

after homelessness...

Created and performed by people who know homelessness



Sundown Stieger as Cloud; Janette Pink as Katie; Sandra Pronteau as Shawna; Photo: David Cooper

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S FINAL REPORT

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Just a few of many quotes about the project¹

“*After homelessness...* may be the most important show you can see this year.”

Jerry Wasserman, Vancouverplays.com

“I lived on the porch of Rectory/Holy Trinity Cathedral for almost 5 months. *After homelessness...* really hit Home, so to speak. I thought it was very well done! It has inspired me to try to help the Street People I met while I was outside. I was never homeless while at Trinity. Many thanks for an excellent play.”

Lawrence, audience member

“Some of the most profound moments I have ever experienced in theatre occurred during this performance (*after homelessness...*). Don't go if you want to feel comfortable and secure in your life. It is only for those who want to feel hopeful, uncertain, aware, responsible, angry - in other words, connected.”

Jennifer Brooks, audience member

“I participated in Headlines Theatre's *after homelessness...* last night and it was an awesome experience! Totally engaging and thought-provoking. (It is) an experience like no other you have had. It is significant to our lives as people in this community who are engaged citizens; people who together can take actions to effect positive change. As David Diamond said, in one way or another, we're all affected by homelessness. And it's true.”

Melinda Suto, audience member

I attended the *after homelessness...* performance last night. I am blown away by the creativity of this project & integrity it gives all in allowing us to truly empathize and take responsibility for the tragedy that this city has been riding through for years. Bravo for all your hard work, you should be highly commended for this important piece.

Lisa Fox Valdes, audience member

“*After homelessness...* is unlike any other theatrical experience I had ever seen. Even more powerful than the initial performance were the performances of the (audience members) who took on the re-imagining of roles. Even thinking back about it now makes me emotional. This play was a gift to people who needed a way to speak, because by speaking truthfully they can become strong and heal. I am immensely grateful to have experienced those moments. Remember, it's not about you and me or them, *it's about us*.”

Glen Gaetz, audience member, (from Glen's blog)

“I have just been to see *after homelessness...* This was the first time I have been "in" an SRO, although I have heard the term many times, and the first time I really grasped the horror of living there. Now I can understand the need to create and enforce legislation dealing with SROs.

This was the first time I really understood the depth of attachment a street person can have to their shelter (a tarp in the play). Now I understand why people are calling for "tent cities" here on the west coast. I understand why it's important to have safe, humane policies for moving the homeless and their improvised shelters. The play's director, David Diamond, explained to us (the audience) that one of the purposes of theatre is to create an image of reality and place it before the eyes of the audience. He and his theatre company accomplished this around the issue of homelessness and a whole roomful of people were the wiser for it.”

Michael Duff, audience member, excerpted from a letter to the Premier of BC, Finance and Culture Ministers.

“*after homelessness...* is phenomenal. Giant congratulations to all of you.

I have passed the following along to all my local friends: Please see this life changing show! We've all driven by the homeless and wondered what to do. You can be part of this dialogue with your fellow humans who have struggled with homelessness.”

Kim Hayashi, audience member

¹ A full version is attached as Appendix 3 and/or available at:

http://headlinestheatre.com/past_work/after_homelessness/reports_after_homelessness.htm

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The Short Version

In mid-2008 we started wondering at Headlines what we could do that would contribute positively to solutions around issues of homelessness in Metro Vancouver. We knew very quickly that a play that rang an alarm bell and said, “Hey, Folks, we should look at this issue” was not going to be helpful. We are way beyond that here and all up the Fraser Valley.

After talking with people in the community it became apparent that what would be helpful was a project that asked questions about what it really means to create housing that is safe and appropriate in the context of people having been homeless and the mental health issues that often go along with that.

And so fundraising started, outreach and networking began. We went looking for people who had lived these issues who would be interested in being directly involved in the creation and performance of the play. We got 125 applications. This was the highest number of applications for any project in Headlines’ history. To a degree, this is a credit to Dafne Blanco’s (Outreach Coordinator) outreach, but is also an indicator of the depth of the issue out in the streets. An “application” consisted of a written submission. Some of them were emails of a few sentences. Some of them were letters, faxes that have been up to 14 pages long. Many of them were gut-wrenching.

We had space for forty 30-minute interviews in four days. Out of this would come 14 workshop participants and 6 cast members. Workshop participants were paid \$600 for the week. Cast members got \$650. All were fed a continental breakfast and a catered, nutritious lunch.

In the end, we did 42 interviews, just so we could say “yes” to two more people. If a person wanted to be considered for the cast (most did), then we did some improvisation work with them.

