

**THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA**

**Report by Penelope Lowther — 2004 Churchill Fellow**

**To research and train with various organisations in the USA and Canada that specialise in using Creative Arts Therapy, Circus, Puppetry and Drama as a therapeutic process for disadvantaged communities; to create social and political change, and to encourage self-empowerment, self-esteem, self-determination and creative expression.**

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Signed: Penelope Lowther

Dated: 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2005

## INTRODUCTION

My time in the USA and Canada was enriching, educational and inspiring. My brief was quite broad and eclectic, as is my own work here in Australia. I spent my time researching professional and community-based circus and puppet companies, intellectual disabilities organisations with arts programs and clown therapy courses in New York, San Francisco, Santa Fe (New Mexico) and Vancouver (Canada). I focused on companies that emphasised political, social and therapeutic components in their arts practice and centred my research on their community arts process, rather than their end product.

I was particularly drawn to work by companies such as the Clown Conservatory in San Francisco and Wise Fool in New Mexico, where I researched methods of clown therapy, puppet making and circus and puppetry for community arts and creative arts therapy.

The specific issues that informed my fellowship research were the:

- value of using Circus, Puppetry, Drama and Art as vehicles for political, cultural and social expression
- effectiveness of Circus, Puppetry, Drama and Art as tools for therapy, self-expression and self-empowerment
- importance of Visual and Expressive Arts centres for providing viable vocational training and employment for clients/artists with physical, mental and intellectual disabilities
- different models of clown therapy and their uses in various therapy and social programs.

I would like to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for this opportunity as well as the many artists and arts companies I encountered. Their generosity, dedication and creativity will continue to inspire me for years to come.

Special thanks to my partner KD, my family and friends for their love, support and belief in me. To the women of Wise Fool for their incredible energy and inspiring work, to Jeff Razz for his wonderful dedication to the art of clown and to Shannan Calcutt for her wisdom, humour and big stick!

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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### **Project**

To research and train in using Creative Arts Therapy, Circus, Puppetry and Drama as a therapeutic process for disadvantaged communities, to create social and political change, and encourage self empowerment, self esteem, self determination and creative expression.

### **Fellowship Highlights**

#### **New York**

- Established contacts with various professional and community puppet companies

#### **San Francisco**

- Researched clown therapy programs at the Clown Conservatory, Circus Centre
- Researched Creative Arts programs for intellectually disabled participants

#### **New Mexico**

- Trained with Wise Fool for five weeks in social circus and puppetry
- Participated in Wise Fool's disadvantaged communities programs

#### **Vancouver, Canada**

- Intensive 10-day workshop in Clown with Shannan Calcutt
- Exploration of clown therapy with Ian Wallace, David MacMurray Smith and Siobhan McCarthy

### **Findings**

The most valuable insight gained from this fellowship was the confirmation that there is an important role for Creative Arts to play in empowering marginalised communities and that Australia can benefit from the experiences of both the United States of America and Canada, which both have well-established histories and culture in community arts.

Through my research with companies such as Wise Fool (New Mexico), Clown Conservatory, National Institute of Art and Disabilities (NIAD) and the Growth Centre

(San Francisco), Earth Celebrations (New York) and various clown teachers in Canada, I discovered fellow arts practitioners utilising the Arts to encourage and facilitate communities to express issues of identity, culture, politics and social commentary. They also recognise the role the Arts can play in the development of self-esteem, self-empowerment, and creative expression. Their successful programs confirmed my beliefs in the importance of community arts therapy and practice in creating a vibrant, dynamic and healthy culture.

Australia and Australians can benefit widely from the implementation of community arts therapy and practice but these benefits cannot be realised without adequate arts funding for Community Cultural Development. It is time to recognise that community arts practice is an essential cultural component in its own right; it is not secondary to professional arts practice but equal to it.

I have already implemented many of the skills I learned during the fellowship in my own Creative Arts programs and will be actively promoting the benefits and value of Creative Arts in various communities through my workshops and public talks. I am also incorporating street theatre into my programs for clients with intellectual disabilities enabling them to participate in local arts festivals and events.

