

The use of drama in AIDS prevention: building on Pacific culture

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Introduction

Some of the most innovative and effective AIDS prevention initiatives in the Pacific, and elsewhere, are those of young people. A most exciting development, and one particularly suited to the Pacific region, is the use of drama in AIDS prevention and education. This article highlights some of the theatre groups working to prevent AIDS/STD. The most effective are the small mobile theatre groups which travel to remote villages and outer islands with plays on contemporary themes such as AIDS, other health issues and environmental protection. The most successful not only present their own ideas, but also involve local people in the performances and encourage them to devise their own plays on issues of concern, using local music, language and customs.

Most people find it easier to relate to the spoken rather than the printed word or even pictures. This is particularly true of Pacific cultures with their oral traditions. The performing arts have been used to educate for generations. The medium is familiar and the skills are found any in Pacific community. More importantly, theatre is flexible. It can be used whether the audience is large or small, indoors or outdoors.

Theatre, role plays, song and storytelling can entertain and inform at the same time. They give a personal dimension to a subject and help people to think and talk about sensitive issues more easily. As part of an audience, people can relax and discover that things may need to change, but without feeling embarrassed, accused or threatened. World Vision Vanuatu, for example, has found that

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in-Vanuatu communities find it acceptable to discuss sensitive matters as AIDS publicly, if they are gathered to watch a video, or particularly a live drama.

In the Pacific, theatre groups often use song and dance as part of their performances and encourage audiences to join in. Masks and puppets, popular in other parts of the world for AIDS prevention education, are little used at present in the Pacific, although masks would seem ideal for presentations to Melanesian cultures. The incorporation of humour in performances facilitates the raising of sensitive issues without threatening conscious and unconscious values.

This paper reports on young people's initiatives using theatre to get across messages about AIDS, STD and related issues. Despite the effectiveness of theatre, it cannot work alone. To effect change, theatre needs to be accompanied by other types of information and education, and must be supported by political will, commitment to change, and by members of the audience having access to adequate health care... and condoms!

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Papua New Guinea (PNG)

In a country with over 700 different languages, theatre, with its emphasis on the visual and the physical, offers a solution to difficulties in getting health messages to such a diverse population. As a long-time part of PNG culture, drama enjoys traditional popularity and allows the actors and audience to interact in a way that most forms of modern media do not. The communication problems in PNG are enormous – television and radio are not readily accessible to the majority of its population of 3.7 million; most people live in small scattered settlements; and only a small percentage have completed schooling to Grade 10 level.

The Awareness Community Theatre (ACT) programme of PNG aims to increase awareness on health, literacy, AIDS, birth control and other health and social concerns. To do so, it has set up a network of local theatre groups with a core of administrative and training staff. Its membership includes

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provincial theatre groups, local village theatre groups, and youth and church-based groups. There are 29 groups in all, from 16 of the 19 provinces of PNG. Group members' ages range from 12 to 65 years, with most being between 18 and 25.

One of the local ACT theatre initiatives is the Maprik District STD/AIDS Awareness Committee's mobile theatre, song and community awareness programme. Maprik District, in East Sepik Province, is one of the most heavily populated areas of PNG. The project is managed by the Maprik District Council of Women, a branch of the East Sepik Provincial Council of Women. The Maprik District Council of Women has developed substantial material and human resources over the last fifteen years. Three hundred volunteer community-based health workers and 300 village literacy and awareness workers conduct programmes and provide basic health care and education for their communities. According to co-ordinator Lusey Goro, 'This is not just AIDS/STD awareness in a vacuum, but rather an education and awareness campaign conducted in the context of a much larger community-based primary health care and education programme'. The travelling theatre moves throughout the district working with communities that have well-established community women's organisations. Activities include theatre performances, recording of radio plays, compositions of songs on AIDS/STD and recording of a cassette, and awareness sessions in conjunction with the theatre performance.

The theatre group is a vigorous and creative team of young men and women. Lusey Goro is confident that they will be able to communicate effectively with their peers, one of the key target groups for AIDS/STD education. 'In Papua New Guinea our youth are troubled by the very rapid shift in social norms and values, especially as they apply to relationships and sexuality. Taboos inhibit frank discussion and communication. Drama, song and informal awareness-raising sessions can be a vital tool in this work and can pave the way for more openness, honesty and frankness among peers and within families and communities. The South Pacific Commission (SPC) funded the 1994 activities of the theatre programme, through the Pacific Island AIDS and STD Prevention Project of (PIASPP) of the Community Health Services.

