

“I think it's really important people understand just how prevalent ambivalence is in young people up here (in Iqaluit). For me, this THEATRE FOR LIVING workshop was an ideal example of how art can inspire people to explore both issues and culture. The central idea of my dissertation is that aboriginal art is "communitist" (a fusion of community and activism) to the extent that it has the power to help others in the community -- and, more importantly, should do so whenever able.”

Jonathan Dewar, Executive Director, Qaggiq Theatre

I am in Iqaluit, Nunavut. A three hour plane ride north of Ottawa, Iqaluit is a tiny city – the capitol of Nunavut – in the middle of thousands of kilometers of ice and tundra. Interesting to be somewhere where there are NO trees. Vegetation is grass and lichen. I realized today that this meant that the Indigenous people did not have fire. Blubber will burn like oil, but not fire like the cultural way I think about fire. I am in a very ‘other’ place, and yet still in Canada.

Much to my surprise, most of Iqaluit is new construction. Built, it appears, in the last 15 - 20 years, the city is going through a boom now that it is the centre of the Territory Government. Much of it, still, looks like any Reserve in the north: very impoverished housing, dirt roads, satellite dishes that are a central form of entertainment, so far away from where the plastic images originate.

I took a walk today on Frobisher Bay. Along a skidoo trail. I walked for an hour, straight out, until the horizon was completely white and flat. Out there, there was no city. Only the sound of birds, my feet crunching the snow, and the occasional dog team, lounging on the ice, wondering if I was bringing them lunch. One team set up a howling – plaintive, like wolves. This set various teams off on other parts of the bay – it was beautiful, haunting, like the harsh landscape.

We start the workshop tomorrow. Jonathan (the central organizer) took me on a tour yesterday, so I have seen the workshop space, in a small community outside Iqaluit called Apex – their community hall. We will be 25 youth (ages 13 – 25), me and three support people. Our task is to investigate issues of “shutting down” and to create Forum plays for a national suicide prevention conference.

I already know that Canada has a terribly high suicide rate. Jonathan and David (from Qaggiq Theatre, the co-sponsors) tell me that Iqaluit has one of the highest rates in Canada.

## Day 1

This was a good day, but with some not good surprises. Twenty-five people had registered for the workshop. We have fourteen, plus 3 support people. The ones from the High School who were so keen are the ones who didn't make it. The ones from the drop -in centre and the 'troubled kids' – who were going to be the ones who probably wouldn't show – are the ones who came.

So, there was a big no show rate, but it is a very good group. We did a lot of work today. And the room is kind of small.....I don't know what it would be like with double the number of people. This size might be just right for the room.

Of course we started late. Jonathan was warning this would happen, and to complicate matters, most of the participants live far away from where we are working and so have to be shuttled to the space. This morning an attempt was made to pick them up at a central spot for 9:30 – but people were late, needed wake-up calls – we didn't get going until just after 11:00. The new plan for tomorrow is that one of the support people is going to call them ALL in the morning to wake them up and then they will get picked up at their homes.

The games went well. The support people were very surprised when they all showed up 10 minutes early after lunch!

It didn't take very long at all in Complete the Image<sup>1</sup> for violent images to start, and the group was impressed with how they made a coherent image. And then there were some very strong images out of Groups of 4.

One of a guy being pulled apart by friends, another of people mourning a death and another of an abusive (drunk) parent berating a child, while other members of the family cower. There was a lot of silence in the images – so completely appropriate in an investigation of 'shutting down'.

The support people seem very impressed about how much the group is offering. In the final circle they talked about how much fun they had, how it was way better than they thought it was going to be. I think we have the potential to do something great. I am hopeful at the end of this first day.

## Day 2

This was both a good and a frustrating day. We are supposed to be starting at 10:00 AM. At 11:00 AM we were still waiting for people to arrive, although each of them had got wake-up calls in the morning and arrangements had been made to pick them up at their homes. Finally, at 11:30, we were all there. Of course we had a chat about getting in on time. I told them that some of us (also some participants) had been there since 9:30 and if they thought

---

<sup>1</sup> A game I use to introduce the idea that we can make frozen images about our subject matter.

that keeping us waiting until 11:30 was OK, they were wrong. I insisted that by the end of the day, we figured out how to start on time.

We also had a new person today. Craig<sup>2</sup>. A big guy and friend of some of the group who, when he arrived, was there just to hang out. Evidently he never goes to anything – one of his friends in the workshop had talked it up. I said if he wanted to stay, he needed to be a participant. Not only did he stay, but he was great.

Something is appearing with one of the girls: Ida really wants to be there, but whenever the work comes to her, like, in a game, if she has to do **anything** – make a sound, or a gesture, she just freezes. Once she freezes, then attention gets focussed on her, and I can see her vanish, vanish, vanish. Her eyes glaze over. She ‘shuts down’. What happens to Ida is what we are there to investigate. I am trying various things: giving her space, letting her know she can pass, to take the pressure off her, hoping this will make it possible for her to participate. I am concerned, though, that, once in performance, if she stays with us, and I hope she does, that she is going to have to respond by herself, and if this continues – ending up in front of an audience and ‘vanishing’ will be the worst possible thing for her. I have asked the support people to keep an eye on her.

