

# Western Edge Youth Arts: The Flemington Theatre Group *Building Leaders through the Arts*

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## Case Study

An important role for **Western Edge** is to develop young people into artistic leaders in their communities. The **flemington theatre group** is a group of young predominantly African-Australians from refugee/new migrant backgrounds, most of whom started making theatre with Western Edge in their early teens as part of schools projects in what was then Debney Park Secondary College. These accomplished performers are currently engaged in a tour of schools and community venues performing **Black Face White Mask/Interactive**. In this production they perform extracts from their acclaimed play, **Black Face White Mask**, before opening up scenes for discussion through forum theatre and process drama. This involves the **FTG** working at a very high level as artists and as facilitators for the learning of students and other young people. They have come a long way since they first began work with teacher-artists from Western Edge.

## Early Days

In 2004 some members of **ftg** appeared in **Shana & Ali**; the cast members were

exceptionally nervous of performing at 14 years of age, and some were not even sure if they wanted to be involved at first. Most of the young people found it challenging to even talk in front of the group let alone perform. But the more engaged they became with the material, the more they committed to the project. The drama allowed them to start a process of openly discussing identity and belonging, of telling their own stories, or stories of people they knew – stories of life in a new place. The play generated much discussion about the issues facing recent migrants as these comments from contemporary interviews show:

*It was explaining our lives to others. It connected because it is connected to our lives.. Most of the different cultures come to Australia, they have experience of those things.*

*It's important to us and to the audience. We are not just making things up, things like that happen in this life.*

**Harry's Game** followed in 2005. This was a more complex piece with multiple timelines. Still, some performers were not

sure how to engage with the work to begin with:

*...when you guys first came I thought you were going to make your own stories...but this changed when I saw the scripts being made, they were about kids and stuff that related to us, about the culture...*

It was during the **Broken Pieces** project (2006) that the earliest version of a monologue that eventually became a set piece in **Black Face White Mask** was written. The piece describes an experience of an African migrant to Melbourne as reported by one of the group and significantly it was written in collaboration with Western Edge artist Cuong Nguyen. At the time, Maki Issa explained why working with someone else from a refugee background made the collaboration possible:

*They grew up in the same community we live in now, so they can mainly understand what goes on, so it was easier to communicate...*

### Approaching Shakespeare: developing a complex aesthetic

In 2007, some members of the group were part of an intensive 'theatre-lab' workshop process on Shakespeare's **Hamlet**. This change of direction saw the performers begin to grapple with complex language and develop their performance aesthetic. Interviews at the time reveal that members of **ftg** really savoured the challenge:

*It's just Art – what Shakespeare is saying. It's just like an Art piece. If you modernise it, you've just taken the colour out of it. Doing a Shakespeare play, it's going to make you grow a lot...*

*You have 26 different students acting almost identical lines in many different ways. You know they are going to say 'to be or not to be..' but what you don't know is how they will say it.*

In 2009, **Searching for Lear** was staged. This ambitious project combined Shakespeare's *King Lear* with a parallel modern story and characters from *Waiting for Godot*. It had a large multi-age cast and combined performance styles from slapstick to contemporary dance to straight Shakespeare. Shortly

after the end of this project one cast member said, "through art you can teach people – there is no greater way". Another expressed his desire to take work of this sort back to his country of origin, to effect change and 'help people there tell their stories, about the hardships they face'. Both these young men were emerging as articulate leaders in their communities.

### Growing Autonomy – Intercultural dialogue

The first version of **Black Face White Mask** was staged in 2011. This was the first play to be performed under the Flemington Theatre Group banner and was a daring piece exploding the myths and stereotypes about growing up as an African in Australia. The group worked in intensive collaboration with Dave Kelman and Cuong Nguyen from **Western Edge** to tell the stories they knew were important, but that were being largely ignored in mainstream arts.

