

Understanding race through theatre

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"I don't know if they're reacting to me or reacting to me as a black man," Solomon Salew's character says, prompted by an audience member.

The Flemington Theatre Group is performing excerpts from their acclaimed play *Black Face, White Mask* for students from the Breadth subject Engaging youth: art / media / performance, offered by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE). The characters perform a series of sketches exploring the experiences of young African Australians, 'pausing' scenes midway and seeking audience input.

It is a powerful form of theatre, encouraging audience members to put themselves in the characters' shoes, and discuss the issues presented.

"When you show this to teenagers aged 14 or 15, it really goes off," says Dave Kelman, Artistic Director at Western Edge Youth Arts and co-writer of *Black Face, White Mask*. "In the feedback we receive, 25 per cent of young people consistently tell us it has changed how they think."

The group comprises young actors from Melbourne's Western suburbs, mainly first generation Australians from African backgrounds. The play was originally performed at the Incinerator and Flemington Community Centre, then at the Malthouse Theatre and now the group is taking it into schools.

This particular performance showed the Breadth students how the Flemington Theatre Group uses drama to engage young people and deepen their understanding of multi-cultural communities. According to co-founder Maki Issa, it is all about two-way engagement.

"It's about allowing people into our community, not just being a voice, but also being educators," he explains.

The group's workshop for the MGSE featured highlights from the play, including Fatima's run-in with her boss over her 'attitude' and her hijab, a group of angry young men who decide to throw rocks at the police station and an elderly man who is asked by a young white girl at a bus stop 'Why are you black?'

"We have to make sure the stories are true. These are our stories. The theatre we make has to be honest," says Mr Salew.

His colleague Munira Younus explains their theatre provides a platform for young Afro-Australians to work out complex issues that arise by being split between two cultures and two identities.

"In our culture young people can't talk to their parents about drinking or sex and we can't talk to our Anglo friends either because they don't understand," she explains. "We have to figure it out on our own. We are creating a culture by mixing Australian and African, we're creating our own footsteps. Our theatre reflects that."

The African community in Flemington has embraced the group, seeing the value it can bring. "The arts are not always encouraged in our community, our parents want us to get 'good' jobs, like becoming a doctor or a lawyer," says Mr Issa.

"But the community has a sense of ownership over our work now - we provide them with a voice they didn't have before."

The group's work has also made a powerful impact on many audience members. Mr Salew tells of a woman who said

their show changed her racist perspective because, "racism is when the mind and the heart disconnect and you guys speak from the heart."

MGSE's relationship with the Flemington Theatre Group extends beyond student workshops. Senior lecturer Christine Sinclair has been collaborating with Dr Kelman and the group to research how theatre fosters cultural leadership.

"We are really stretching the boundaries of the research model," says Dr Sinclair. "We are teaching the group about reflective practice, and helping them explore their understanding of themselves as cultural leaders.

"As a result they have really taken charge of the message of who they are and what art means for them - they are amazing advocates for the arts and its potential impact."

According to Dr Sinclair, this work has helped the group develop the confidence and a language to talk about their work. The next step, she says, is to work with them as co-authors of research.

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