

Walking in both worlds: Snuff Puppets at Barak Indigenous College

by

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(Australia)

Abstract

This paper presents an account of the Snuff Puppets Performance Project, the final case study in the Risky Business research project (2002–05) that investigated the impact of the creative arts on young people at risk. Snuff Puppets, a professional performing arts company, undertook a puppetry project in a residential secondary school for Indigenous students in a bushland setting outside Melbourne, Australia. The paper explores the serendipitous application of theatre involving giant puppets within a unique and culturally complex site. It analyses the responses of the artists, teachers and the diverse Indigenous young people to the arts process and to the final performance, *Singing the Land*. The study highlights the challenges of engaging the young people and negotiating cultural differences. The paper proposes that this performance outcome exemplifies the transformative and redemptive potential of dramatic metaphor.

Abrégé

Cet article présente un compte-rendu du projet de spectacle par les Snuff Puppets, le cas d'étude final du projet de recherche *Risky Business* (Affaires dangereuses) (2002–05) qui étudiait l'impact des arts créatifs sur des jeunes gens à risques. Snuff Puppets, une société professionnelle d'arts du spectacle, lança un projet de marionnettes dans un lycée résidentiel pour étudiants indigènes dans un environnement campagnard hors de Melbourne, en Australie. L'article explore l'application par un heureux hasard d'un théâtre impliquant des marionnettes géantes au sein d'un site culturellement unique et complexe. Il analyse les réponses des artistes, des enseignants et des divers jeunes indigènes au processus des arts et au spectacle final, *Singing the Land*. L'étude souligne les difficultés d'engager les jeunes et de négocier des différences culturelles. L'article suggère que le résultat de ce spectacle exemplifie le potentiel transformateur et rédempteur de la métaphore de l'art dramatique.

Sumario

Este artículo presenta un recuento del Proyecto de Actuación de la compañía Artística *Snuff Puppets*, y describe el caso experimental final del trabajo de investigación *Risky Business — Situaciones de Riesgo* — (2002–05). Este trabajo investigó el impacto de las artes creativas en los jóvenes a riesgo. *Snuff Puppets* es una compañía artística profesional que llevó a cabo un proyecto con marionetas en una escuela residencial secundaria para estudiantes aborígenes en un escenario rural en las afueras de Melbourne, Australia. El artículo explora la aplicación sin expectativas del teatro con el fin de extraer una información valiosa utilizando marionetas gigantes dentro de un escenario único y culturalmente complejo. El artículo analiza las reacciones de los artistas, educadores y de los diferentes jóvenes indígenas al proceso artístico y al desempeño teatral final de la obra teatral '*Singing the Land*' — *Cantando la Tierra*. Este estudio enfatiza los retos de la interactividad entre jóvenes y concierda las diferencias culturales. El

artículo propone que el resultado de este desempeño artístico o actuación ejemplifica el potencial transformativo y de redención de la metáfora dramática.

Authors' biographies

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One of my big things about art is that it is a tool for communication and that it can break down communication barriers. It can communicate ideas in a peaceful way and puppetry is a language that can be enjoyed by people all over the world. People can communicate with each other, with puppets or with theatre generally. (Nick, puppeteer, 2005)

The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure - the Über-marionette we may call him, until he has won himself a better name.... But let me tell you a few things about these puppets. Let me again repeat that they are the descendants of a great and noble family of Images, images which were indeed made 'in the likeness of God' ... (Craig 1911: 81, 90)

Introduction

For the last four years, we have been investigating the impact of creative arts activities on highly marginalised young people through the Risky Business research project. This longitudinal study (2002–05) was conducted in collaboration with ten industry partners across the areas of justice, health and well-being, education, arts and human services. Broadly, the research addressed two interrelated critical problems: the identification of effective diversionary programs for marginalised young people, and an analysis of the social impact of creative arts activity.

Over the period of the Risky Business study, we established and researched ten creative arts programs in urban and rural centres across Victoria, Australia, in custodial and non-custodial settings. The programs were led by community artists and focussed on different art forms: theatre, writing, painting, photography, stand-up comedy, music, puppetry performance and circus. Young people participating in the programs became artists-in-training, with the opportunity to develop a range of arts-based skills through experiential workshops. All programs culminated in a public performance or exhibition.