Solomon Islands

During 1990 alone over 14,000 people watched shows put on by the SEI! theatre troupe of Solomon Islands. SEI! was created in 1988 by the Solomon Islands Development

Trust to take theatre into villages to help preserve custom and culture and to present important social issues in a lively and entertaining way. That's exactly what they've been doing ever since. A team of eight young men tour the provinces presenting plays about real village issues – What happens when you sell your trees to the loggers?; Why local food is better for your body and purse than imported food; Why breastfeeding is best; How family planning helps your family's health and standard of living. The theatre team are also trainers, training college students, rural training centre (RTC) students and other groups in theatre techniques. When the RTC students return to their villages, they teach youth from other villages and the process can go on. With some 6,000 villages in the Solomon Islands, SEI! could never hope to cover them all by themselves, even over a period of years. Despite transport problems SEI! has already covered about 800 villages and there are only a few small islands that are yet to be visited. In 1989 two members of SEI!, Frances Iro and Patrick Kekea, and trainer Campbell Smith went for observation and training with theatre groups in Papua New Guinea. Team mem-

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bers have also visited the Philippines to look at how the Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA) organises its network, and in 1993 they performed at the popular theatre festival in Sydney. After these exposure trips, SEI! started to establish a network with PETA, PNG's Raun Isi and Wan Smolbag Theatre from Vanuatu. The Canadian organisation CUSO has produced a video showing the work of the three melanesian theatre groups in environmental education. SEI!'s three year programme for 1994-96 focuses on village interventions on malaria reduction, and AIDS awareness. In 1994 Patrick Kekea, who for five years was coordinator of SEI!, left to concentrate on a new group, ISI theatre, which consists of young men from his village. Patrick is writing a play about AIDS. He is also trying to start an all-female theatre group. Women are presently not included in theatre groups for cultural reasons.

Kiribati

The seeds for the growth of theatre are certainly present in Kiribati. Traditionally the Kiribati people have a long history of the performance of song and dance, the songs usually telling the story of a recent happening. Perhaps the first theatre group with social messages in Kiribati was CHAR, a church-oriented group of young men who had been actively involved in song, drama and dance presentations on a range of cultural, customary and developmental issues for many years. They were hired by the Ministry of Health to do performances about AIDS, alcohol, nutrition and sanitation. Another group, Itibwerere, was originally

the University of the South Pacific Kiribati Drama Group, which in that incarnation performed plays on condoms, nutrition and other health topics. They have recently been reactivated by the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific, for whom they had previously acted in a nutrition drama video. This vibrant and talented group is keen to do plays on a variety of issues including environmental awareness, family planning, domestic violence, alcohol, nutrition and STD/AIDS. Late in 1994 six members of Itibwerere went to Vanuatu for training with Wan Smolbag Theatre and came back with two complete productions under their belts: a very powerful play on domestic violence and another on the importance of preschool education. Also while in Vanuatu they performed in an STD play for World AIDS Day with members of Wan Smolbag. The actors are endowed with beautiful singing voices, which they use to full effect, songs being an integral part of their theatre performances.

New Caledonia

A multicultural group of unemployed youth in New Caledonia formed Mosaiique (currently in abeyance) several years ago. Their play, *Teddy has AIDS*, included music, dance and a song composed by the group. They toured New Caledonia with local health association ADSPPK. These young people from the poorer suburbs of Noumea were able to travel, occupy their time and learn new skills and develop self-esteem while doing something they felt was very worthwhile. The tour of New Caledonia was funded by the National AIDS Committee, SPC and others.

French Polynesia

In Tahiti a group of young unemployed people from the commune of Faa'a, some of whom were previously delinquents, have been involved in a theatre programme, helped by youth workers from the Territorial Youth Service. They have greatly benefited personally from this. According to Maeva Bordogna, "Theatre is the best way for young people to express their worries and to have their point of view heard. In the French Polynesian family, young people don't have the same right as adults to say what they think."

On World AIDS Day 1993 they performed their AIDS play for the first time. The play, in Tahitian, was a chance for them to show how the problem of AIDS is felt in French Polynesian families. The young people try to talk about AIDS with their father. They explain that even in his youth there were STD, but this was not talked about and young people had no way to protect themselves. The father is very typical. Sexuality

is a taboo subject. The mother is more open minded and there is a complicity between her and the children. Her employer, a nurse happens to arrive and is invited to eat with them. The mother says she is worried about this problem. The nurse provides the opportunity to get round the taboos. She explains the facts about AIDS and the father begins to understand the need to talk about it. When the excellent acting of the young people was commented upon, Maeva Bordogna said "They are very true to life ... they are playing themselves."