Their focus in the morning was great. They loved the knots game and also, once they got the hang of glass bottle, the first trust game, they did it really well and rose to the challenge of it – and it was a big challenge. Trust is a huge issue.

There is a mix of people in the room who would never otherwise be together. A number of them talked about this today and how neat that is, that they are getting to know other people in the community who they would never talk to.

They really struggled with making images in Magnetic Image but the work was very strong. One girl in particular, Linda – a very tough girl – had a really frustrating time. She was convinced that she ‘couldn’t do it’ – be at the centre of an image her group was creating in which they are all after her, some trying to help and some trying to hurt, and she wants them all to leave her alone. When we activated it she ran away (in character) and hid behind chairs, and they went after her, and a heart-breaking scene unfolded where they stripped the chairs away, and she found new ones to hide behind. This scene really hit the room hard. I asked her when it was done, what her character would do if she got what she wanted and she said, ‘be alone, and think and think and think’. And others in the room thought if she was ‘allowed’ to do that, she would disappear completely.....kill herself.

Another scene was about a drunk family – a drunk community – and a guy curled up in a little ball, trying to not be that, but being pressured from every area to be exactly that – shutting down, because he is afraid of losing himself in alcohol and drugs. A lose/lose situation.

---

<sup>2</sup> Except for the organizers, names of participants have been changed.

There was a lot of laughter today but also a lot of intense work. I talked with them, congratulated them, on going to the scary places and encouraged them to keep being courageous. If we can do this, we can create very powerful pieces for the conference.

They were apologizing in the circle for being so late – saying they didn't want to come today but were really happy they did. And asked that the organizers come and wake them up tomorrow, because they want to come but know they won't get out of bed. It was Craig – the new guy – who said 'why should people have to do that for you?' I agreed with him and asked them to take the responsibility for themselves. An agreement was reached to meet at central locations in the morning for pick-up. I think Lisa (a support worker) will probably still call them all.....but it'll be a good thing, in my opinion, for them to have to get themselves somewhere to be brought to Apex.

Again, they all seemed to leave very happy. We will see what tomorrow brings.

### Day 3

They were all, except one, on time today! This was, I gather, something of a miracle. A lot of them weren't awake....but they were there. Of course I got them running around off the top.

We had a very intense day.

They loved boxing<sup>3</sup>. So much laughter. And it's a good tool for them to explore the violence of their images.

Almost all of them did the intestine, including one of the support people who is a very, very large man. The group worked really hard to carry him, and succeeded.

I wanted to do auto-sculpting with them, which is quite an abstract exercise, to increase their understanding of improvisation. The room is starting to split now – the same ones participating all the time. Interestingly it's the really tough kids who are being the most involved, and the quiet ones – who seem gentler to my awareness -- are getting quieter. I am concerned about this, but can't force them into scenes.

We have a young boy with Down's Syndrome in the workshop. For the first couple of days he was doing fine, and the group has been accommodating his needs really well. It got harder today in two ways:

When we were working a group of them who were in the 'audience' at the time got really unfocussed and I asked them to support the people on the stage by paying attention. At a break they came to me and said I didn't know

---

<sup>3</sup> Slow motion, can't touch your partner.

what was going on.....that the young boy is touching his privates a lot, and picking his nose and eating it....and that they are upset both at having to watch him do that and that they know he isn't washing his hands and we are doing a lot of touching games (like effective hand<sup>4</sup> today). Them having brought it to my attention, I started watching for it, and they are correct. And their complaint is legitimate.

Also – as the work has deepened today, he is starting to not be able to participate. As long as what he was doing was really focused on him, like in frozen images, he was ok. He doesn't seem to have the understanding, though, maybe it's a perspective thing, to be able to function in scenes, improvisations, that are not directly about his own experiences. The group has been handling this quite well, making accommodations for him, but its getting much harder to do – and I can't tailor the workshop for his needs – this will rob all the others of the experience of creating something collectively.

These two issues led me to talk with the support people, but no one wanted to deal with it, which was a disappointment in itself. So I talked to Jonathan when he came with lunch. He called the boy's mother who was, evidently, understanding, but wants him to stay in the workshop. He is starting to be alienated, though – none of the participants want to work with him now.

Jonathan talked to his mother again (and then with him) and he has agreed that doing what he is doing is not appropriate in a group of people, but says he can't help himself, his mind wanders. (Yes – this kind of honesty is the way he has been, a reason to try to work with him – but we are also concerned that he is going to get really far out of his depth when we start to make plays tomorrow). Jonathan has a plan, which is to redefine his role in the workshop as Jonathan's assistant, so he can always be with him. We'll see if this helps.

This is a difficult moment. I have seen many plays containing people with disabilities (including Down's). Some of them have been very wonderful theatre. I know that these performances have come together over long periods of time. In this case, though, we have six days. Working with this boy would need to become my main focus and there are fourteen other people in the workshop, who would not get the attention they need, and either plays would not get made at all, or they would end up onstage adrift. I am having to weigh my responsibilities. The solution above seems to be the best option.