The next year saw **Zamunda** performed at the Flemington Community Centre. This story saw the **ftg** make their metaphorical return to Africa. Students from Debney Meadows PS took part as performers alongside the **ftg**, and were taught and mentored by members of **ftg** as part of the process. The wheel has come full circle – **ftg** are now working independently as emerging artists in their own community, teaching the younger generation about their culture and tradition as well as how to bridge the gap between two worlds. One **ftg** member spoke of how important the passing on of culture and knowledge is:

*In some ways we create pathways for the Debney Meadows students. Younger African kids can learn from scenes like those with Sara and her grandma...this can show them a little bit of what they haven't been able to see when they are growing up. What their parents were going through, what we tasted when we were growing up – some of us were raised overseas. So I think we have that duty to try and show a little bit about that history to the younger ones...*

### Development of Reflective Practice

The **Zamunda** project had a Melbourne University research project attached to it,

led by Dave Kelman and Chris Sinclair, which enabled the **ftg** to develop their art through reflective practice. Using an innovative research technique, the members of **ftg** were interviewed at key stages of the project; the material was then presented back to the interviewees for them to reflect upon, and shape into complex statements about their work. This resulted in them presenting their 'Manifesto' at a public forum at Melbourne University:

*Our theatre is real – it is emotionally truthful and beautifully honest so you can recognize yourself in it; it brings what real people want to see to life.*

The Flemington Manifesto

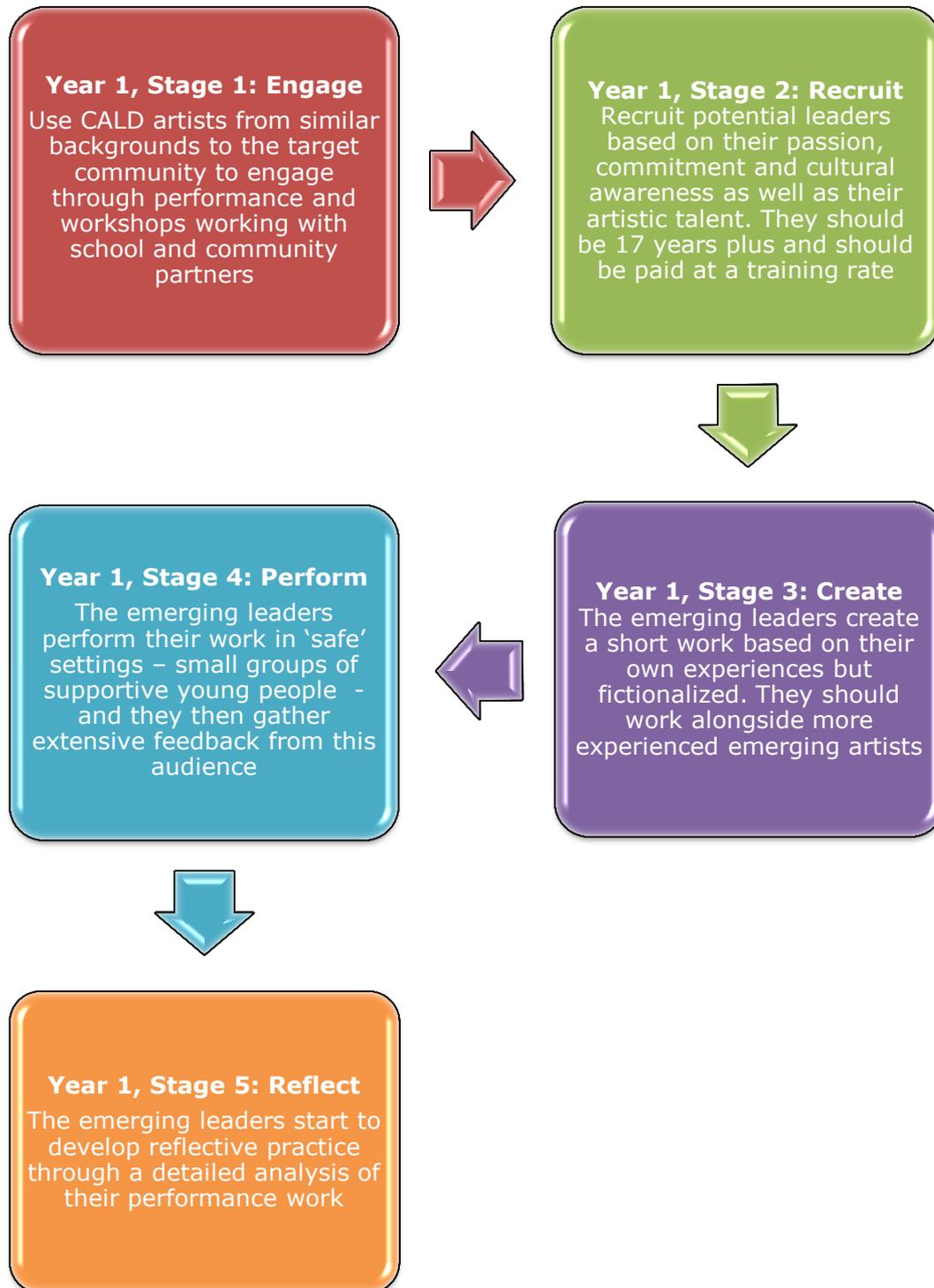
The research won the Vice Chancellor's Engagement Award. The engagement in reflective practice has seen the **ftg** become more confident in their own ability to produce transformative performances that are literally changing the way their audiences think. Three recent schools performances of **Black Face White Mask/ Interactive** (both culturally diverse and mainstream audiences) saw 29% of written audience responses noting (without prompt from researcher question) that the performance had "changed the way I think" – in relation to race and culture.