Cook Islands

Co-operation was the key to success in *Fading Away*, an AIDS story from the Cook Islands. The play was originally written by staff of the Health Department and reworked by Tereora College student Anita Allan before performance by college students as part of the 1992 World AIDS Day activities. Since then it has been filmed for television, as a collaborative effort between health staff, Tereora College and Cook Islands Television (CITV), and was broadcast for the first time on World AIDS Day 1993. A young man, Mareko (played by Romani Katoa), travels to Australia for study and while there unknowingly contracts HIV. He comes back to the Cook Islands and marries his childhood sweetheart Tara.

Anita Allan, who plays Tara in the 20-minute film, rewrote the script while travelling to and from school on the bus and during lunch breaks. She expanded the play and added new characters to produce something more in line with the way Cook Island teenagers think. According to Anita, 'Making a film about AIDS was an excellent way of learning about it. This was an experience not to be missed. And while we were doing it we knew we were helping others, or so we hoped.' There was much fun and excitement for all those involved, including the CITV who said it was the first drama they had ever filmed.

Anita also wrote 'Fading Away', the title song of the film. She was very careful about the wording as 'I did not want to tell people that it was alright to have sex with anyone as long as you use a condom but I also didn't want to say "Abstain until you're married". I hope I managed to subtly combine the two thoughts.'

After a rush to complete the editing in time, the first public showing went well, feedback was good, but two main problems were identified: the broadcast was broken up by advertisements and the film ended too abruptly. By ques-

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tioning viewers afterwards the producers found that most people had not got the point: that Mareko was not only infected himself, but he had infected his wife Tara and possibly their unborn baby too. The drama was broadcast again in 1994, this time without advertisements and with an improved ending that made it clear that Mareko, Tara and the baby all eventually die of AIDS.

Fading Away has attracted a lot of interest in Australia and New Zealand. With permission from CITV, SPC's AIDS prevention project in the Community Health Services distributed copies to all the Pacific national AIDS committees. The Cook Islands Department of Health used WHO funding to produce the film.

Vanuatu

What's in a small bag? If it's Wan Smolbag – the popular Vanuatu drama company – it's bound to be a bag full of pleasant surprises with great educational impact. With a population of 164000 people who until recently had no access to public television and who are spread over many islands, health promotion efforts in Vanuatu must use methods which bypass these communication barriers.

When Wan Smolbag began in 1989 with a team of four people, all the props they needed fitted into "one small bag", hence the name. With the selfsame bag and a guitar the group set off with missionary zeal carrying their messages to villages throughout Vanuatu, where they do seven tours a year. Wan Smolbag's plays often use visual comedy and music, which makes it easier to overcome language problems. Performances frequently take place outside traditional theatre setting, such as outdoor spaces in villages. The plays must be action-packed to hold the audience's attention as the actors might be competing with the noise of waves crashing over the reefs, crying children or shouting adults. Villagers' response has been very positive: 'It's so much clearer when we see a play than when we hear a tok tok on the radio.'

The small bag had to expand into a suitcase when Wan Smolbag was commissioned by SPREP (South Pacific Regional Environment Programme) to produce a play on logging, which meant carrying the costumes of Mighty Hawk, Magic Fish, The Rubbish Machine, and The Chainsaw of Mr Kill-the-World. UNICEF commissioned plays about vaccination, and pre-school education. The suitcase gathered many labels as the group toured around Vanuatu and started to get requests to perform abroad. Traditional plays and custom dances performed by the group meant carrying a bundle of spears, custom mats and tam tams as well. The group's play about the history of Vanuatu was performed at the South Pacific Arts Festival in the Cook Islands in 1992. The amount of luggage was now getting serious. Unlike most theatre groups Wan Smolbag needs to keep all its plays as part of its repertoire.

In 1993 the bag finally burst its seams and so was born Smolbag I and II. Smolbag I would tour the region and be free to attend overseas events and Smolbag II would keep the work rolling in Vanuatu. The British aid agency (ODA) made this possible by funding Wan Smolbag for three years with a brief to train groups from the region, and produce materials like films, scripts, songs and new plays. The ODA funding, supplemented by PIASSP, has permitted the construction of a new theatre/workshop for the group. PIASSP also funded some of the group's tours of Vanuatu.

There are two AIDS plays in Wan Smolbag's repertoire, *Warm Night* and *Like Any Other Lovers*, and one about STD, *she never knew*. A video of the English version of *Like Any Other Lovers* has been produced by the SPC and has been widely distributed throughout the Pacific. The video production has won several regional awards for excellence and has been on television in several countries.