**Cops in the Head**<sup>5</sup> was very challenging and valuable. Although they were all keen to DO cops, when it came time participation was low. Only two stories were offered instead of three. The first took place in solitary confinement in prison. The second, behind a store in Iqaluit, getting drunk alone and smashing beer bottles against a wall, after breaking up with a

---

<sup>4</sup> Finding a partner's hand with closed eyes.

<sup>5</sup> A long exercise that investigates internalized voices that paralyze us, and how to deal with the voices.

girlfriend. The room chose the second story. We had two cops: one who said: just keep it inside, don't let anything out; another that said: drink, get really drunk....it'll be better that way.

The improvisational work was very good. This involved about a third of the participants. Some of the others went to sleep, although we tried to keep them up.....and others went very silent. The silence is not unusual in this exercise, it is a very big concept – that the voices in our heads that are paralyzing us or giving us very unhealthy advice, originate somewhere else, from people we know, and that we can change our relationship to them. It's my experience that participants go home after Cops and do a lot of really deep thinking.

In the final circle the ones who participated spoke at some length about how amazing the exercise had been, and said to the others that they know it's scary to get up, but once they do, it's not so hard and that not only is it fun, they are learning really a lot. I'm hoping that this urging from peers is going to activate some of the others.

We make plays tomorrow.

The girl who has been freezing, by the way, has been making progress – she has started offering things and also did some improvizing in autosculpting. She offered to be a cop in cops in the head, but then bailed when it came time to work with her. Some steps forward, though.

Day 4

It's -27 right now with the wind chill, and there are 1 1/2 foot long icicles hanging from the roof outside my window. Brrrr. But it got 'hot' in the workshop hall today. We have plays.

Getting some of them in on time was a problem again today, one made it in with a very bad hangover. Instead of starting at 10:00 we started at 10:40. This makes it hard to plan a coherent day that ends on time, of course. I had hoped we would finish early today. We didn't.

They love the tag games that I use to 'clear the energy' in the room, and ask for things that will keep them awake -- so we are playing lots of tag and 'jump around' games. This is their way to try to stay present, and I am finding it's better to say yes to this request as often as possible (which is not always, or we would play these games every half hour). A kind of negotiation has opened up between them keeping themselves awake and me keeping them awake. I am insisting that they also take responsibility for it.

Many of them loved the Fall – falling off a table into the group's arms. Almost the whole room did it.

We made two groups in Song of the Mermaid<sup>6</sup>, interestingly, with eyes closed, one group of all the guys and one group of all the girls. This is extremely unusual. I thought it was going to be the guys who would have the hard time – a few of them were very ambivalent about whether or not they would end up onstage in a play – one of them in particular was certain he wouldn't. It turned out, though, that the guys got their play, which is quite complex, finished really fast. They are all in it. The girls went into crisis.

I kept going back to the girls and trying to help guide them through a decision-making process without making the play for them. I will not do this, and have been saying so to them for a few days. There were times today when some of them were looking at me with hatred – because I wouldn't do it for them and was insisting that they make it through the creation process themselves. At various times four of them stormed out, sometimes in tears, but always came back. The problem for them was that none of them would 'give' to the others – they were all holding onto their own ideas so much that they couldn't make space to connect up to other's ideas – I explained a number of times that they needed to do this – but they couldn't.

Eventually they split into two groups and I said OK to this – it was a solution that had come from them – and lo and behold, in 20 minutes, each group created a play. One of the groups was going to do three images, but ended up with two images and a small play. We can work with this.

We watched all the plays today. The kids were beaming – very, very proud of themselves. The support people also said over and over again how proud they were of the kids. I know it was hard for the support people to sit and do nothing while the participants floundered, but I kept insisting they not go and rescue them.

For me, the groups must, absolutely must own their plays. They are going to have to play the characters. Once they have made the plays, no matter how rough they are, I can get inside and direct and dramaturg them – but not before they have made them. And I certainly will not force them through a process. In fact, as I did today, I open up the possibility for them to bail. This is so contrary to the way a lot of the counselors who I meet function in their own work. Being a theatre director, and not a therapist, means that my focus is on them making the theatre – not navigating them through a "success". Especially if that success is going to be mine, and not theirs.

Some of the challenges now will be for the plays to be dramatically clear (simple things like not everyone talking at the same time all the time will be a challenge for the guys) and to contain true emotion. Some of them seem to have this idea that acting is about being really fake. Yesterday I tried to give them an example of the kind of 'telling the truth' I am talking about: having given one of the guys a warning in his ear (and got an OK from him) that I was going to play a scene with him, I launched into a rage against him –

---

<sup>6</sup> A very emotion-based exercise that creates groups, based on sound, with the participants' eyes closed.

swearing, accusing him of turning his back on me (something out of an improvisation that had happened) and pushing him around. He started laughing and I kept at him, until he got pissed off and he pushed me back. It was then that I stopped the scene. They were all stunned, mouths open. I said to them: “see what I mean?” He was laughing again now. The room started hollering and burst into applause.

They can do this. They do it all the time – acting. They do it when they say ‘they can’t’ in order to get someone to do what they want. They do it when they say they are OK, when they are terrible. Acting consciously will be the task tomorrow.