The Risky Business study operated from an assumption of latent or unrecognised potential in marginalised young people. It asked whether youth with a background in harmful risk-taking

behaviour were more likely to respond to intervention programs that focused on creative expression involving excitement and risk rather than corrective programs. The research project investigated the participation of ‘at-risk’ young people in various creative arts activities and examined whether this involvement resulted in a reduction of risk factors, improved personal skills, and a greater sense of community and social inclusion.

The Risky Business research project developed a conceptual and methodological framework informed by qualitative inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Janesick 2000), including ethnography (Denzin 1997; Tedlock 2000; Wolcott 1994, 1995). It involved field-based data collection, emergent analysis, grounded theory and stakeholder input within a community research context. The research was participatory and collaborative, with complex multi-faceted outcomes to inform the multiple-sector end-users of the research. The design of Risky Business drew on Stake’s concept of ‘collective case study’, where ten cases were researched within the large-scale project (Stake 1995: 169). Ethnographic data were collected and interpreted in the context of each arts program, and we also undertook cross-site analysis. A range of data were collected for each case study by teams of field researchers in order to elicit the diverse perspectives of the young people, the artists, support workers and community members. Analysis was based on interviews with the participants, researchers’ field notes, visual and sound recordings of both artistic process and product, demographic information and art works generated through the programs.

The Risky Business study provides compelling evidence of the benefits of arts participation for the young people who engaged with the programs (O’Brien et al. 2006; O’Brien and Donelan 2006). However, a key issue was the challenge of engagement. In our final case study, the Snuff Puppets project, we decided to examine how a professional performing arts company might engage the interests and skills of young, marginalised people.

This paper focuses on the Snuff Puppets case study, a performing arts project conducted at Barak College, a residential secondary school for Indigenous students (*Note: pseudonyms have been used for both the name of the college and for the students.*) The Snuff Puppet artists worked intensively with the young people for two weeks, writing a story, designing and building giant puppets, developing music and dance, and creating a performance. The participants performed *Singing the Land* at a community event at the conclusion of the project. The following account of this performance project, in its unique, culturally complex site, explores the serendipitous application of theatre involving giant puppets. It highlights the challenges of engaging the young Indigenous people and negotiating cultural differences.

Although it was not the intention of either the Snuff Puppets or the Risky Business team, the focus on giant puppets in performance process and product exemplified Edward Gordon Craig’s theory that theatre is more inspirational when it rejects ‘impersonation and the reproduction of nature’ in favour of representing the spiritual: ‘beautiful things from the imaginary world ... strange, fierce and solemn figures ... impelled to some wondrous harmony of movement’ (Craig 1911: 74). Craig argues that the human actor should be replaced by ‘god-like’ puppets, Über-marionettes (1911: 81). In the Snuff Puppet project, the involvement of the huge animal puppets not only illustrated Craig’s theory that the use of Über-marionettes can offer a transformative theatre experience, it also supported Barak’s cultural curriculum and allowed the young people to create a liminal theatre space which connected them to their Aboriginal Dreaming, and the mythical Land that existed before human time.

Researching the Snuff Puppets project

As Chief Investigators of the Risky Business project we conducted the fieldwork for the Snuff Puppets project in its school community context. Throughout the intensive two-week arts program, we documented and analysed each phase of the project and, as participant researchers and experienced drama educators, we assisted the artists and young people where appropriate. We wrote field notes, conducted interviews with artists and teachers, interacted informally with the young people and other members of the school community, and undertook visual and oral recording of the process and the final performance.

As researchers, our aim was to collect data from a wide range of young people in order to access multiple perspectives about the impact of the arts project. In the nine previous Risky Business case studies, the research team interviewed the young people individually before the project began, during the project and, when possible, at its conclusion or when they left the project. However, we needed to adapt this research design for ethical and cultural reasons in the Snuff Puppets study. After a few days in the Indigenous school, we decided that it did not seem culturally or contextually appropriate to interview the young people individually. In consultation with the principal, we conducted taped interviews with small groups of students who volunteered to meet with us at the end of the project. The young people often chose to meet with us in mixed-age ‘family’ groups, with the older, more confident students speaking on behalf of the shyer and younger ones.

