feelings of triumph when on the last day, just as we were winding the program up, these girls agreed to perform for us! Wow!

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DISABILITY AND DISADVANTAGE

In India, Deafness, as with so many other disabilities or differences, disadvantages further, the already disadvantaged. A child with a disability can be considered an unacceptable burden on a family - an unproductive mouth to feed; they may be excluded from education and therefore, work opportunities.

In Kanyakumari, we see it has barely been touched by 21st Century. The number of fully trained teachers is limited; classroom desks empty of books; charts I recognized from my own childhood reminded me that A is for apple, and B is for Ball. Few of the aides available to assist hearing-impaired children make their way here.

In this silent world, there seemed a struggle being played out between a desire to learn, a lack of ability to engage because of the deafness, and a need to herd the children towards becoming some sort of acceptable human being. It is not easy for anybody. All are hampered by out of date practices, and notions of what is an appropriate (and affordable) education for children who have a disability.

This was our most challenging location – not at all because of issues around communicating with deaf people; but because of the social and educative isolation. On our first day at the school, 200 deaf children fidgeted, pulled faces, hit each other, and clamored for our attention.

Theirs was an education being offered through the prism of Christianity. Nobody knew anything about the arts beyond the rudiments required to visually or dramatically represent a bible story. At the end of each session we carefully put the artwork up on the walls, gradually creating an art space, filling it with colour. The first works were startling in their lack of ability.

Draw a line with a soft brush and black ink. The line is not going to be anything in particular – a curve, an angle,. Keep drawing, adding lines, shapes, patterns – but not an image. Quite a challenge for children used to drawing churches and bible stories. After the ink, we are going to add colour – but just a few.

As the colour goes on – the excitement mounts – the work is unlike anything they have done or seen. It is quite beautiful. And astonishing. To us all. Three days ago we could never believe the scribbling could transform into this!

We put the work up, as usual. The sense of pride was palpable. In the discussion, we looked at work they first did and what they had achieved since – we all felt fantastic! We have so many images of this work, child after child asked me to take a photo of their drawing.

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Many wonderful discoveries were made. Untapped talent found in the most unlikely places. In the unglamorous city of Gaziabad we met a teenage boy with a life long hearing disability with incredible talent in mime and physical comedy. He jumped up and jumped in, adding ideas to Jyoti's and taking the workshops to a new level. His exceptional sense of movement is, in theatre terms, described as "being very much in his body".

He was capable of taking on advanced work and it was in here that Jyoti added an exercise where the actor imitates an animal and then puts that animal in a situation. You will see him as a gorilla in the video.

When we looked at the child labour issues, this young man created, with great detail, imagination and pathos, the barber shop scene. "His skits would be the envy of many performers in Melbourne, including myself" – said Jyoti (ruefully!). People tend to think that it is because of his deafness this young man so good at physical comedy – This is not true - you will see other deaf students who don't display such showmanship! He has an innate talent; fortunately acknowledged by his teachers – who are, sadly without any resources to develop his skills.

World Vision have suggested it might be possible for them to sponsor his drama, let's hope

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Running alongside the group program was a Professional Development stream for teachers and leaders. Sometimes we unpicked the work done with the group; giving them the opportunity to talk about what lay behind the workshop and how ideas might be implemented for their own purposes.

The second method was to talk to teachers in advance of the workshop. We found them sometimes reluctant – as are most people – to show themselves up as being unskilled, or silly, in front of others. The drama seemed to unnerve the more demure amongst them. This professional development gave some forewarning of what lay ahead and helped build confidence for their participation.

A recurring theme in the discussion was the around allowing children the opportunity to try out ideas – in a somewhat chaotic and unpredictable way. To allow the journey of discovery, to allow some messiness. This can pose some difficulty for teachers who regularly work with groups of 40-50 children. No teacher in his or her right mind is ever going to purposefully embark on a program which invites a total breakdown of order. But of course, this is not what we are advocating!

Teachers seemed to crave the opportunity to learn and share. Those working in isolation seemed to particularly enjoy being with others, sharing in the creative journey, and learning skills and about materials.

I have spoken about a few of the highlights of this project – there is obviously so much more to tell!

The project was funded through the generosity of an individual sponsor. He will probably never really know the extent to which his donation helped develop creativity, joy, concentration, education, self confidence and laughter. To help build relationships and offer possibilities.

As I said at the beginning – this was a small project... the start, a trial, and the seed, perhaps from which bigger projects might grow.

We believe this project can be built upon to achieve important and meaningful connections between people and offer disadvantaged communities another route to building a better life and future.

This paper was originally given at Victoria University : Intergenerational Conference. July 2006 and formed the basis of our talk with the Cultural Development Network.

Contact :

Anne Riggs

is a Melbourne based visual artist

☎ 0417 526 636 9532 5667

✉ ariggs@alphalink.com.au
<http://web.mac.com/anneriggs>

Jyoti Mukherjee (also performs as Alex Pinder)

is a Melbourne based performing artist / director

☎ 0409 210 202 9532 5667

✉ alexpinder57@hotmail
www.wooloo.org/communityart