Western Edge will continue to support the development of the **ftg** as an autonomous company into the future, as well as employing most of its members as emerging artists on our program of education and community projects.

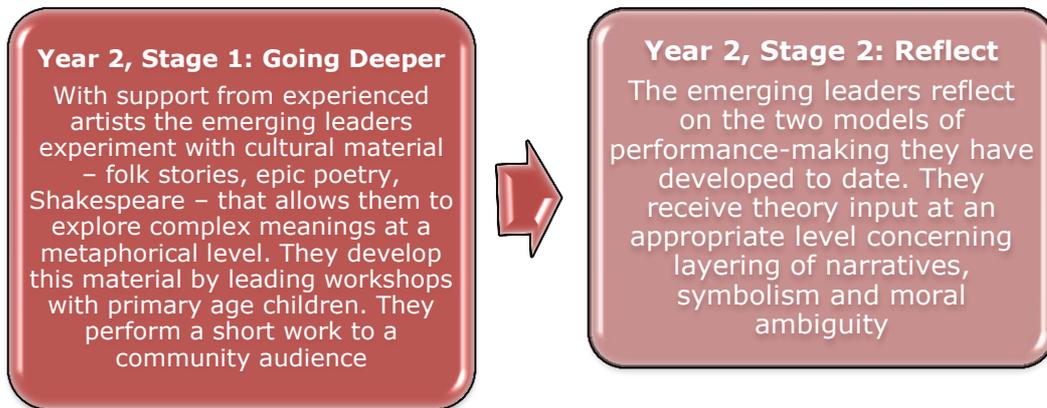
## The Flemington Model of Community Leadership through the Arts