In writing this case study, we were mindful of representing the ‘complex phenomena’ (Stake 1995: 108) that we experienced, observed, described, documented and analysed as co-researchers throughout the Snuff Puppets project. This interpretive narrative account interweaves the voices of artists, teachers and young people throughout our discussion. We have attempted ‘to document alternative understandings of the same event’ as well as identifying the ‘shared meanings’ within the performing arts project (Winston 2006: 470). The text draws on the varied, sometimes contradictory and individual responses of participants and members of the community to the project, and to the final community performance event. We wanted to highlight the tensions and unexpected responses that we encountered, and to signal the questions the study raised for the artists and for us as researchers. In shaping and constructing this research narrative, we have attempted to ‘develop vicarious experiences for the reader, to give them a sense of being there’ (Stake 1995: 63).

The research site

Barak College is situated in bushland, 50 kilometres from Melbourne. The land is of special significance to Aboriginal people. It was the traditional land of Barak, an Aboriginal Elder present at the signing of the 1835 treaty with John Batman, colonial founder of Melbourne. It later became part of an Aboriginal Reserve, home to generations of Aboriginal people. A female Aboriginal writer and community leader established the college in 1983. The college is controlled by an Aboriginal management committee and has accommodation for up to 50 students. The school attracts students from urban, rural and remote communities from all over Australia, representing many Aboriginal nations.

Barak College offers an Aboriginal cultural program as an integral part of the school curriculum. Through its ‘culture curriculum’, it aims to honour the Aboriginal culture of its students by recognising their Dreamings, their histories, their pasts and their relatives. The deputy principal explained the cultural rationale underlying the approach of this complex educational community:

We are looking at the whole Aboriginal education and trying to turn that into something very spiritual. So we can say this is where your elders wanted you to be, this is the way your people lived, look at the way they looked after the environment and each other, and their traditional ways. (Deputy Principal)

Young participants

The concept of ‘risk’ in relation to young people was central to the Risky Business research project (Hughes and Wilson 2003; O’Brien 2004; Donelan et al. 2006; O’Brien et al. 2006; O’Brien and Donelan 2006). A Barak school document describes the risk factors of the students in the Snuff Puppets case study:

Most of the College’s students come from impoverished backgrounds and many have suffered family breakdown. Some have been school refusers and at risk of entering the juvenile justice system. Almost all have had negative learning experiences in mainstream education.

A senior teacher explained the student profile in these terms:

There are some students who are here because they haven’t succeeded anywhere else. This could be their fifth or sixth school and so they haven’t fitted in or engaged. It’s been truancy or just refusal to go to school. There are some students here who have missed two or three years of primary education. So they are missing the basic numeracy and literacy skills so that lets them down in all subjects ... And there are some students who have personal problems or behavioural issues.

The majority of the students were urban teenagers with an interest in contemporary popular culture as well as some knowledge of Aboriginal cultural traditions. Five young people from a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory who spoke their Indigenous language had just arrived at the school with two mothers. Although their English was limited, they demonstrated a deep knowledge of traditional culture. Their participation enriched the cultural aspects of the project.

Snuff Puppets

The Snuff Puppets, a contemporary Melbourne performing arts company, was established in 1992 and combines the elements of puppetry, live music, visual and physical theatre (see www.snuffpuppets.com). The Snuffs create giant puppets, and their performance work is bold, highly theatrical, anarchic, comedic and irreverent. Much of their work is with communities which have little exposure to theatre generally, or to the kind of work created by this company. They have been commissioned to work in Europe and Asia with various adult and youth communities, culminating in parades and performances.