I have invited Ian Wallace and Shannan Calcutt to run intensives in Clown Therapy in Wollongong in October 2006 and I intend to write a handbook on Creative Arts Therapy to assist teachers and arts workers working with participants with intellectual disabilities.

## Program

### **New York 6<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> May**

- Julie Taymor interview/public talk and attended *The Lion King*
- Earth Celebrations - community workshops in giant puppets and annual Garden Pageant Project. Attended puppet making workshops and networked over two weeks.
- *Shockheaded Peter* – live performance incorporating actors, puppets and musicians
- *Chantacles* – puppet production
- *Lunar Sea* – dance production by Momix
- Puppetry Guild of Greater NYC
- Andrew Edlin Gallery representing ‘Outsider’ Artists (artists with no formal training)
- New York Folk Art Museum – ‘Outsider’ Artists

### **San Francisco 20<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> May**

- The Circus Centre, Clowning Conservatory – three days spent with Jeff Razz and students studying and training in Clown Therapy and watching their performances with disability organisations and in hospitals
- Interview with Paoli Lacey on her development of Clown Therapy and its practical uses
- NIAD and The Growth Centre – two disability arts centres, where I spent two days researching the organisations and their Visual Arts programs for participants with intellectual disabilities including international mainstream gallery representation and employment opportunities
- Axis Dance Company – integrated dance troupe providing professional employment and performance in dance for people with intellectual and physical disabilities

### **Santa Fe 28<sup>th</sup> May – 5<sup>th</sup> June**

- Wise Fool – Women’s Circus and Puppetry Company – five-week program training in clowning, stilts acrobatics, giant puppet building and performance
- Participated in Wise Fool’s outreach programs using Puppetry and Circus for social, political and personal expression and empowerment at
  - Disadvantaged indigenous and Hispanic children’s circus and puppet camp

- New Mexico Rape Crisis Centre
- New Mexico State Women's Prison
- Challenge New Mexico – an intellectual disability organisation

### **Vancouver 5<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> June**

- Intensive 10-day workshop in Clown with Shannan Calcutt, master clown
- Exploration of Clown Therapy and the Pochenko method with Ian Wallace and David MacMurray Smith
- Interview with Susanna Uchatius from Theatre Terrific – integrated theatre
- Interview with Polly 'Public Dreams' a Circus and Puppetry events company
- Interview with Siobhan McCarthy from absolute theatre – Clown Therapy with people living with mental illness

### **What I learned from my fellowship**

The objective of my fellowship was to observe the practice of Creative Arts Therapy, Circus, Puppetry, Drama & Visual Arts as tools for therapeutic, political and social empowerment and self-expression, with a view to incorporating new knowledge and techniques to develop and disseminate in my own arts practices here in Australia.

An important part of my research was to assess:

- how arts companies devised their projects
- how much of what they did was motivated by social politics
- how much awareness was paid to the therapeutic process
- how much was decided by artistic/ aesthetic functions.

The first thing that struck me in my conversations and observations with most of the artists and companies I visited was that, for many, the use of Creative Arts started as a political tool; by making art, giant puppets, stilt characters, dance or theatre performances etc. each group was able to increase their visibility, both politically and culturally. The artistic development came after the initial desire to unite like-minded people to express themselves, their lives and their stories. The awareness of the therapeutic impact came much later, when groups began assessing the effectiveness of the events in terms of building community and individual identity, ownership, pride, self worth and strength.

It seems that the tradition of street theatre for religious festivals, cultural events, specific celebrations or political protest is much stronger in the USA than in Australia. The use of giant puppets, masks, costumes, circus and street theatre has developed as an essential part of this, often providing the key visual images and atmosphere for the event.

Some of the companies I researched, particularly Earth Celebrations, Public Dreams and Wise Fool, have made large-scale events their trademark. Such events empower disadvantaged communities making them and their issues more visible.