The full 11-member cast of Smolbags I and II toured Fiji in 1994 with a puppet show on environment, plays on pre-school education, toilets, immunisation, AIDS/STD and domestic violence. They were brought to Fiji by Women's Action for Change which is developing its own drama group along the lines of Wan Smolbag. The SPC Community Health Services participated in these activities.

Wan Smolbag is increasingly involved in training and several drama groups from the Pacific have gone to Vanuatu to work with them, including the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (with funding from ODA and SPC), Ceebue from New Caledonia, SEI! from the Solomon Islands, and a group from Kiribati. Wan Smolbag has also been to Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) with funding from SPC for a very successful training of participants at a HIV prevention workshop. Late in 1993 they visited Noumea at the invitation of SPC and Unicef to perform their plays at the South Pacific Conference and at various venues around Noumea. Although the groups' plays were performed in bislama or English they delighted audiences in the poor suburbs of Noumea. Most popular were *Street Kids*, a play about urban youth which brought tears to the eyes of many in the audience, and *The Clever Fly*, their play about the need for VIP toilets, which had people in tears with laughter.

Marshall Islands

"Nowadays, kids my age and younger say it's impossible to build up Marshallese custom. They say another world has come and it controls us. But after they see our programmes they say it is possible for us to be proud of our culture", says Roma Bejiko of the Youth to Youth in Health theatre troupe. Youth to Youth in Health (YTYIH) was launched in 1986: a volunteer, action-based youth programme whose goal is improving health and social conditions in the Marshall Islands. But it's become so much more than that to the young people, rebuilding their sense of cultural identity and

worth. Pride in Marshall Islands identity is encouraged as a first step to action. The programme teaches young people to have a clear awareness of their culture and to help their communities.

Marshall Islands young people are facing many preventable health and social problems such as AIDS, STD, malnutrition, alcohol, diabetes, over-population, teenage pregnancy and suicide. Suicide is a leading killer of young men aged 15 to 30, with the Marshalls (and other islands in the Pacific) having a suicide rate many times higher than that of the USA.

During the 1980s the Marshall Islands had one of the world's fastest-growing populations. This compounded many of the lifestyle changes caused by rapid westernisation and urbanisation in this island nation of 50000 people. About two-thirds of the population live in the two urban centres, Majuro (the capital) and Ebeye. These are crowded and cover less than two square miles of land.

YTYIH works closely with the Ministry of Health, other government departments, women's and church groups, and the business sector. Young people from the ages of 13 to 25 are trained as peer educators in Ebeye, Majuro and the outer islands. Members write and sing their own songs; develop and act in skits, puppet shows and plays; join in health, drama and other seminars throughout the year; perform on outer islands and support local YTYIH branches; write scripts for radio, TV and slide shows and spots; and take special programmes to schools, churches and other groups throughout the Marshall Islands. In 1993 YTYIH members were able to benefit from training by the Honolulu Theatre for Youth, whose visit was funded by SPC and the Australian government. Some of the resulting skits had titles such as Pregnancy Man, Boyfriends, At the Disco, Suicide, Malnutrition and STD.

YTYIH conducts two or three youth health leadership seminars each year to train volunteer peer educators aged 13 to 25 years - high school and college students, and out-of-school youth. The seminars combine intensive health training with lots of fun. The YTYIH programmes have been credited in part with increasing the use of contraceptives by youth and a decline in the birth rate (of 26% between 1988 and 1992). A key to their success is the support and involvement of families of youth members. Much of this work has been supported by UNFPA and WHO.

Since 1992 (with funding from the World Council of Churches in Switzerland, Bread for the World of Germany and other agencies), YTYIH has gone from strength to strength. Also in 1992, a local business donated prime land

in downtown Majuro for a Youth Health Centre. The year 1993, the group's eighth year of operation, brought a major new activity: the involvement of 8 to 12 year olds in outreach programmes. They have literally been stampeded by children of this age group wanting to join the programme.