We engage a lot with non-theatre audiences in our work. That’s one of our philosophies to give people who have never seen theatre the experience. The nature of our puppets — they’re rough and they’re big and they act irresponsibly and they’re funny. (Andy, puppeteer)

The youngest puppeteer described their work to us as:

... sort of black, darkly comic and a bit grotesque. And it’s sort of looking at the underbelly of things and things that aren’t the everyday. There’s hilarity and brutality kind of at the same time. (Nick)

The Snuff Puppets prefer to work in community projects rather than in schools, but made an exception for this project:

We don't like to work in schools because the peers and kind of group set-up can be a kind of inhibitor to the process, but we made a concession with this school because of the nature of the school and it's residential and Tony begged us to go there. (Sandra, Snuff Puppets Manager)

Aims of the project

Tony Briggs, a well-known Indigenous actor and playwright, initiated the collaboration and was the significant point of contact for the artists with the college. He has family connections with the school and had worked as a house parent and mentor to many of the young people. He had worked on projects with the Snuff Puppets, including a performance using the 'Nyet Nyet' traditional stories of the Aboriginal people of the region. Tony Briggs saw this as an experience that 'confirmed the value of sharing traditional Indigenous stories to the rest of the Australian community'.

The deputy principal was very keen to have the Snuff Puppets performance project in the school because of the potential artistic, social and educational benefits for young people through the art-making process. She recognised that a public performance would provide an opportunity for the school community to celebrate the work of the young people and their culture. She welcomed the research component of the project, and facilitated our access to members of the school community and the young people. She decided that the school curriculum would be entirely dedicated to the Snuff Puppet arts program, and that all 30 students would be involved in the two-week program.

In contrast, many of the other teachers in the school did not seem clear about the purpose of the project, and there was some confusion about their roles and responsibilities during the two weeks. Some teachers asked how the arts program would assist the students with their 'desperate literacy needs'. In spite of our understanding of 'whole-school' involvement, the participation of teachers remained inconsistent. Many of the senior staff seemed preoccupied by the pressing welfare needs of students, while others seemed unsure about the role they could play in supporting the students within the arts project.

Caring for Country

The artists agreed to focus the project on the school's 'cultural curriculum' theme: Caring for Country. There were five artists involved throughout the project: a designer/puppeteer, a puppet maker, a musician, a director (Sarah Cathcart) and the writer and cultural mediator (Tony Briggs). The Snuff Puppets came with a clearly defined working process based on Peoples' Puppetry Projects that they had conducted all around the world. Sensitive to the vulnerability of inexperienced performers, their aim was:

... to create a theatre piece, to discover what it is to be a performer, to be inside a puppet not just to make a puppet, but to go through the whole process of making it, bringing it to life and giving it character. The puppets we make in this respect are great because you are there standing on stage in your full body but you are covered completely. You go on a journey with these people and it's quite a binding experience. (Andy, puppeteer)

Despite the emphasis on the tangible achievement of completed puppets and a final performance, the puppeteers stressed the importance of responsiveness and flexibility.

The workshop has to remain about the process and what the abilities and interest and engagements might be with the group. We are very adaptable. (Andy, puppeteer)

The artists were committed to building community alongside the performance-making:

My aim is to create an environment that is fun and the participants can offer their ideas freely ... for me it's about creating a sense of community ... to create an environment that is safe and unified through having fun. (Sarah, artistic director)

The artists were determined that a performance outcome would be realised at Barak College. They wanted to assure the students 'that it's going to happen and that it's going to be great' (Sarah, artistic director).

Phase one: Meeting the puppets

On the first day of the project, the Snuff Puppets artists met with the students in the conference centre, a beautiful building overlooking the valley and housing the school's collection of Aboriginal paintings and artefacts. This space, used only for 'special occasions', contrasted with the old and poorly maintained portable buildings normally used for classes. The artists laid out two large puppets from their 'Nyet-Nyet' project. One of the students, Scott, was drawn to the giant blue-green Bunyip puppet with its pendulous breasts and huge webbed feet. With the support of puppeteer Nick, he climbed inside it and worked out how to manipulate its outsize limbs.

