

Blow the Cupboard Door Open

Lockie McDonald on the frustration and joy of international exchange.



The SWAPCo Project.
Photo: Garth Stead, Bellybutton Images.

When a gust of wind bounces down the valley and hits the house, the inbuilt cupboards fly open. In the early hours of Sunday morning I ignore the swinging doors, eagerly waiting for an email reply from South Africa. Sitting in this fibro house on the South coast of Western Australia, mid winter in 1999 nothing feels global. My nose hurts from the cold.

'Please explain what you mean by community cultural development?' The genuine question comes from one of the South African partners of South African West Australian Arts Projects Coalition - SWAPCo. Theatre Director, Mark Flieshman asks from a small cottage in Observatory, an old railway workers suburb of Cape Town, down hill from Main Road, under the Shadow of Devil's Peak.

So begins my international experience, mid-career, at the end of a millennium, sitting on the edge of one continent communicating with someone at edge of another massive land mass. At that moment I underestimate the distance between us in so many ways.

But in early 1999 in Albany and Cape Town we were filled with hope, on the brink of a new global era dawning. In the coming months we would; look after each others children, live, eat, sleep, work and cry together, across the divide of gender, sexual preference, religion, nation and culture.

Was it fraught? Despite a documentary being broadcast nationally in South Africa portraying the SWAPCo project as evidence of the rainbow nation successfully purring along, another cog in the smooth machine of new South African nationhood, it was to put it mildly, extremely challenging for all involved.

But would we do it again? Probably! It was that year of hard won experience that taught tough cross-cultural lessons. Little did we know that some of the clues might have been hidden in Mark's first question, 'Please explain what you mean by Community Cultural Development?'

Skip ahead to January 2003 to around an Albany backyard pizza oven with a couple of Belfast theatre workers drinking VB stubbies and eating kangaroo steaks at

three in the morning. 'Who is gonna believe you people exist back in Belfast', says Dan Gordon, Actor, Belfast Lyric Theatre.

So begins another international exchange. Dan Gordon star of *A Night In November*, a one hander tackling racism in Northern Ireland around a series of soccer games and a trip to New York for the World Cup, promises to hook up the SALT Writers [Silent Authors Lavish Tales] in Albany Maximum Security Prison with Prison Arts Foundation in Northern Ireland or as he would say, 'Norn Iron.'

Two months later an email arrives from one Mike Maloney, the backbone of Prison Arts Foundation, an organisation running multi arts workshops in five prisons in Northern Ireland. I'd heard about Mike while visiting my wife, Caroline O'Neill's, family in Belfast a few years ago. So I was pretty excited to start communicating with this dedicated and witty character. Much to my surprise was the revelation that Mike hails from a



The SWAPCo Project.
Photo: Garth Stead, Bellybutton Images.

little known part of the world called Toowoomba in Queensland. I grew up an hours drive away in Brisbane so communicating with another Queensland community arts exile brought with it a healthy dose of camaraderie.

And then the clanger comes bouncing down through the ether and when it hits the house, all the cupboard doors fly open.

'Lockie ... ccd ??? ... what's community cultural development mean?'

There are historical reasons why a pack of Australian misfits might not hit it off with some of South Africa's leading artists and political activists. Australia was heavily involved in the Boer War when the British and our good selves invented the very first concentration camps imprisoning Boer women and children in tent cities behind barbed wire, starving thousands to death. Australian history is not dissimilar to that of South Africa's apartheid genocide yet we choose to ignore our own legacy telling the South African's what racists they were.

'Australia's history does not read like history, but the most beautiful lies.'
Mark Twain.

And on top of all that, as a Cape Town factory owner pointed out, 'I hate Australians because you bastards keep beating us in sport.' He wasn't joking!

But I fear it's not the weight of history or sporting rivalry that drove a wedge between the South African contingent and the Australians in the initial SWAPCo Project. I think it was the words we were using. We were all speaking the same language but in retrospect we were speaking very different dialects. We often used the same words but meant very different things.