They got a lot of congratulations in the closing circle. I said I hoped they realize why I have insisted they create the plays, and that part of the creative process, especially in a group, is often disagreeing – and that its important, its very creative, to be able to argue, to have fights even, (keeping them respectful hopefully); to go away and come back and continue to find solutions. This is creativity – sometimes its hard and sometimes the solutions are doing something other than what you initially thought you would do – like in this case splitting up the group. This was a very different kind of day for them.

The solution with the Down’s Syndrome participant seems to be fine. He is under Jonathan’s wing now, who, under the circumstances of just having had a baby, his wife just coming out of an extended stay in the hospital, and being the central organizer for the workshop, is being very generous. He’s had a couple of conversations with the boy’s mother and we all agree that while his participation somehow is important, we also have to create safety for the other participants – and his personal habits, which we are not going to change in the next three days, were creating unsafe space for them. A difficult decision.

## Day 5

Aiyaiyaiyai. What a day.

We lost two of the strongest people in the workshop this morning.

The first, Craig, got picked up by the RCMP last night, in violation of his probation. He was, evidently, under house arrest in Apex, and supposed to stay out of Iqaluit. None of us knew. He had seven charges pending. Drunk and disorderly, resisting arrest, that kind of thing, and was picked up in Iqaluit, drunk. Jonathan and Lisa spent a good part of the day dealing with lawyers, police, etc., telling people how great he was being in the workshop and that it didn’t make any sense to stop something that was being so good for him and for the community as a whole. Evidently, everyone agreed – but were powerless to release him. He’s in jail and will likely stay there throughout the summer.



The second, Linda – came in this morning in a rage. Partly because of what happened with Craig, but she also had a fight with her mother and is breaking up with a boyfriend – her brother was also killed in a bad vehicle accident a few months ago....lots going on. She banged around the room for a while, a number of us, both support people and participants tried to talk with her to no avail, and then she left. Lisa – who has worked with her before -- is going to keep in touch with her.

And so we spent the whole morning dealing with this loss and chaos – it was, of course, impossible to get anything done. It wasn't until lunch time that we had all the others in the room and were able to think about doing any work on the plays.

Two of the support people have come in to the plays to replace Craig and Linda. This, at the request of the groups. And then, after lunch, amazing things happened. We got a lot of good work done.

I say this in the context of some of them not being used to taking direction in any way, and so me getting inside the plays they have made and suggesting changes is very hard for some of them – some of the girls in particular. Jonathan had private talks with a few of them, trying to explain that I was trying to make the plays clear and that while their expertise was their lives mine in this moment was making theatre. I told them many times today that theatre is not real life and if the audience is going to understand what the plays are trying to say, we have to “control” the plays....the actions, the dialogue – people have to hear it and know what to look at at any given moment.

Here are the plays:

#1 there are two Images. We will activate these first.

#2 a group of Inuit girls are sitting in the library of the school, talking about how disgusting the girls' washroom is. A girl enters – Caucasian, blonde hair. She tries to join the conversation. She is new in the school. They reject her, except one girl, Ida (the one who was so silent in the workshop) who makes a small attempt to reach out but is stopped. The new girl goes off to the other side of the library and sits alone.

The girls start to ask each other if they are going to the dance that is coming up. It turns out that one of them is going with a boy that another has just broken up with 2 days earlier. This is really bad. A fight starts, but it is broken up by one of the girls who says that they will get the girl who is seeing the boyfriend later, after school. Ida doesn't like what's happening with her friends and goes across the room to see if she can make friends with the new girl. The new girl rejects her, though and walks away. Having done this, Ida is now alone.

#3 the girls who make the Images also have a play: two friends are walking down the street and see a girl who they don't like. They make

fun of her. She approaches them and asks where they are going?...to a party, they say. Can I come? she asks. No, there's no room. And they leave her. They get on the phone and find out that the people they were supposed to be partying with have dumped them. In the meantime, the girl, very depressed, goes and buys a bottle of vodka.

They see her on the street again and see the bottle. Suddenly she is more interesting. They falsely befriend her and go to her place. The three get really drunk together. Before the girl passes out, she exclaims that the two are her best friends. They take her vodka. They steal her wallet and leave. One of them (who was Linda) doesn't like the idea of the wallet being stolen, but lets it happen. The girl wakes up and realizes she has been used. The two return, as voices in her head, berating her for being so stupid, for being taken advantage of, for not being worthy of friendship.

#4 a whole bunch of guys are at Craig's house, drinking. (Craig is now being played by one of the support people. Robert) They run out of alcohol. Craig starts to suggest that he knows where they can get some – from his neighbour's place, who is away. Howard and Patrick arrive. They have been getting stoned together. The group share a joint and Craig suggests they all go do a break and enter at the neighbour's, and get more booze. Howard and Patrick don't want to. They have both just got out of jail. They are on probation. If anything happens they are back in jail for a long time.

There is a power struggle in which Craig confronts Howard, calling him a coward. Everyone is staring at Howard. Patrick is trying to get his friend to leave, but Howard takes the bait. OK he says....I am not a coward. Patrick will go and do what his friend does.

At the house, Craig decides he won't go in. He will be the look-out. Howard says, 'you better not betray me' and Craig assures him they are best friends. Howard breaks down the door, they enter and ransack the place.