As researchers, we watched from the window as the Bunyip lumbered across the basketball courts where boys who had ignored the bell were still playing. He continued onwards through the school grounds and emerged from the side of the portable classrooms like a giant Pied Piper with 20 students trailing behind. A female student manoeuvred herself into the other huge 'Nyet-Nyet' puppet and joined the Bunyip in gambolling around the space. The first session could now begin.

Andy, the puppet designer, explained the project to the 24 young people:

We're going to make a performance together by the end of the two weeks. We're going to build puppets like these two after we've got together some stories from you guys. We're looking for people who are into dancing and singing and performance-making. Today we'll play some theatre games together, get thinking about some ideas for stories, and do some drawings and designs for the puppet.

The session of theatre games, led by Sarah, the artistic director, began awkwardly when the deputy principal intervened to remove a thick rope that had been laid out in the space. She explained to us: 'Rope has bad associations for one of our kids.' After three games, many students drifted away. The task was to create the story of the play, but discussion with the remaining students was stilted and unproductive.

Tony Briggs worked with a group of boys who covered a large whiteboard with lurid drawings. They talked about how logging was destroying native flora and fauna and began to develop some characters. Their ideas were constructed into the plot outline of the performance:

Bush animals are living in harmony. A logging truck crashes in the bush, killing a kangaroo but not its Joey. Poisonous oil is spilt into the environment. Creatures emerge from the poisoned lagoon. Eagle watches the disaster from above. Orphaned Joey appeals

for help and Eagle transforms into a young woman who eventually sings the land back to health. (artistic director's notes)

Phase two: Building the puppets

We use cane and bamboo and fabric and hot glues to hold them together. We use a range of materials that are often about how puppets move and operate. But the most basic one is making three-dimensional cane shapes, a sphere a head a body or starting from a back-pack frame which means you carry the puppet on your back, which means you can have a long frame above your head, or it's like making humans or animals from the bones up. (Andy, puppet designer)

The construction of puppets took place in the school hall, where the tools and materials were laid out on newspaper. Recognising that the building of puppets is experiential and demanding, the Snuff Puppets normally spend little time on initial explanation. Students were expected to participate in the process of building the puppets alongside the puppeteers. However, by the second day it became clear that the involvement by most of the young people was sporadic and many seemed reluctant to persist at the technical tasks despite the encouragement of adults.

The following account, constructed from field notes, highlights the diverse levels of commitment in the arts project by the young people. It contrasts the intense engagement in the puppetry construction process with the majority of the young people's disengagement:

By 11.30 only one student, Brodie, is still in the hall working alongside the puppeteers. The other kids are scattered around the school grounds, kicking footballs or hanging around the residential houses. Sarah rounds up a group and, with the assistance of Tony Briggs, they set to work cutting out the fabric for the eagle's wings, gluing with the glue gun and pushing in the stuffing. In half an hour they are all gone again, leaving their tools, the glue and bits of puppet in a tumbled heap. Brodie remains. He has worked out a way of opening and closing the emu puppet's mouth and he demonstrates this to Nick. Tony Briggs comments approvingly on the huge size of the evolving emu puppet and explains: 'this is the size of animals before men came'. Brodie turns to us and says: 'That's true, that's a fact!' (field notes, day five)

Phase three: Creating dance and music

Dance was an important component of the preparation period and the final performance. Sarah discovered that dance provided opportunities for expression that were not otherwise available for the girls:

There is something about the Indigenous dancing that really was profound. I sensed that this was something that those girls really wanted to do. (Sarah, artistic director)

For Tony Briggs, the students' affinity with dance was not surprising:

There was nothing special in working on the dance with the boys: it's something they have all been a part of at some stage or another during their stay at Barak. It's their culture. This was one of the main reasons the school was started in the first place, to preserve our culture. Dance and storytelling are fundamental to this.

The young people engaged with the music activities more readily than with designing and building puppets. Many of the young people demonstrated considerable ability with drums and

guitars. A small group of boys, including the boys from the remote community, were proficient with Indigenous instruments and played clap sticks and the didgeridoo for the traditional dances. A small group worked intensively with James, the musician, on the creation of a digitalised soundtrack.

