English in Mind Second edition
Level 4 Unit 7
Article

THE INDEPENDENT

Knife crime: Can drama help stop it?

They were young dropouts on the road to ruin. Then they discovered the theatre – and a whole new sense of self. Angela Neustatter reports on a remarkable programme that's turning lives around

Thursday, 11 September 2008

[1] Children as young as six are being introduced to gang culture by seeing their brothers with knives and guns. This is the chilling reality spelled out by Dr Derrick Campbell, chair of the National Independent Advisory Group on Criminal Use of Firearms, in the week that the number of victims of teenage homicide this year went up to 25. At the same time, the Home Office announced publication of Gangs: You and Your Child, a booklet for parents.

[2] The parents of 21-year-old Tony (who prefers to remain anonymous) would have welcomed some guidance as they saw their young son embarking on the kind of dangerous lifestyle that hits the headlines these days. By the age of 16 he had been expelled from several schools and was running with a gang in the north London area where he lived, 'getting into every kind of bad trouble', he says. He got a conviction for carrying a knife, and was in street fights and rivalries that too often involved guns. He saw *peers* die. 'It's a surprise I'm not dead,' he says. 'One time I remember the bullet of a gang who were after me literally whistling past my ear.'

[3] Today his life has changed radically. Tony studies law at Middlesex University. He got a 2:1 for his first year and has dreams of influencing Government policy on street crime and its causes.

[4] Tony's will to change direction did not come from an advice booklet, but from the help he attributes to Jeremy Weller – the director of the multi-award winning Grassmarket Project. This is a unique theatre enterprise that, for the past 12 years, has been producing theatre with *marginalised* and socially excluded people, based on their life experiences.

'I remember the bullet of a gang … whistling past my ear'

[5] Tony was attending a pupil referral unit when Weller, who was working at the unit, persuaded him to take part in creating a play about gang life. The process was stimulating: the demands of the disciplined routine – not to mention Tony's discovery that he had acting skills – made the young man feel good about himself in a way that he could not recall.

[6] 'I saw the possibility of doing something creative and valuable instead of wasting life on the streets,' he says. With Weller's help, Tony was one of 800 out of 6,000 chosen for the National Youth Theatre's summer course. Tony went on to do GCSEs and earned a place at law school.

[7] When we met, Weller was working with a new group of disaffected young people, rehearsing The Boys, a play set around life on an *unremittingly* tough inner-London estate where brutal machismo rules. The play was based on the experiences of a group of teenage boys and girls who had volunteered to take part.

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[8] The Boys was commissioned by the National Theatre's education department, who asked Weller to work with Fairbridge, a charity in south London. Fairbridge tries to help people aged 13 to 25 who have dropped out of education, training and work, by offering activities to re-ignite their interest in education.

'I saw the possibility of doing something creative and valuable'

[9] For The Boys, the group constructed a storyline about a dangerous love triangle involving a powerful drug dealer who *taunts*, threatens and abuses those around him, who in turn learn to protect themselves as best they can. Sexism abounds; the atmosphere is one of tension and fear. Watching the teenagers perform, one gets a palpable sense of what it is like to deal with such behaviour.

[10] Weller demands high standards, and refuses to waste his time with anyone who offers less. These teenagers had to create their own dialogue, write up their own scripts and learn them.

[11] Weller himself grew up in a chaotic, impoverished family, had no education, and got into plenty of trouble growing up. His experiences help him to understand what his young charges may be up against. But he is unsentimental about his past. He got himself a scholarship to art college and later moved on to theatre, where his focus has always been working with people he sees as having the least power and voice.

[12] Richard Ings, who has just completed an evaluation of Grassmarket Project (which is funded by organisations such as the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Tudor Trust, and the Arts Council of England), believes that Weller is driven by a fierce morality. 'He seeks out suffering and looks for *redemption*,' Ings says.

[13] Weller stresses that his work is not therapy or formal education, but rather art, which may or may not be transformational. 'My experience has shown that working in this way encourages young people to think afresh about education, creativity and other areas of social development,' he says.

[14] The impact of Grassmarket Project on the young people has been so encouraging that the Fairbridge centre is keen to continue the partnership, says Gemma Clemson, the centre's operations manager.

[15] 'So many of the young people coming here have had very unhappy experiences of education,' she says. 'We see developing social skills as the first step towards changing their lives, but we embed basic education into all our activities, from cookery to caving and abseiling.'

[16] The Boys was performed at the National Theatre this summer to an audience of 600; it remains available in the theatre's archives. After the performance, the actors held a question-and-answer session. 'These kids started with no confidence, *engagement* or ability to turn up on time,' says Claudia Barlow, project manager for Theatre of Debate, the National Theatre initiative that commissioned the play. 'All that has been reversed. You can imagine how high their self-esteem was on hearing the applause from the audience. They have learnt about taking pride in their identity, and that they have choices about how they behave.'

[17] Jamal, 20, was one of the young people inspired by working with Weller and now Grassmarket Project. He, too, has a university place lined up. Yet, his childhood experiences were leading him in a very different direction. Jamal grew up in the Liverpool docklands to a mother who was a crack cocaine addict; his father died at sea. He was sexually abused by a family member, and was selling sex at 13. A large, strong lad, he dealt with difficult situations by using his fists. He was homeless and rarely in school.

[18] 'That's how it was when I came across Grassmarket Project,' he says. 'I was at a day centre in King's Cross for young sex workers and Jeremy came in. I was 17 and very aggressive – but Jeremy asked me, what was my idea of hope? That was such an important question, it hooked me in.' Jamal agreed to be in Weller's next production, ➦

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➥ The Foolish Young Man, playing alongside the professional actor David Harewood at the Roundhouse in London. The production told a tale of *deprived* and dangerous London street life.

[19] For Jamal, it was a turning point. 'All my life's experience went into The Foolish Young Man, and the experience of working on this *endowed* me with a sense of self-worth. I got some *solace* through performing my story. It also gave me the opportunity to reflect on it and to set about rectifying my life.'

[20] *Epiphanies* may not come every day. But, of the group in The Boys, Abigail has signed up for sixth-form college to do performing arts and some GCSEs; Jay will start work experience with a printer; Paul worked through the summer as a sports coach and is going to college to do a media course this month. Isabel, who is pregnant by a man she describes as undesirably similar to the drug dealer in the play, says she listened to the boys in the group asking, 'Why you let him treat you that way? Why you staying with him?' and began to see that the relationship could only be bad for her and her child. 'I'm not with him any more,' she says proudly. She, too, plans to do a work training course when the baby is born.

[21] All of which pleases Weller. He has no statistics measuring what he achieves in terms of social reform. But he has seen enough changed destinies to be an irredeemable optimist. ■