Back at Craig's they are drinking and Bill is looking out the window. He sees the police checking out the neighbour's place. He quietly alerts Craig and the two disappear out the back for a smoke. The Police follow the tracks in the snow to Craig's. They enter and the place clears. Patrick gets caught. Howard tries to get out the back door but Craig has blocked it from behind. Howard hides behind some furniture, tries to escape out the front, but gets caught. The two get hauled off to jail.

In jail they are full of remorse, and silent.

The amazing work of the day was that these three plays were so, so, so rough. And in four hours of really hard work we made them coherent. There is still a lot to do tomorrow. Volume is going to be a problem and we have to rehearse accepting interventions, which is going to be very, very challenging for some of the cast.

They did great work today, though. In the final circle, many missed the two who are gone. They also talked about how good the work in the afternoon had been, and how good the plays are now.

## Day 6

I feel like I have been through a hurricane. We tried to give the group a shorter day today – trying not to burn them out – and so agreed we would meet at noon sharp for lunch, and start work at 12:30. At 12:45 we were still waiting for people to arrive – the same few who are always late.

Unfortunately, they are in each of the plays and so it was impossible to start on anything until they got to the hall. This is WITH people calling around every day to wake them up and drive them around. There is a point where I want to say that their behaviour is telling us that this isn't important enough. The way things are done here, though, seems to be to indulge this, which I think is extremely unfair to those who arrive on time and also, in the end, not doing the ones who are late a favour.

We finally did get started and rehearsed Forum on the first play. It took a little while for the girls to understand what it is like to accept interventions – the kind of balance that is necessary to find in the character/actor moment. It demands of the actor that she really listen and make the audience member work, and IF something happens to change the character, to go with that – if not, not. Either way I am going to ask why they did what they did, and I want them to know why. Saying “I don't know” isn't OK.

The news came that Linda, who left yesterday was coming back and wanted to come back into her play. We had JUST finished rehearsing Forum on that play; my plan had been to leave that play, having rehearsed Forum on it, until we got into the library space at the school.

The guy from CBC TV arrived at 2 PM as planned. We played ‘complete the image’ for him and did some image activation of the two images that are going to be presented. This meant working Linda into them on camera. This was fine. He then did an interview with me and went into the kitchen to do interviews with three of the youth.

In the meantime, I rehearsed Forum on the second play. This cast is the weakest and I am concerned about them for tomorrow. They are all very shy, and hard to hear except for the girl who is the centre of the play – who just seems belligerent. She and I are in a power struggle. If I ask her to do something in the scene she rolls her eyes and does the exact opposite. Whoever came onto the stage today to try something, she made fun of them or insulted them. I kept asking her to listen and pay attention to what they were doing in the scene, but everything is an opportunity for her to be violent on stage. I have told her that I am going to treat whatever she does onstage in front of the audience as real from now on, and that if this embarrasses her in front of the audience tomorrow – well, that will be what happens. It's the only way I can think of to get her to stop playing a game and respond

truthfully. Yes – I am certain she is not responding truthfully, and so are the others in her play, who are also losing patience with her.

We got news late in the day from Jonathan and Lisa, who had gone to court to plead for the release of Craig, that they had been successful, because of the great work he was doing in this workshop, and that he was returning. This is terrific – and also means that we have to rework him back into the very complex play. At this point I put everything on hold to rethink the schedule.

What is important is that they are as confident as possible in front of the audience. No one can second guess what an intervener is going to do, but we can prepare the casts for the idea of accepting interventions. This is why its important to rehearse that part. The two leaving and coming back meant that a lot of the great work we did in constructing the plays yesterday has to be redone, and that meant not rehearsing Forum today. The plan had been to not call them too early tomorrow.....that went out the window.

We spent about 90 minutes working the Craig back in. He was very good – and had a lot to absorb. Its tentative – we managed one run without stopping. While I was working with the guys the girls' play was in the kitchen working Linda back in. As soon as they finished, she left so I haven't had a chance to see that play again at all. This won't happen until tomorrow now.

Instead of getting to the school library where we are performing tomorrow at 11:30 as planned, we have called everyone for 9 AM. Because, another glitch.....from 10:30 to 12:00 some of them (in each of the plays) have a video presentation that they have to be a part of. (!! ) I was unaware of this double-booking until today. So, the plan for tomorrow is:

Work the guy's play in the new space and rehearse Forum on it from 9:00 – 10:00 (supposing they are there on time) then from 12:15 – 1:15 work the other two plays into the new space and, if possible, do some Forum on the play where Linda has gone back in. We have a performance at 1:30.

I should also say that the feedback from the support people is that a multitude of miracles are unfolding. Just getting this group to show up six days in a row they think is absolutely phenomenal. Then there is the miracle that they have made plays that are about important issues. They are telling me that it doesn't matter now if the performances happen or not. Of course for me, it is about the theatre. And interestingly, I believe really strongly that the reason the youth have stuck it out is BECAUSE its about the theatre – not that it is supposed to be good for them.

## Day 7

To begin at the end, we got an extended standing ovation this afternoon, and numerous people want to come to Vancouver for the **THEATRE FOR LIVING** training session this summer.