And so we progressed through, making notes, taking photos of each person. Then the selection process began: I started putting photos and notes in small categories based on age, experience that they brought into the process, various diversity issues. I wanted as much diversity in the room as possible. Then, out of these categories, eliminated 20 people. This left me with a workshop group of 22. Then I decided on the cast, using similar criteria. Casting before the workshop starts is important, so the workshop itself will not turn into an audition.

Adeline Huynh, Production Manager, has written her own report regarding getting participants and cast members who were homeless into housing. *The report is attached as Appendix 1.* It is remarkable, as a theatre company, to have accomplished this. It begs a question:

Some of our participants had been on a waiting list for up to two years. We managed to get them into housing in a matter of weeks, because of our relationship with the housing providers and their commitment to support the theatre project. If we could do this, why can't the Government?

The workshop and creation process

The week-long THEATRE FOR LIVING workshop happened in the midst of the height of the flu pandemic. The homeless population is very vulnerable to contagion and so the flu walked into the room and spread quickly throughout the workshop group, despite the use of hand sanitizers, hand washing reminders etc. I also got very ill². Of course we continued, but the flu added a difficult layer to what was already a challenging undertaking.

Having said that the week was very powerful and tilled the soil from which the play grew. The workshop is explained in detail, with photos, in the full report.

During the creation and rehearsal process all of the complexities of the issues in the emerging play were in the rehearsal hall: addiction; an inability to deal with structure; various mental health issues.

It had been clear from the beginning of recruitment, as is always the case with Headlines' projects, that this project was not an opportunity for "therapy" for the cast members. This is one of the reasons we pay people above union wages – it is work. While we also hire a full-time support person/counselor there are clear expectations that people will show up for work. It is part of the contract we sign with everyone.

In the middle of rehearsals, after numerous instances of not showing up, (and also attempts at solving whatever barriers there were to showing up) a company decision was taken, in consultation with the rest of the cast, stage manager and support person, to fire two cast members. Their absences were making it impossible to work in a coherent way and they had lost the trust of the rest of the cast. This was a very difficult choice, but needed to happen. One was replaced by a workshop participant and the other was replaced by a member of the cast of *Practicing Democracy* – a related project Headlines did years previous on poverty issues.

We also navigated dual diagnosis mental health issues with one cast member in particular, making working with him very challenging. He, however, regardless of the state he was in, showed up for work every day. The bottom line, we realized, was that there was no way to take on the issue of "after homelessness" and not have all the issues inside the rehearsal hall. We had to find a way through.

² We don't believe anyone had H1N1, symptoms were never that severe, but...the flu – need I say more – and we had to continue, the schedule having been set a year in advance.

The night before we opened we lost a cast member. Issues in his life outside the play made it necessary for him to enter the hospital. This was very intense, and is explained in some detail starting on page 68 of the longer report. When this happened, Holly Anderson (Support Person), who had been present for all the rehearsals, stepped in with one hour of rehearsal. She ended up playing the role for the rest of the run.

In the midst of these almost daily challenges very powerful work happened, as is witnessed by the strength of the play and its ability to ask, I believe, deep questions about what it means to create safe and appropriate housing when people have been homeless.

Comments from cast members:

“When I got asked to be a cast member for *after homelessness*... I was quite excited to say the least. As a recovering addict and homeless person I was honored to have the possibility to be a part of the change for people. I learned so much about myself, other people and the problem at hand in a much larger scope and how *we* can make a difference. Being a part of this project has had an immense impact on my life and the lives of others.”

Janette Pink, cast member

“*after homelessness*... brought out a lot of issues that people are facing in the real world when living in impoverished conditions. My character was presented in a realistic way when addiction arises in an individual’s lifestyle. I felt this project was an ice breaker for viewers to recognize how they resemble the characters within themselves in various ways.

I found this type of work a great way to facilitate social justice matters. It invites people from all walks of life to become aware instead of the issue falling on deaf ears. The people I have talked with have all of sudden realized and come to understand that we can’t ignore poverty issues, especially after being homeless and struggling to find a safe, secure environment.

Working for Headlines Theatre has given new hope for betterment of people who are still struggling, but also to a new social justice approach to future policies for all levels of government.”

Sandra Pronteau, cast member

“As a social worker it was an amazing experience to be involved in a project that epitomized anti-oppressive practice, and made inroads on personal, structural and governmental issues. *After Homelessness* embodied inclusively, and allowed participants to use their strengths of experience as a call to action around the barriers they have and continue to face. To be involved intimately with this project and watch the shifts in the participants, audiences, and greater public was a humbling and invigorating career highlight.”