For the outer island branches of YTYIH, self-reliance has been an important step in their growth. Several have planted gardens and now generate funds by sending produce to Majuro for sale. The Majuro YTYIH office acts as the agent and arranges to have fruit, vegetables, flowers and handicrafts sold in town. By focusing on the outer islands and encouraging young people to get involved, YTYIH believes it can help stem the exodus of people from the outer atolls into urban centres. YTYIH cannot keep up with demands from the outer islands but continues to add new islands as staff and funds permit. 'From a health standpoint we have been trying and trying for years to reach the youth

and couldn't until this youth group came by. It is one of the strongest parts of our health programme ... They are our greatest ambassadors for health here in the Marshall Islands'said Dr Neal Palafox, formerly Medical Director, Preventive Services, Ministry of Health,

Marshall Islands. The YTYIH is an excellent symbol of youth commitment and capability. Regional and international organisations have contributed to its development, with SPC providing financial and material support. YTYIH has been selected as one of Three Pilot Projects in the SPC European Union project on youth peer education for the prevention of AIDS and STD.

Guam

Two contemporary but very different approaches to drama about AIDS are showing the way of things to come in Guam. One of these is probably a first for the Pacific Islands.

On World AIDS Day 1993 playwright Cathy Cruz presented a one-act play *Opening Doors*, a statement about AIDS and the people it affects. Cruz, like a growing number of people, has had someone she loved die of AIDS. *Opening Doors* is the story of Michael, a person with AIDS, but through the words of his nurse, his family, his doctor and his fiancée. Through the monologues of the various people in Michael's life, audiences learn the misconceptions as well as the truth about HIV/AIDS.

Also on World AIDS Day, Rio Vizmanos, who has been doing performance theatre for 10 years in San Francisco, New York and Japan, presented an experimental piece on

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AIDS Time to Act which gave an inkling of future developments

His next production *Bodies in Trouble* was performed for the first time at the University of Guam with a new theatre group called *Dilemma of a Burning Building Experimental Theatre*. The troupe currently has nine members including Rio Vizmanos, who came up with the concept, penned the poetry and even designed the poster.

'This is experimental theatre, which is something I think is needed on Guam,' said Rio. 'A lot of young people seem to be alienated by the culture here. We need to expand a little bit more into things that they can really understand, but in an abstract sense. It's not an action-packed Hollywood movie or a Broadway play. There's lots of symbolism. Non-narrative. Movement. Text. Images. Abstract images'

The cast members were friends or friends of friends from different circles. 'I asked each one of them if they wanted to work on a project with me. I asked people who I thought had some kind of spark in them that I wanted to bring out. The first month was basically all experiments. A lot of emotional, physical and spiritual experiments, and this is what we came up with.'

The *Bodies in Trouble* cast contributed their own personal experiences to the finished performance. "I tried to bring out the things that were true to them, and use them for the performance, rather than trying to do any kind of acting", Rio said. 'To recreate a situation that they are familiar with - it could be a painful situation - and catch it, recreate it, rather than act it.'

The performance has minimal lighting and the stage has no props, just a covering of dirt. 'I wanted a sense of timelessness and also of some otherworldly battle ground, which is what life can be sometimes. We want the colours to come from the performances themselves.' The play deals with issues such as AIDS and child abuse, racism, domestic and school violence. Its images are very strong, even disturbing. The show deals with violence but has comedy and a sense of hope. The group hopes that audience members will come away with their own personal interpretation, and their own emotional catharsis that will stay with them long after the performance is finished. A proposed video will make the group's work accessible outside Guam.

The project was made possible by the Coral Life Foundation and all the money from performances went to community organisations. While the *Dilemma of a Burning Building* doesn't have any funding yet, Rio Vizmanos is hopeful. "It

will be hard, it always is. But throughout this project we have been blessed with support from local businesses and even restaurants donating us food. It's been really heartening. The dirt we had to buy. We went to a lot of trouble but it was worth it because we really wanted to get to know the dirt." Coral Life Foundation and local groups are currently developing strategies to assist these young people on their way to self determination.

Conclusion

These theatre groups are prime examples of Pacific youth on the move to strengthen their identify and self esteem. They are both participants in community education and shaping the future they will inherit. They are using a culturally appropriate approach to protect their inheritance and bridge the generation rift within a rapidly changing socio-economic environment.

Drama against physical and social ills of the Pacific is popular communication in action. It allows people to speak for themselves. Drama allows communities to create their own images of themselves, which is vital

if people are to take responsibility for their lives and health. The children of the future will be grateful to inherit Pacificness through drama and prevent health related problems at the same time.

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Endnote

PIASSP and Community Health Services of the SPC, work with the people of the Pacific islands and various international agencies such as UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, and the South Pacific Alliance for Family Health (SPAFH). PIASSP and SPC Community Health Services funds have been provided by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), WHO, UNICEF and the governments of France, New Caledonia and New Zealand. Contributions from the 22 Pacific member countries and territories of the SPC have also been substantial.

References

References are available from the author on request □