Those who are always late were late. We worked the guy's play and rehearsed Forum on it. Very quickly into doing that a lot of the other participants had left. Their ability to support each other without being ordered to do so is slim. We gathered them back into the room and practiced interventions.

Then I had a chance to see and work the other girls' play for a bit and also moved the third one into the room. We had done as much rehearsing as we could, and people started arriving.

We are a feature event at the Canadian Association of Suicide Prevention (CASP) Conference. A few things came together in order for this to happen. Qaggiq Theatre wanted to do a youth project. The Nunavut Literacy Council agreed to fund it. The Conference was happening at the same time. There is an expectation at the Conference, I think, that we have made plays about suicide. My task, though, was to make plays with the group about "shutting down".

There were about 60 people in the audience. We had put out 50 seats. We began with the two Images and many people came and went off the stage in activation of these. I asked the workshop participants not to offer anything during the event – we are not there to do a demonstration of Forum Theatre, but to DO Forum Theatre. What this means is that the participants, who have internal knowledge of the plays, will not offer interventions. Now is the time for us to give it to the community. In this case, the Conference delegates, which includes people from the community.

They loved participating in the images. I could tell that they would engage.

Contrary to my original plan, I decided to do the play that starts with the girls' bathroom first. It is the simplest piece. The interventions started very quickly. Of course, almost all of the audience are adults. We are at a Conference, not working with youth in the community. I asked them not to pretend to be teenagers – but to approach the plays as human beings. We are all just human beings, here in this room, grappling with 'shutting down'.

One of the great surprises in the first play was Ida. She has been silent for pretty much the entire workshop. The school has kept checking that she is with us, because they haven't believed she would last the week. Not only has she kept coming, but today she had ideas in the Forum, and improvised! And when I asked her, as the Joker, why she had done what she did as the character, she answered me! In a loud voice!!! Its hard to describe what an amazing moment this was. Even members of the group talked about it in the final circle.

Many of them did wonderful work today. Even the belligerent girl. And as we moved through the plays it got harder, of course. There was a great moment, in the guy's play where there was silence for a long, long time. I challenged the audience. Their silence, I said, was a mirror of the silence in the community. If we can't break the silence here, in a theatrical moment, in a

school library, at a national suicide prevention conference, how can we expect to break the silence out in the community? They rose to the challenge – with this difficult play – and the adults didn't have all the answers, and they complained when the young actors didn't behave the way they thought they should in the scenes – and this was soooo interesting.

I said to them that my instructions to the actors are to be in the scene and to tell the truth in the moment. They are not reacting in the Forum in certain ways because I have told them to – they are doing it because of what they believe, and because of how things really are. I know (for me too) that I don't like how things are some times – I encounter this in my own work – wishing the way things are in the community would be different, more comfortable, but we are seeing a harsh truth here – these characters in the play are out for themselves. They are not going to rally together and be nice because someone comes up and tells them to. Saying we should all bake a cake together (someone's suggestion) is likely to get you beat up instead of create a 'community moment'.

And so the solutions became more real. One or two of the characters at a time refusing to do the break and enter, having to lose their friends if they didn't want to go along.

The final moment in the play, when the two who didn't want to go in the first place, but got convinced, are in jail, I asked that we explore this bad moment. The B & E has happened. They have been caught, arrested and jailed. We wish it didn't happen, but it did. Now they are plagued by voices in their heads – what do we do?

A man came on the stage and replaced one of them. He started to really talk to his friend. He admitted that he had got him in a lot of trouble. He apologized. He said he wanted help to find a way not to repeat this over and over again. It didn't get him out of jail. But it did get them talking. Really talking.

There were questions people had at the end and the participants were gracious. They talked about how the workshop had changed them, brought them together as a group. There were some things I learned during this that I am glad I didn't know. Some of them had charges for beating each other up! There are people in this group who have pounded the crap out of each other. Them working together in plays now is seen as.....another miracle.

There are plans being made now, requests coming, for them to keep doing these plays in the school and across the North. Some of these kids are banned from the school. Arrangements had to be made for them to be able to perform there. The Principal came to me and said how amazed and astounded he was and he would be very glad to have them come and do these plays for other grades in the school – as role models!! A woman came who knows them -- knows one has a severe learning disability, for instance. Or the self-esteem problems of others. She cried and cried this woman. She was so moved by what they had done.

We have another performance tomorrow and I imagine it is going to be very full.

If there is anything to work on for tomorrow, it is their ability to say “yes” more often in the Forum. Some of them got really dug in as their characters. Maybe we can take this step tomorrow.

Jonathan has been dealing with the mother of the boy who has Down’s. She is upset now that he is not in one of the plays, even though she agreed a couple of days ago that we should alter his participation in the process.

This has been a hard thing to deal with. Jonathan and I agree that we have a responsibility to him, but also a responsibility to the other workshop participants. It became really obvious that as the work got deeper, he wasn’t able to do it. When he was in a group, it became the group’s responsibility to take care of him. His need and desire seems to be to make a play **about him** and that isn’t what we are here to do, and I haven’t got the time (or the energy) in this kind of process to accommodate that. Also, this would be so unfair to the rest of the participants, who struggled to make collective pieces. When I imagine what it would have been like to include him in that kind of a process, I know it would have been a disaster, and robbed some of the other youth from their own experience of the work.

