TO WALK A JOURNEY WITH THEM
An interview with Jo Trevathan; Teaching Artist
by Georgia Cowling

Jo Trevathan, a performer and theatre educator, attended Drama Action Centre (DAC) in Sydney, Australia 1985-87. DAC’s strong focus on Jacques Lecoq’s methodologies and techniques provided a solid foundation for her special interest in community theatre. These are among the techniques she brings to bear in her creative work promoting intercultural awareness and dialogue for Western Edge Youth Arts (WEYA).

Trevathan became acquainted with WEYA in 2000. Originally a small theatre company based the western suburbs of Melbourne, WEYA has become “highly respected within National and International education communities for its leadership in arts in education pedagogy” and is a place where “artist-teachers have developed strong, long-term partnerships with more than ten schools and have delivered significant social and learning outcomes for the young people who participate.”

‘Awake work’ is how Trevathan describes the pedagogical approaches that support and guide her work with WEYA. She says she aspires for her work to be rigorous and relevant: “We go in with work that is really challenging, not in a negative way, it’s really positive…talking about current issues… always finding the life in it,…the entry points for getting them (participants)…to express themselves, what they think and want to create.” Trevathan engages diverse practices, such as creative writing, visualizing, drawing, making objects, using sensory and kinaesthetic awareness exercises and performance tasks, to share emotions, stories and ideas. Trevathan has seen “massive transformations” in the students and often schools and the teachers.

Specifically, her work is with WEYA’s Artists in Schools Program and occasionally with the Community Performance projects focused on teenagers at risk, people with refugee backgrounds and new arrivals. In situations where there is “nothing around to support those communities coming together” Trevathan says, there are complex communication difficulties for people who are suffering poverty or have language, cultural and historical differences. Some of those themes were explored in the work, “Old Ghosts, New Land” (2007), a community project where new arrivals from countries including Burma, Kosovo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Macedonia, Vietnam and Papua New Guinea, all who were learning English as a Second Language, worked with Trevathan to develop media and art installations, create spaces and connections

1 www.westernedge.org.au/about/
with past, present and future identities. Trevathan described her role in this project as being able to “walk a journey with them”.

But every journey begins first by building trust. Inspired by a Hindu Creation Myth from Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Trevathan encouraged storytelling via a process of layering for performance making. Year 6 students worked through developing their own understandings and interpretations of the material, physicalising the story and writing about it, which provided a framework to explore and delve deeper into the meaning of their work together.

Reflecting upon her methods and approaches, Trevathan says, “I do believe that you can go on a significant meaningful and deep journey with the students and it will change their lives, yours, the teachers and the community. It says something. It has to be rich in meaning.”

WEYA has continued to gain long-term residencies of up to three years in schools. Trevathan credits the company’s artistic directors who are “constantly gauging the weather”, conducting extensive evaluations to remain responsive and relevant to contemporary issues and interrogating what might be possible given different schools funding opportunities. WEYA continues to be reliant on government funding and are often at the mercy of shifting policy priorities, needing to remain creative and educationally current.

Trevathan finds long-term residencies in schools to be the most valuable, particularly in “building a language and a culture within that school”. A mutual relationship based on trust takes time to form. Building trust with schoolteachers while matching school curriculum with an artistic, political slant is an ongoing challenge. As Trevathan states, “Where you don’t go in school, we do push the edge, we are political and do push that social agenda… which I think is a balance… really healthy to have in the curriculum.”

The results can be very encouraging. Trevathan relayed an anecdote of the transformation experienced by a Cambodian student, who had previously been disengaged with school. The particular project that Trevathan facilitated was based on a Cambodian story. Teachers reported to Trevathan afterward that having explored the story, the student felt motivated to re-engage, connect to and excel with both the ‘performance’ in the show and performance at school – an experience that changed this student’s academic life.

Teaching and learning is exchanged between teachers and teaching artists alike.

Trevathan described some of the techniques and strategies that she has shared with teachers in an effort to adapt new skills to unique teaching environments. Trevathan believes successful connections made through pedagogical approaches that encourage new ways of thinking and creating, can have far-reaching positive consequences beyond the duration of the project, as was the case for the newcomer from Cambodia.

At the heart of her work is Trevathan’s belief in the place of art in society. Art offers all of us “a space to come together and express…and play…and cry…and talk…and not have restrictions around it (art)… a really great way of building something positive and strong.”


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