### A Three-Year Process based on Reflective Practice

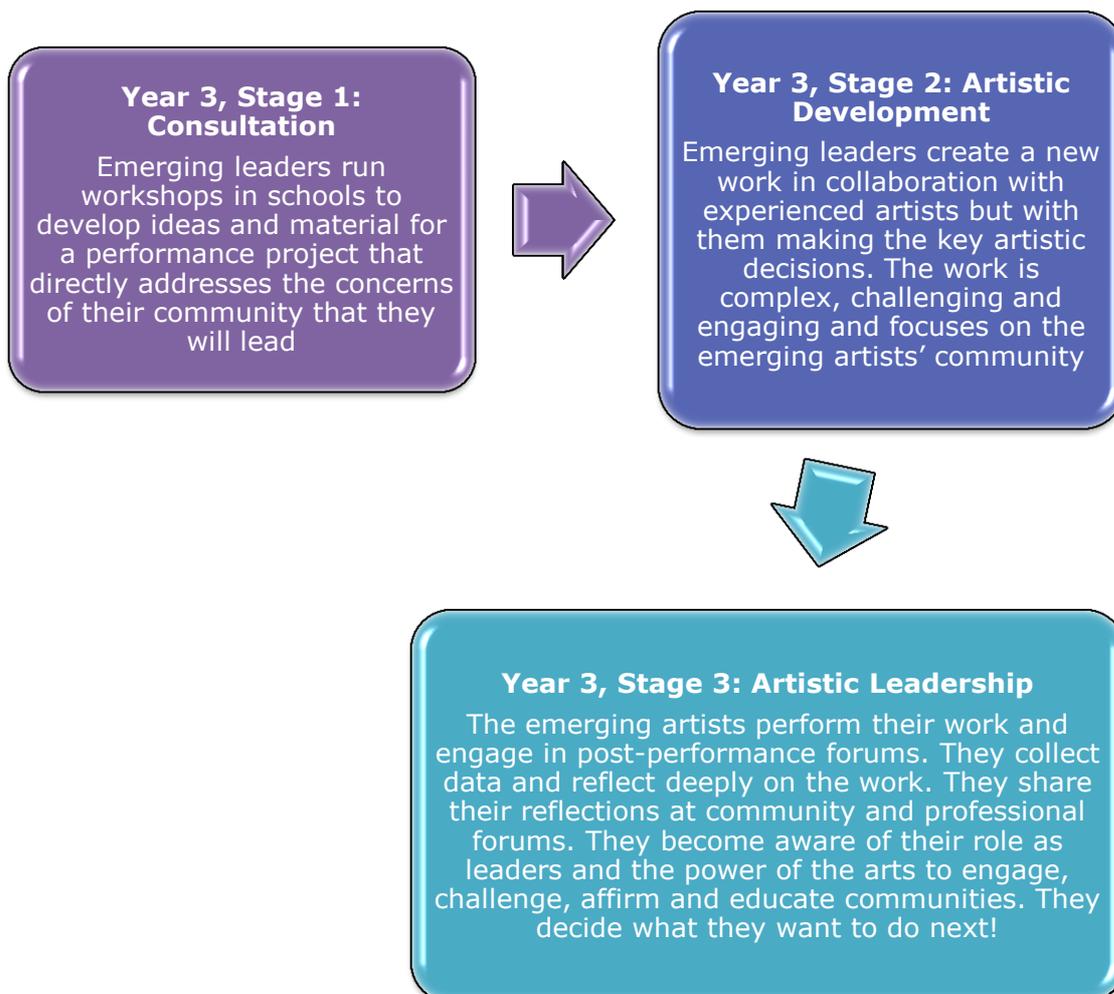
#### Year 1



## Year 2



## Year 3



## The Flemington Manifesto



### The Flemington Manifesto

Strong me - I am a citizen of the world  
Weaker me - I am an African-Australian  
Amongst Africans in Australia - I am African  
Overseas - I am an Aussie.

Our theatre is our voice.

Our theatre is grassroots: we want to speak, not be spoken for.

Our theatre is the stories that link us to our past but it is always evolving,  
deciphering transitional, Afro-Australian Identity.  
It is descriptive of both self and culture.

Our theatre is 'real' - in the sense that it is emotionally truthful  
and beautifully honest so you can recognise yourself in it.  
It brings what real people want to see to life.

Our theatre is comedy: the intense scene is when you hold your breath.  
Comedy gives you a break from thinking: you can breathe and laugh.

Our theatre is a mirror reflecting the community:  
taking the fictional stories of our community and reflecting them back,  
representing different sections of the community and treating them with respect.

Our process is based on a strictly ethical and critical construction of story (and how that story is told):  
take a theme, story-tell, create pictures, share stories, and weave stories into a bigger narrative.  
The rehearsal space is a space outside conventional thinking.  
It is a space of critique, discovery and mental freedom.

Our process is story and meaning over form.

Our theatre is meaningful and educational for our people and for the wider community. It is a social  
commentary. It doesn't have a closed meaning: it is open to interpretation but it can't be misleading  
- we don't want fabrication or stereotypical perspectives. We can show challenges and problems  
and we are not afraid to portray negative aspects of our community but it must always be insightful.

Our theatre is inspirational and aspirational  
-- we want to inspire other young people in the community.

Manifesto



FTG Speak

*We are strict on how you tell a story - how correct it is. Every line has its own debate.*

*The show is the community...Whoever is in the venue is the show - they can find the story in themselves.*

*Our plays are not a closed book - they're open. We are critical of our own messages and we try to make our messages complex. It's about not going for the obvious - finding hidden stories - that's what makes the work powerful.*

*Creating the work is a struggle because we are trying to decipher who we are - deciphering our identity within Australian society.*

*We work with fictional stories. It's different to autobiographical stories - refugee victim narratives. I don't want you to cry for me. I don't want you to feel it, I just want you to know it. It's more healing. It takes out the element of guilt and replaces it with developed consciousness.*

*You dealt with such big complicated hard 'hurting' issues for many young people - but with love, humour and that nothing is just one or the other but a complex mess of feelings and experiences that we muddle through.*  
- Audience comment

*They confound expectations by exploding stereotypes and presenting multiple points of view with self-satirising humor and open-hearted performances -The Age*



Facebook - Flemington Theatre Group/  
[www.westernedge.org.au](http://www.westernedge.org.au)

The Flemington Theatre Group