Jonathan tells me that he has wanted to make a play about vampires, and when Jonathan has talked with him about issues in his life that he is struggling with about shutting down, his response is that he is afraid of vampires so we should make a play about vampires.

His mother, who hasn’t been involved in the process at all won’t accept any of this and has told Jonathan that I (the theatre director from Vancouver who is supposed to be so sensitive) has shut her son down in a workshop about shutting down. She wants him to “MC” the event. Jonathan refused this on my behalf.

What she isn’t comprehending is that I can see that inserting him into a Forum Theatre play with this group is setting him up for a spectacular failure – and also creating a severe problem for the people who are acting with him. Jonathan and I have agreed that he will work with the boy and, although I usually don’t let workshop participants make interventions in community Forums, he can do some interventions if he wants. We both feel, though, that we are not doing this for him – he seems perfectly content – we are doing this for his mother.

## Day 8

Having promised to be there at 11:00, at 11:30 we only had the guys’ cast intact. We rehearsed that play and broke them for lunch hoping that by 12:30 we would have everyone there.

At 12:15 as I was heading back to the room I ran into Linda, and told her to get her lunch and bring it upstairs for 12:30, so we could run her play. “why can’t we do it right now?” because everyone else is having lunch now. “but I fuckin’ came here to rehearse it!” Does she know that she was late and that we were all waiting for her? I think so. Does she expect that the whole group is going to bend and function to her schedule? I think so. I think she’s been taught to expect that, somehow.

I had an interesting conversation with someone (an Inuk) who said to me, ‘you know this issue with time is part of the culture.’ I asked him – is it part of the culture to agree to do something at a certain time and not do it? Or to tell people you are going to do something and not show up? He looked at me – ‘well, no, that isn’t part of the culture – that’s just being disrespectful.’ Right. You know....I’m this Jewish white guy, but I think its also disrespectful to the culture to use a cultural perspective as an excuse to be disrespectful.

Anyway, we managed, very quickly to run the two remaining plays, and I talked with them about saying “yes” more in the Forum. They find this idea very confusing – its hard – spending time building a solid character who knows why they are doing what they are doing and then being asked to see and listen in the Forum and change if appropriate for the character. They want me to tell them what to do, and I can’t.

We did some more intervention rehearsals to work on it and some of them started to be more flexible. We had to stop because the audience was arriving – having started late meant the group got no break before the performance started.

The room filled up again. Evidently, there was a big buzz from yesterday’s show. People talked about how powerful it was from the stage at the main plenary. Its warm outside today (warm for here, meaning not below zero) and so in the room, with no windows and the heat on, it was really, really hot.

The first intervention of the day was by an Inuk Police Officer. A few of them had come to the show. Nice guys. They really liked what we were doing. Them being police was very challenging for the kids and fun for the room. I kept having to remind the cast that the big guy in the uniform was really one of their girlfriends. You can imagine this had high entertainment value. It was also great for some of them to see a cop playing in this way.

Ida has really bloomed in the last few days. From so quiet to a leader in the play. She was the same today and its great because many of the audience know her and know her silence – she got tremendous applause today for her improvizational abilities. Jonathan has talked with her a few times now about being in Qaggiq’s next play, as an actor, and tells me that she is really enthusiastic.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> This last comment from about 4 weeks after the workshop.



The boy with Down's did do two interventions. The first one was in the second play. He replaced the girl who gets taken advantage of, at the moment when they are taking the bottle and the wallet. He passed out, as she does, and then held tight onto the bottle. He let them take the wallet. In discussing this with him, I asked him why he chose to keep the bottle and not the wallet. He said he wanted to keep the bottle. So I asked him why the bottle was special, but he didn't know, or couldn't say. I had hoped to find some meaning in his action, but I don't know if there was any. This is what I mean about his improvisational ability. I know we could not have put him in a play with a cast.

The other intervention was in the guy's play. He refused to do the B & E and left. The guys went after him to convince him, and he started to beat them up. The audience applauded and appreciated him in both instances and he was very happy. I have no idea if his mother was or not.

There were some great (and also difficult) moments in the middle play.

A woman yelled stop and wanted to replace the central oppressor in the play. I asked her if she thought this character was struggling with the issues. 'I don't know' she said. I have very few rules in a Forum but the ones I do have are there for reasons. I don't want people replacing characters they believe are consciously creating the problems, to turn that character into a nicer person in the moment and solve the problem with a magic solution. She started to explain what she wanted to do and I stopped her as I had done with others. If she explains her actions instead of doing them we won't actually do Forum anymore. I said, again, do you think this character is struggling with issues of shutting down? And she got very angry and went back to her seat and said never mind. I asked her to think about it and if she thought the character was struggling, to get back to me.