For example today the word 'community' is used for such a broad cross section of Government, and corporate purposes that it's almost become a poisoned word. Ask anyone in the arts who lives in a country

town in Australia what they think of 'community capacity building'. I'd suggest you'd be best to step backwards and quickly duck. They're well used to the hit and run operators building capacity for two to six weeks then quickly scurrying back to coastal comforts of city living. We spoke of ccd the South Africans spoke of community empowerment. With the political shift in South Africa came the ANC Government's desire to fund a more democratic arts practice. With new policy comes new rhetoric. Even the State Ballet Company was engaged in empowerment projects. On the lips of every South African artist chasing an extremely limited slice of funding pie was the word 'empowerment'. The reality was it meant many things.

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The fact of the matter was the two companies who we were working with, Jazzart Dance Theatre and Magnet Theatre had strategically been engaged in what we would call the cutting edge of ccd practice for many years. They had been working with young male offenders in prisons on a weekly basis, had a disability program engaging hundreds of blind children in a multi-arts program, a strong regional program was supported and weekends were spent driving into townships working with kids from a broad cross section of social and racial backgrounds. They just called it something else.

I have had the privilege of working in many cross-cultural environments, each has had it's own cultural mores. The tricky aspect of cross-cultural work is that customs can often remain invisible to the uninitiated. Even after years of working in another culture the veil of confusion can peel away all too slowly. After three years of working in a prison, two or three days a week, I found myself still taking away one small revelation about life on the inside each week. After all - cultures are complex. If they were a cinch we wouldn't find them so fascinating.

Recently I was privileged to attend a meeting convened by Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre in Perth. A group of elderly people from Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley were welcomed by a group of Noongar Elders (Noongars are the Indigenous inhabitants of Perth) into Noongar Booja (Noongar Country.)

I entered the room following three Mangkaja artists and was greeted by the Yirra Yaakin, Chairperson, Dean Collard. What followed was interesting. Both parties stood three metres apart and waited in silence for some minutes. No movement, no greeting, just silence.

Had it all gone wrong? Was this a cross-cultural train wreck? No it was a culturally accepted form of respect. When people did shake hands they made brief eye contact, then dropped their eyes to the ground averting them from any further eye to eye contact, another culturally appropriate mark of respect. Sadly silence is often taken as guilt in a court of law when in Aboriginal culture it is a mark of respect.

For me, it's not what I learn artistically, which is often significant, while working alongside South African Choreographers or Theatre Directors or Chinese Acrobats or the many Indigenous nations of Australia. What I value most working with other cultures is the knowledge and understanding we gain about our own culture. Working alongside other cultures with what we think are odd customs, we are forced to look at how we create meaning in our lives.

As the grey hair increases and gravity starts to make me saggy I am increasingly wary of words strung together to mystify what we do. Every time I start a new project I promise myself to shut up a bit more than last time and listen.

It is also important to challenge what you witness. Not all of our culture is sacred and nor is anyone else's completely sacred. In South Africa someone said to me, 'Culture is bullshit. It's what people use to oppress others, it's what the Apartheid National Party used to keep us apart. I want to smash all culture.' That's a whole other argument.

Hey, can some one help me answer Mike in Norn Iron? What the bloody hell is community cultural development? I'm bugged if I know. If you do, drop me a line on ccd.net. I do hope the cupboard doors keep flinging open while I'm burning the midnight oil, waiting for an email from someone somewhere else ■

As a kid growing up next to the sewerage plant on Oxley Creek in Brisbane, Lockie McDonald thought cars were about as beautiful as life could get. And then in 1974 it flooded. After all the water swept away, the mud mopped, they had a street party. He still chases that flooded beauty. After a brief stint in circus he followed the love of his life West in 1987. For ten winters they wandered up and down the West coast and wheat belt with their small family, working with communities. For the past five years they've lived under the fast sky that is Albany. Lockie is a founding member of the SALT Writers. (Silenced Authors Lavish Tales.) He is currently employed by the Perth International Arts Festival as Boundary Rider. Occasionally it floods, he smiles.

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