Phase four: The performance of *Singing the Land*

The performance took place on a sunny Saturday morning in the grounds of Barak College, in a natural outdoor meeting place between the school buildings and the main road. Sarah had selected the performance space in front of and around a large tree-trunk painted with Aboriginal symbols.

The following narrative account of this community performance event has been constructed from our descriptive field notes:

The artists and the students are still working on a last dress rehearsal even as the audience is arriving. There are families and friends with children and babies, and older non-Indigenous people who are 'friends' of the college. There is palpable excitement, even amongst the young people who are not involved in the performance. Behind the audience, under trees, the two mothers from the Northern Territory have set up a table with their bark paintings and shell necklaces.

The performance begins about half an hour after the scheduled time as Sarah, the director, introduces the play: 'The students have designed and helped build the puppets. They have written the story and composed the music and written the lyrics.' To one side, a small group of young artists with drum kit, synthesiser, guitars and traditional instruments are warming up.

Four girls enter and perform their version of a traditional dance. It is a subdued performance — the girls move forward with repetitive movements, waving branches of gum leaves; their heads are bowed. They perform to clap sticks and didgeridoo, played by the musicians. This is followed by a more confident and vigorous dance by three of the boys, representing kangaroos and emus. The music speeds up and Scott ends the dance with a showy leg-kick.

At this point, the music changes to a simple digitalised piano piece on loop. The Emu enters slowly; his movements are deliberate as he leans forward to simulate eating. The effect is quite powerful and we are surprised the young person inside the puppet is managing so well, although he is having problems with the huge feet. Wombat enters from behind the audience. A young female student is manipulating this puppet; again, the movements are slow and theatrically powerful. The Kangaroo enters from behind the tree, the largest of the puppets at around ten feet. The animals meet and commune.

There is a dramatic change in the music from the simple piano to a raucous rap song, 'My Big Black Truck'. Five boys enter running from the road, carrying giant logs to represent a logging truck. The 'truck' crashes into the Kangaroo.

Tony Briggs begins his narration of the story, explaining the accident and the consequence: 'The Joey, finding himself alone, searched through the bush looking for his mother.' The youngest boy from the Northern Territory emerges as the orphaned kangaroo and moves around the performance space. A tall blue Creature appears,

somewhat like a misshapen man but faceless and spotted as though with a terrible disease. Tony explains how the petrol has poisoned the lagoon and the Swamp Creature has been disturbed. The Joey asks the creature how the land might be repaired. A huge Eagle appears, the most spectacular of the Über-marionettes. The performer moves across the space, displaying the great bird — a significant symbol for the school — with its wings outstretched. The narrator explains how the Eagle transforms into a beautiful young girl (who emerges from behind the tree). The Joey asks her if she will sing the country back to life. At first she refuses, too ashamed to sing by herself. After the Joey begs her to sing, the girl agrees and as she sings the animals return to the land and the play ends.

It has been quite a spectacular and moving performance, despite the lack of rehearsals. Scott introduces the performers; the deputy principal says a few words and the audience dissipate very quickly back to the student dining room for hamburgers, sausages and cups of tea. (field notes, performance day)

Outcomes for the students

In spite of what we perceived as disengagement from the project by many of the young people, senior staff at the school were extremely positive in their responses. They argued that the impact of the project for the school community and for many of the young people had been significant.

The deputy principal spoke passionately about the impact of the project beyond the immediate school community:

It's fantastic. It's had a fantastic impact on quite a few people ... and the impact on the students was that they had a fantastic time. It's the ripple effect. I've had the Shire Council ring me wondering whether I would join one of their local festivals with the big puppets. Now that's bridged a really big gap. (deputy principal)

Another senior staff member recognised the benefits for young people who became involved:

I think the kids who have been engaged over the whole process have really enjoyed the opportunity and will have gained something personally from it ... I think it's one of the greatest achievements we've put together over the whole year. (senior teacher)

One of the themes that emerged from the data was the importance of the mentoring relationships that developed between the artists and some of the young people as they engaged in the puppetry construction, music and dance workshops, performance-making and rehearsals. The opportunity to work with experienced artists was an important dimension of the project. The young people worked with new art forms and experienced an artistic process from inception to completion, including a presentation before a live audience. They shared the experience of creating a new work, with cultural and thematic significance. One of the artists noted:

You just treat them as an artist because anyone who is making art is an artist. (Nick, puppeteer)

Brodie, one of the most marginalised of the young people, both in terms of his background and his position within the school, developed a strong relationship with puppeteer Nick who became his mentor and working partner. Brodie felt comfortable enough to reverse the roles of master and apprentice: 'me and my helper Nick, we'll be the first ones finished'. For this young participant, engagement and success in puppet-making led to a sense of ownership of the

performance in which he manipulated the giant Emu. The artistic director commented on his commitment to an ‘authentic’ performance:

He was really fantastic and he got a video to watch emus. He did his own research and he said, I’m going to try running and I said, try keeping your head still and he said, no, no, they moved their heads around because I watched it on the video. (Sarah)

The deputy principal of the college outlined the positive effects on many individual young people with histories of family breakdown, violence, substance abuse and depression. She believed the project had a profound impact on Brodie:

Now he walked in on Friday and we started Snuff Puppets on Monday. Now I do not believe we would have kept him at school if we hadn’t had Snuff Puppets. He got right into it and when you don’t have any friends in the place — especially in a place like this — to be able to take on a puppet role, which he did ... It wasn’t until afterwards when we reflected back that he realised what an impact it had ... (deputy principal)

Tony Briggs identified considerable personal achievements for the young people:

I think the entire group of students who participated managed to discover more about what they are capable of when they step out of their comfort zone. I saw a visible change in attitude and demeanour with some of the students after the event; they seemed to carry themselves with a little more pride.

One of these young men was Scott, a physically expressive and dominating student who was involved in most aspects of the performance. He spoke with pride about his achievement:

My name is Scott and I did the rap in the play and I did the logger truck and I did some traditional dancing at the start with my cousin Ashley and I was introducing everyone at the end.

Prior to his involvement in the performance, Scott — who has serious behavioural and learning difficulties — had been suspended from the school. On the basis of his success in the Snuff Puppets program, the deputy principal saw dance and drama as his way of ‘getting through’:

Scott has only just discovered dance and music so the timing was brilliant for him. James inspired him and made that CD with him, so it’s really put him on a career path. For him, the project was really positive.

When we asked Scott about his theatrical aspirations, he said: ‘Yeah I want to be an actor but not play a truck.’

The performance project helped senior students studying arts subjects to understand that art skills could be applied and could offer career pathways. Skye, a senior student who had composed her first song for the performance, recognised her role was pivotal in the play:

I was representing the girl that was transformed from an eagle. To bring the land back to life and the animals. The song came from my head. I made it up.

Initially, three girls were going to perform the song, but when the others dropped out Skye performed alone. She was also one of the dancers in the opening scene, encouraging some of the shy and reluctant girls to stay involved and perform. Skye had constructive criticisms of the

project. She thought it would have been less ‘boring’ if the puppeteers had come once a week over a longer period of time.

Outcomes for the artists

The Snuff Puppets team found working at Barak to be very challenging, but recognised the benefits for the young people — particularly through individual mentoring. The puppet designer commented:

What I did with them I saw as greatly beneficial. It was simply sitting down with them and spending time with them ... (Andy)

The artists encountered significant problems in engaging the young participants during the arts program. In the planning stages, the Snuff Puppets artists imagined that, because the school was residential, they would be able to work eight hour days with ‘a structured series of programs right through until they go to sleep’. The puppeteers wanted the young people to take charge, to develop ideas and accept responsibility for making puppets: ‘We’re quite open to letting it go just where it’s going to go.’ (Nick, puppeteer) Instead, throughout the two weeks, they found it was ‘a struggle to get anything’. Many of the young participants were unable or unwilling to persist at the task of puppet-making, and drifted in and out of the project, leaving the bulk of the construction work to the artists. Attendance was particularly poor after lunch and other activities took the students away from the project. A long weekend fell in the middle of the project and work was suspended for three days.