Then a woman yelled stop and replaced the girl who buys the bottle of Vodka. She rejected the two girls when they came to her on the street and went home alone. She looked at the bottle. Opened it. Drank. Picked up a phone and called someone. And yelled "help!" I asked her who she was calling. My mom, she said. Can we have a mother, I asked.....an elderly woman came up (both Inuit women) and they played the scene on the phone. Quite quickly the mother went over to the daughters house – and the woman with the bottle cried in her mother's arms.....I let them do this for a while and then went to them....caught the woman's eye and when she saw me she started to laugh....laughing with tears in her eyes.....'this is so powerful' – she said to me, beaming. And so we talked a bit about the realities of not being able to not drink in this moment, but still, within that, being able to reach out. And the woman who was the mother spoke at length about her children, and addiction, and suicide. And then, in Innuktitut, one asked the other if it was OK to hug and they did in the middle of the stage and started to – the best description I have for it is howl. Or keening. And this happened for about 20 seconds and then they parted – and so many in the room were crying – I think for the courage of these women, for the reality of what they had shown us, and for the reflection of this all in our own lives.

By the time we got to the third play it was stifling in the room. So hot. There were some lovely interventions. A man who wanted to replace the central oppressor....I asked him the same question....he said yes – and he tried to get the friends to leave – they wouldn't and so he called the police – and we had police in the room, and as soon as the police were REALLY coming everyone ran away. So interesting, while he was threatening to call the police no one left, it was just a game....we talked about the reality of this – of how your 'good friends' don't respect your wishes. I asked this man what struggle he had to get through to make such a transformation from our character (the ringleader) to the character he presented. He explained that he doesn't believe the ringleader wants to be the ringleader, that it is a role he has been cast in in the community and so he plays it. The 'bad boy' since high school. But tonight he is not going to.

And so the woman (mentioned above) who was already angry started yelling - - why did you let him replace a character and not me? And I explained that I had asked her the same question I asked him and she had said 'I don't know' and he had said 'yes'. This wasn't good enough for her. I had "shut her down". I explained it hadn't been my intention to do that, and explained again about magic interventions. She said at this point that what she had wanted to do was 'bring resolution to the character' – that we had left the middle play and not brought that character to resolution. So, I started to explain that bringing the characters to resolution wasn't our task at this event. At this point she started telling me that she knew all about the "Theatre of the Oppressed" and I was doing it badly. After acknowledging that she was entitled to her opinion, but that (once again) these were the rules this Forum was working by, I said we would move on.

A few people came to me and told me about her later. Evidently, this is what she does at events, that when they saw her there they knew there would be an argument. For me, its not a popularity contest. She can be angry at me. Its ok. I feel confident that I wasn't rude to her, and so many others were part of the same rules as her and understood and accepted them. If the Joker (my role at the event) starts allowing 'magic', the audience will start offering a lot of magic – it's a lot easier -- and there is so much less learning in it, and from a purely theatrical standpoint, it makes for bad theatre.

This is a classic example of Paulo Friere's comment in "Pedagogy of Hope": 'We cannot get there from there; we can only get there from here.' The magic intervention wants to show us the 'there' without any action or analysis to take us 'there' from 'here'.

The police officer came back and, in an attempt to not go and do the B & E, started getting really stoned, and trying to get the others to focus on the stone....and having the munchies...and getting something to eat. It was very creative and surrounded by a lot of laughter. The guys wouldn't go for it, though...I think they really wanted to do the B & E with the Cop.

There was another lovely intervention in this scene. A woman replaced Howard who gets convinced to go do the B & E. She just started talking, in a very drunk way, going on and on and on about jail and how bad it was and about not wanting to go back there and the guys tried to convince her (him) and she went on, droning on and on, and then they sat down, and some of them started nodding off....and the B and E didn't happen that night.

And of course these were both very creative ways to try to make safety in a very unsafe moment.

Again, there was sustained applause at the end. The woman from the CBC who I did an interview with on the first day was at the performance yesterday and was so excited she came back today. She has interviewed some of the cast and also audience members – she did an interview with one of the women who cried today, and then with me again at the end. She has talked to Toronto and raved about this so much that they have agreed to run a national story.

And so this is over. In the final circle we were all exhausted. Some of the kids very sad. I have talked with them about knowing that a hole might open up, and to expect that, and that they have each other and the support people. And I have also said to them that if it does continue – and it should – I want it not to be the adults making it happen for the youth – but the youth insisting it continues and working with the adults to make it happen. Lots of hugs. I fly tomorrow.

May 19, 2003

At the airport and on the plane – many of the people there had seen the performances – it wasn't until then that I started to understand the effect we had had on people. I had very long talks with suicide prevention people from Quebec, also a Doctor and one of the Inuit police officers who were so, so moved and astonished by the Forum Theatre event. They talked about how revealing it was and practical, and that it changed them and their perceptions about the issue.

An Inuk man said something that really struck me. We were talking about why kids (Inuit kids in particular at this moment) commit suicide: 'Because when children are born they are pure and that means they are born 'traditional' – and they see at a very young age that their parents and grandparents are trying to be White. And they know something is very wrong, and that it is in their lives, and they don't know how to fix it. This play you made and how it works with the audience, helps us all understand how to fix it.'

He has made me wonder how what he is talking about might translate into other cultures and situations. About the purity of all children who are not born to be global consumers, but having been born into a consumer culture, struggle at a very young age to learn and fit into an unnatural value system

that is based on what we can be perceived to possess, instead of who we are, what we think, feel, and do.

Postscript May 27, 2003: Jonathan has been in touch and they are starting to make arrangements to bring the plays back together, to perform them in the local High School.