I was interested in the perceived benefits to the communities from the creative arts process and event. I found that different aims, approaches and outcomes depended on the original purpose and brief of each arts organisation. Earth Celebrations and Public Dreams tended to be more interested in using puppets and street theatre to mobilise communities around political and social issues. Their public art spectacles were designed to celebrate local communities and their specific festivals, celebrations and issues. For example, Earth Celebrations is involved in an annual community street theatre event that uses giant puppets, masks and dance to celebrate spring and their parks. It is used politically to raise money to look after community projects based in the parks, such as community gardens. The event unites the community in a common cause, gives it a creative focus, and ensures that both the community and the local politicians perceive the parks as a valuable community resource.

In a similar fashion, I encountered several puppet and circus companies, such as Bread n Puppets and In The Heart of the Beast, which specialise in large-scale community arts events and spectacles that take on mythic proportions, fulfilling the communities' needs for ritual, and creative, spiritual, political and cultural expression. A good example of this is the "Burning Man Festival" in Nevada. Many of these companies are interested in the political and social role their art can play.

*"Puppet theatre is the theatre of all means. Puppets and masks should be played in the street. They are louder than the traffic. They don't teach problems, but they scream and dance and hit each other on the head and display life in its clearest terms. We want you to understand that theatre is not yet an established form, not the place of commerce that you think it is, where you pay and get something. Theatre is different. Theatre is a form of religion, it is fun."*<sup>1</sup>

In Australia, in comparison, I believe there is a limited opportunity to create large-scale community arts events that are not part of an organised cultural festival with a professional, artistic aesthetic. There is not the same tradition of street theatre or large, community art happenings, or large religious and cultural festivals that incorporate street theatre. The Woodford Festival in Maleny would be one of the few examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Schumann Peter, 'Bread and Puppets' in *Popular Theatre: A Sourcebook*, Joel Schechter (ed.) (2003), Routledge, USA, p. 40.

Other arts organisations I encountered had worked with specific community groups to help them build a puppetry/circus spectacular that celebrated their own religious or cultural events.

Wise Fool (New Mexico) has undertaken numerous projects teaching puppet building and stilt walking to indigenous communities enabling them to perform their sacred stories in a spectacular and entertaining way. For these communities, using the construction and performance component strengthens their sense of co-operation, pride in their stories and culture, and pride in their identity and traditions. This is especially important in a climate of severe cultural erosion, drug and alcohol addiction, poverty cycles and disintegration of cultural identity.

While working with Wise Fool, I was fortunate to become involved in some of their outreach programs conducted in the Indian Pueblo schools with primary school children and teenagers and at an annual Circus camp. These programs, funded by local government organisations, had wonderful results.

The children learned physically challenging circus and theatre skills in a fun and supportive environment. The obvious benefits of the program were increasing their physical fitness, physical agility, self-esteem, confidence, creative expression and group communication skills. Other important benefits were the supportive relationships developed between the company and the kids, the care taken for the kids to experience pride and to celebrate their culture and themselves as creative, expressive beings. Judging by the smiles on their faces, the show at the end of the camp was a huge success for participants and their families.

Wise Fool is very aware of the therapeutic benefits of these programs, as well as the political, cultural and social importance. I found a lot of similarities between their philosophies and practices and my own work and learnt many wonderful new techniques in puppetry and street theatre. I was also humbled by their dedication to social circus and the emphasis they place on the importance of thinking through the reasons for producing an event or a program and what the wider benefits will be for the participants as well as the audiences.

One such project was a circus and puppetry/theatre piece called “Baggage”, which was devised and performed by Wise Fool and the participants from the Santa Fe Rape Crisis Centre, who were sexual assault survivors. In this project, it was established that some of the women would not perform because it was too traumatic for them to relive their experiences on the stage. For other women, performing and telling their stories to an

audience was a huge part of their healing journey and had enormous cathartic value. Their stories were translated into circus, physical theatre and puppetry. Part of the process involved the women training in aerials, acrobatics, stilts and general circus skills over a period of a year. By being 'in' their bodies and training in challenging skills that required strength, trust and group collaboration, the women reported huge shifts in their self-esteem and body image, confidence and general well-being. Overall, the project had life changing consequences for all the participants and I believe demonstrated wonderfully how the arts can have a therapeutic benefit for both participants and audiences.

