

GRAHAM GLUCK

Educational theatre reaches 'closed minds and hearts'

Do you practise safer sex? Not the sort of question that teachers receive every day. But with the Contagious Performance Company it's the sort of question that might require an answer every day, five days a week.

Contagious was formed in August 1988 with an aim 'to produce shows around issues of concern and interest to other young people'. In the relatively short time since its inception, the Company has established a national reputation as a leading health education organisation, appearing three times on national television. The response from audiences, critics, and fellow health professionals has been overwhelming, with many Health Authorities as regular customers. The success of 'educational theatre' in disseminating messages on health-related issues is of considerable interest, and a method from which much can be learned.

The questioner above was a young woman in the 10th year at one of our school performances of *Closed Minds and Hearts*, on HIV transmission and AIDS. The question and answer ses-

sions that always follow our shows offer the opportunity to clarify some points from a show that is packed with information. It is also an opportunity for us to listen to the current concerns of young people so that we can refocus our work if needed.

Interactive learning

But the question also implies a need for credibility — 'if you practise safer sex, then as a role model I can be tempted to follow your example'. This is a vital concern. Knowledge does not automatically change behaviour; the saying goes: Tell me and I will forget, show me and I will remember, involve me and I will understand. Much of the success of Contagious can be attributed to this approach; the technique is one of interactive learning, perhaps not the only usable technique but a proven one.

When we started out, we consulted the Terrence Higgins Trust. This was at the time of the 'iceberg' advertisements on television. The Trust's advice, as a measured response to these campaigns, was to avoid 'doom and gloom' at all costs:

despondency is simply a turn-off. Warmth, humour, compassion, optimism and, most importantly, honesty was the recommended brew. A few theatre groups who had bothered to approach the subject saw the issue as a chance to be dramatic, to 'do a play about someone dying of AIDS'. "That will cheer everybody up," was one comment, while an HIV counsellor patiently explained: "we try to talk about people living with HIV rather than dying of AIDS". Our course was set — we were not going to do a play about someone dying of AIDS.

Peer advocacy

We had the advantage of being a company composed of very young professional performers with some training in educational theatre. Youth is an important element. When most young people begin to engage in risk behaviours — drink, drugs, and sex — it is at a period when they are taking the first steps in managing their own lives. The natural corollary is rejection of parents and authority. At this time, most people are responding to the behaviour of their peers, the infamous 'peer pressure'. If our clients are not going to be advised by authority, well, they may listen to other people. The approach we would advise would be one of 'peer advocacy'.

The advantage of theatre is that it can bring issues to life. We can show, for example, the problems of HIV and insurance, of prejudice and disinformation through characters. Besides, we are a theatre company — naturally we would use drama. But how to bring all this together? To be 'peer advocates', to avoid gloom and doom, to use drama effectively, to address ourselves to the issues, to involve the audience in the learning process and, lastly, to wrap everything in a package that is caring, compassionate, humorous and factual.

'Alternative cabaret' is a format that allows anything. Being involved in the emergence of alternative cabaret in the early 1970s I was disap-

pointed at having seen the form drift slowly to locker-room infantilism, so I suggested that we call our first show simply a 'cabaret'.

Game show

After intense research, the most important bedrock of educational theatre, we formulated our ideas around televisual techniques. We would use the form of the television game show. Six 'contestants' (some stereotypes, others not) are seen in some Brookside-style excerpts of their lifestyles, and the audience are asked to vote on which might be HIV positive. The scenes all relate to young people in typical situations, at the disco, as students, in the GUM clinic. The contest is set in a television studio and the show is called *Run the Risk*. The game show format

allows the scenes to be inter-cut with audience participation — the 'host' and 'hostesses' take people from the audience on stage and go through various quizzes for which there are, of course, 'prizes'. The finale returns to the competition and each character speaks one last time directly to the audience, using a 'hot-seat' technique. The audience vote.

The formula has been honed and reworked since. Our overwhelming response has allowed us to take health education into polytechnics, universities, schools, youth clubs, prisons, art centres, care centres, a public park, street presentations, and now (an important development from one Health Authority) pubs, clubs, and discos.