At times, the artists felt frustrated about their roles and responsibilities. They planned to work as artist mentors, but many of the young people required one-to-one personal as well as artistic mentoring, and they would lose interest and disappear from activities unless fully engaged. It was a challenging experience for the artists:

It was the first time for me that I’ve created a product out of very little process. So it was like careering towards the end point. And I could see that the product was a positive event for the people involved and the people who came and saw it. Feeling personally out of depth with some of the kids because I could see they were very troubled — and how to cope with that. I remind myself that I’m an artist, I’m not a therapist. I’m not there to fix people’s problems but to offer them a positive experience — and my skill, which is a creative one, which is theatre making. (Sarah, artistic director)

The cultural context of this project was significant, and presented the artists with further challenges. The involvement of Tony Briggs, an ‘uncle’ to a number of the young participants, was crucial. He was a cultural mediator for the artists, and an important role model and mentor to the boys:

He has a relationship with a lot of the kids. He was able to talk to them in a way that I couldn’t. And he could invite them to create a story and the story came from that point. (Sarah, artistic director)

At times there was evident cultural tension between boys and girls during the program. The artists attempted to negotiate safe working spaces with the guidance of the Indigenous staff, including gender-specific dance development, arts-specific activities in different locations, and one-to-one mentoring. We observed that, in the female dance sessions, the girls were prepared to accept the presence of those younger boys from the Northern Territory who understood and

respected traditional culture, and also played clap sticks and didgeridoo for them. However, the ‘safety’ of the space was disrupted when a group of older boys came to mock.

There were moments when the artists had to overcome their doubts as to whether they would meet the performance deadline:

At one point I thought, I'm not sure this is going to happen. Because it was like picking up sand you know. It kept running through my fingers. I'd get everyone here and I'd turn around and there'd be no one there. I said how are we going to ever have a show if no one is every actually here. (Sarah, artistic director)

On the last rehearsal day, for example, Joey — who played the orphaned baby kangaroo — went shopping with his mother. For his family from a remote community, attendance at the puppet performance seemed far less important than the opportunity to go shopping in a big city.

In our final interview with them, the members of the Snuff Puppets team indicated that they had learned a lot from the difficulties they encountered:

The biggest challenge is sometimes letting go of our expectations of what the outcome might be. And we as a company have to acknowledge that, so in future situations we go in and we are much more prepared to accept that things might be completely different to what we expect and we have different ways to deal with that. (Andy)

Conclusion

We believe that the focus on giant puppets in this performance project at Barak College was highly significant. The use of Über-marionettes transformed the animals into timeless totems and the simple narrative assumed mythical proportions. It allowed the young participants to communicate the spirituality that is inherent in their Dreaming. The puppet designer recognised the transformative potential of the work when he outlined the benefits for the young people:

[You] can create things from scratch, you can manifest an object from your imagination that you can actually bring to life and get inside it and act out things that might be important to you. And to engage in a group process that's about creating something that is bigger than just themselves. (Andy, puppeteer)

The bush setting and the use of huge puppets supported the young people's performance experience. By being inside the puppets, they were ‘protected’ from personal exposure and potential shame. By inhabiting the puppet animals, the students gave them life. For the dancers, the cultural nature of the movements sanctioned their public appearance. The huge puppets interacting in the outdoor space presented as ancestral spirit beings, giving further cultural meaning to the play. For those of us present, it was a complex experience: pride and pleasure at the achievement of the young people; an unsettling reminder of the detrimental impact of European settlement and ‘progress’ and an experience of redemption through the drama. An audience member commented:

Isn't wonderful to have large creatures moving around so peacefully in the grounds of the school today. Is it because things are large that make you feel so peaceful. There was a lovely feeling between the human and the kangaroo.

Singing the Land was a transformative experience for many of the young participants, the artists and the audience. It functioned as a metaphor for the acquisition of knowledge and the sense of

well-being engendered through the arts project. It exposed the young people to the demands of performance-making and fostered a sense of pride in achievement. It vindicated the artists' confidence in the power of puppet performance. For the young people, trying to negotiate between their cultural and contemporary landscapes, the performance space offered a chance to walk in both worlds.

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