One of the other areas of research during my fellowship was Clown Therapy and clowning. I spent time with Jeff Razz, Paoli Lacey and the students of the Clown Conservatory in San Francisco, and Shanan Calcutt, Ian Wallace, David McMurray Smith and Siobhan McCarthy, in Canada.

I discovered that America and Canada have very strong traditions of clown, based on a combination of European traditions, indigenous Indian traditions and new techniques developed in those two countries. Although there is cross over, the styles and philosophies are quite distinct.

Much of this was new to me, and very different from much of the clown techniques practiced and taught in Australia. Here, clowning tends to be limited to the traditional circus shows, some contemporary circus shows and individual performers scattered across the country. Although there is an emergence of Clown Doctors, there is not a strong tradition of clown therapy in Australia, or many places to study it. For me, the main difference is that in the US and Canada there is a great emphasis and respect given to the methods of learning clown and the types of clown practice, whether it be as an entertainer in a large, commercial circus, or as a process to take you deeper into your spontaneous, inner, authentic self.

The role of the clown does seem to vary according to the context of the performance, but there is general recognition of the powerful, profound place the clown holds in the public's psyche and how this can be used to create dynamic theatre that is political and social commentary as well as a cathartic emotional and psychological journey. It was with this in mind that I found it fascinating to learn about Clown Therapy and its practical application in a wide array of contexts. The students at the Clown Conservatory run programs such as the Clown Doctors and clowns in hospitals projects, the clown project

with homeless kids and the clown projects for participants with intellectual disabilities. The hospitals project has enjoyed great success both with staff and patients.

In Canada, the emphasis is more on the personal therapeutic journey through clown. I learnt of the Pochenko method of clowning and clowning with masks. This draws on principles of role therapy to help participants discover and mobilise different parts of their psyche facilitating the development of healthy behaviour.

I was also intrigued by the work of Siobhan McCarthy, who had completed several successful projects using clowning with participants living with mental illness and indigenous youth at risk.

I found a lot of valuable information and techniques and intend to pursue the study of clown and clown therapy in my own work here in Australia. I can see that it has enormous potential for profound, therapeutic benefits in the right context. As much of my own work is about empowering women, sexual assault survivors, women dealing with mental illness, life threatening disease and depression, young women at risk and adults and kids with intellectual disabilities, I believe the creative arts techniques I researched will be of great use.

The final aspect to my fellowship in the USA and Canada was to study various arts centres set up for clients with intellectual disabilities.

In San Francisco, I visited NIAD and The Growth Centre. Both centres have established visual arts training centres for clients with intellectual disabilities and mental health issues. These centres offer art instruction and equipment five days a week and provide clients with access to a wide range of art tutors and skills. Each centre has a commercial gallery attached where participants exhibit their art and where their work is promoted to national and international art markets. The artists receive a percentage of all sales and some of the artists make quite a substantial living from their work. It is considered a legitimate form of employment allowing each artist to do what they love best to have wonderful opportunities to develop their work in a sympathetic and respectful environment.

It was to my great surprise that I discovered an incredible international art market for what is termed “Outsider Art” and “Brut Art”, which is art created by untrained artists and those with mental illness. Many of the artists I visited at the centre had works in national and international collections and exhibitions, as well as books written about their work.

It would be a wonderful thing to see similar centres established in Australia to develop and promote the art works of local artists with physical and intellectual disabilities and to provide them with viable employment and income.