Our involvement with health professionals led to the choosing of our



Warmth, humour, compassion and optimism: Health Education — it can be contagious with the Contagious Theatre Company!

second project. This time we were responding to requests for a piece that would inform on alcohol and drug use. This subject arises, of course, in our HIV piece — the projection to further work in this area was quite natural.

'Panto'

Of course, all of this incurs costs, whilst venues catering for young people, students' unions, and Health Authorities do not have limitless funds. To set aside time for research and rehearsal needs investment. 'Crusaid' came to our rescue, and in August 1990 two months were set aside for *Scoring*, our alcohol and drug 'panto' — well, sort of panto!

Closed Minds has been a hard act to follow. *Scoring* has received excellent reviews; nevertheless, in August of this year the Company has been joined by award-winning director John Turner to rework the piece. This was made possible by a generous grant from the Mental Health Foundation. We are going to ensure the same success for *Scoring* as for *Closed Minds*.

The benefits that have accrued by working in this way are several. We have been able to bring many agencies together, providing excellent focus. Examples of this are where a students' union welfare officer and a counsellor from a Health Promotion Unit have worked together to present our show and to provide students with health packs, posters, information, etc., with expert speakers, all within a health awareness week. In the prison service, our shows go hand-in-hand with current class work: each prison has an education officer staffed by the DOE. In schools our shows are ideal vehicles for follow-up within national curriculum optional modules on personal and social education.

Closed Minds and Hearts looks closely at aspects of substance use and misuse, sex education, family life and personal hygiene. At a recent conference the Minister of Health was asked a question on placing sex

education within a context of family life. Her reply was to suggest educating towards a notion of sex within a loving relationship. This is a helpful way of interpreting current legislation which in our case allows us to look at the question of fidelity in a general context. We have also been careful to place the problem of transmission of HIV within a context of STDs generally. The interrelation between substance use and misuse was the original motive for our designing a show on this subject specifically. It isn't just sharing needles, some substances can affect the immune system, being drunk or stoned can lead to other risk behaviours whilst the problem of transmissible diseases complicates an already difficult problem of substance use.

Guidelines

Scoring concentrates on the difference between substance use and misuse, and between use and addiction. It also looks at the legality of substances and how this complicates the issue of misuse. But in view of the interrelation that we have stated there is need to cover certain of the issues which are dealt with in *Closed Minds and Hearts*, the transmission of diseases, other risk behaviours and goes on to look at aspects of nutrition, personal hygiene and family life. So, either show is a useful tool in generating interest in the subjects. Some criticism has been made of the fact that the guidelines and supporting information are not specific enough. Our view is that the guidelines offer flexibility and a way of dealing with the subjects in a broader and more imaginative way whilst firmly within current legislation. Co-ordinated follow-up is important in good educational theatre practice.

Technique

Many professionals working to help young people have been able to use similar methods — competitions, chat show formats, etc., in promoting their own work. Independent surveys show conclusively the effective-

ness of peer advocacy and interactive learning techniques. I like to think that our own blend of outrageous humour and responsible concern has done much to bring these difficult subjects to a widening audience of young people. Our achievement has been to lower hysteria whilst promoting safer behaviour among the young people with whom we have worked — as one of our correspondents puts it, "*Closed Minds and Hearts* beats down barriers on apathy, stigma, misinformation, and can make you laugh and cry at the same time". On *Scoring*, it was remarked, "the girls found it entertaining, informative, and thought-provoking... the lecturer from Narconon was impressed with the quality of the production".

It took a huge amount of hard work and determination to establish *Contagious*, and eighteen months to secure our first prison booking — to date we have played to an estimated 100,000 people. It is our intention now to provide a quality professional service designed to meet the requirements of our customers. The last now seems a funny word to me, as most of our customers are colleagues and many are our respected friends. Their support does much to offset the stress in running a small company attempting to provide a high-quality service. Perhaps there's a show there somewhere: certainly there's a subject!

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