## **Conclusions**

As an arts practitioner and Creative Arts Therapist, I feel the Winston Churchill Fellowship was invaluable in assisting me to gain new knowledge and find new ways to develop my techniques. Over the past ten years, I have been developing much of my work in relative isolation. The Fellowship allowed me to gain fresh ideas, techniques and have opportunities to compare my work with that of other arts companies and individuals working within similar philosophies. I was pleasantly surprised to find much of my work compared well to that of colleagues in the USA and Canada, and that I had as much to teach and share as I did to learn.

For me, the experiences of working with Wise Fool inspired me to believe more in my instincts about the importance and value of using Creative Arts as a tool for people to tell their stories and experiences, to celebrate their cultures, their identities and the issues that are important in their lives. The Arts are in themselves wonderfully challenging and life changing and have a vital role to play in the shaping of our politics, our society and our shared cultures and experiences.

I feel the work we are doing at Circus WOW, a women's circus based in Wollongong using circus to teach and empower women and kids, is important and relevant to my commitment to community arts practice in Australia.

The emphasis in Australia for the Arts to be financially independent and self sufficient, has meant a prioritising of the Arts as entertainment, as professional and polished. The emphasis is on the end product, rather than on recognising the importance of the process of art- making itself and its potential value in people's lives. This is reflected in the recent abolishing of the Community Cultural Development category within the Australia Council for the Arts funding program. This was the only category that recognised the importance of the arts for community development and expression, giving opportunities for small non- professional and community groups to use the Arts to enhance their lives, by recording or performing their stories, learning new art forms, or finding other means of expressing cultural identity.

Also, the different cultural experiences of Australians mean there is not the same emphasis placed on street theatre and the celebration of large-scale events, such as

religious festivals, cultural events or political rallies, as in other countries. These events give the community a shared purpose for their creative expression and celebration. Community festivals are becoming more popular, but they are often limited by lack of funds as to what community art forms they can participate in or include.

Since my return I have implemented the incorporation of large-scale puppets, made by my clients with intellectual disabilities, into a local arts festival and hope to continue developing an interest in street theatre events.

I also feel that the field of clown therapy fits well into my work as a therapist and performer in clown and circus. I believe there is great potential for the various forms of clowning in teaching people a deeper awareness of themselves and how they move through the world. I also think that in this political climate it is healthy to have clowns and fools to make public the failures of our political and social structures and to help facilitate healthy debate.

I am also inspired to keep advocating the potential of the Arts to change people's lives and give them a voice and sense of self worth through opportunities such as arts programs for participants with intellectual disabilities or those suffering mental illness to study and make art, or creating street theatre or a puppet show that tells the participant's stories and life experiences.

### **Recommendations**

It is essential that the importance of community arts practice as a vehicle for personal, political, social and cultural change is acknowledged and supported in Australia. The Arts are just as important at the community level, as a shared process of expression of common purposes and experiences, as they are at the professional level.

Recent government arts policy abolishing Community Cultural Development funding and placing the burden of raising money and resources onto private sponsorship and the arts organisations themselves means professional, product-driven arts companies and cultural groups committed to community arts projects that may not be product orientated must compete for limited arts funding. It would be wonderful to see this trend reversed. Community arts projects deserve to be given the same importance and funding as professional arts projects. They serve different functions and purposes in our society but are equally necessary for the cultural richness and balance of our country. In the same way, it would be fantastic to see more private and government sponsored arts programs for people living with intellectual, physical and mental disabilities to develop their arts

practice, whether it be visual, dance, drama or circus, and to participate in the national and international community and professional arts circuits if they so wish.

On a personal level, as stated, I am redesigning my Creative Arts programs for my clients with intellectual disabilities to incorporate a street theatre component so they can participate in local cultural events, raise their visibility and increase their integration into the local community. I am also hoping to share the skills I learned during my fellowship to broaden the opportunities for the diverse communities in Wollongong to become involved in street theatre and large-scale community arts events and spectacular.

I am also instigating more clowning workshops in my circus teaching and I have invited Ian Wallace and Shannan Calcutt to come and run clown intensives in Wollongong next year. I hope to do further study in clown and clown therapy.