Holly Anderson, Support Person

The performances

We played to an average of 93% houses. The is spectacular for theatre in Vancouver. There were 15 performances: 9 at the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver (136 seats) and 6 at the Holy Trinity Cathedral in New Westminster (100 seats). 1,107 people saw the play at the Firehall and another 570 at the Holy Trinity, for a total of 1,677 live attendees. Another estimated 11,001 people viewed the project either live on the web or taped on

SHAW Community Cable. ***This equals a potential viewing audience of 12,678.***

Tickets were affordable at \$10 and we also had vouchers available through housing and homeless organizations so the homeless population could attend. ***486 vouchers were used during the course of the run, meaning that the project was accessed really deeply by the homeless population.*** Full attendance/box office figures are attached as Appendix 2.

Every night in the theatre was so different, because of the interactive nature of the play. I took a step further into delineating the inclusiveness of the THEATRE FOR LIVING invitation for an audience with this project – another step into knowing that there is no “them” in any issue, there is only an ever-evolving “us”. Here is an excerpt from what I was saying to audiences, from the script that was created after the final performance. The thirty-minute play has just ended, and we are transitioning into Forum Theatre:

I have a question for you. All it takes is the raise of a hand. I am wondering how many of us here tonight, either from our own personal lives, or the lives of loved ones, but no further away than that, please, how many of us relate to some or many of the issues in this play?³

So you recognize issues connected to homelessness and after homelessness. What are they? Just yell them out.

(Things we heard a lot, in no particular order: addiction, lack of community, mental health, police brutality, terrible conditions in SROs⁴, bugs, no support, struggles with bureaucracy, drug dealers, bad or no management.)

Lots of issues. Here’s what’s going to happen. We are going to perform this play again. This time without the lights and sound. This second time, if you understand the struggles that the characters are engaged in, and you have an idea of how to *work towards the creation of a safe and appropriate home*, I want you to yell “stop”. The action here will stop. You’ll come out of the audience area, here, into the playing area, take the place of the character whose struggle it is you understand, and try your idea. The other actors will improvise with you in character and... we’ll see what happens.

³ Each night of the 15 performances was so different. If I had to estimate an average, I’d say 60 – 70% of the hands would go up each night. One very unusual night it was 20% and another unusual night 90-95%.

⁴ SRO = Single Room Occupancy. These are hotels, many in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, most (not all) are slums.

Some things about this invitation: This isn't a test here this evening. We aren't looking for right or wrong answers. Often we have the deepest insights from ideas that come onto the stage that don't solve the problems because we can also learn what not to do in any given situation. Also, whatever you do will give someone else an idea, and that will give someone else an idea, and in that way we get to go deeper and deeper into an investigation of these very complex issues.

I want to talk, for a moment, to those of you who did not raise your hands when I asked about connection to the issues in the play. We are very glad you are here. We knew, putting this together, that we would play to the general public. There is something I have discovered working on this project: there isn't a single human being in Metro Vancouver, up the Fraser Valley, who is not affected by these issues of homelessness. We all pay a high price, in various ways, for the terrible situation that exists. Because of this, the "after homelessness" issue is not only "their issue" to address, it is "our issue", whether we are aware this is the case or not.

And so I have a request. Please don't allow your own sense that the issues are not "yours" stop you from sharing your ideas tonight. Here we are in the theatre, and we want your creativity. These are issues of humanity on the stage and being humans, inside the metaphoric language of the theatre, we have a way to understand.

And so I believe that very creative and also inclusive space was created in the theatre each night – space in which deep thinking, confronting of assumptions, experimentation and learning at a "living community" level took place. Certainly the overwhelming feedback from audiences supports this. Pages of quotes (positive and negative) are attached as Appendix 3, and also available at:

http://headlinestheatre.com/past_work/after_homelessness/reports_after_homelessness.htm

Gail Franklin, who was hired as the Community Scribe was at every performance, notating the ideas that came onto the stage, ideas that were articulated from the audience. She gathered these ideas, studied them, looked for patterns inside them. The Community Action Report (CAR) is the result of Gail's work. The CAR is going to all funders, to the government and not for profit organizations that requested it, and it will also be posted on our web site for anyone who wants to access it, at: [www.headlinestheatre.com / past work / after homelessness / final reports](http://www.headlinestheatre.com/past_work/after_homelessness/final_reports).

The webcast - November 29, 2009

People logged into the chat space (you could watch the web cast and not log into chat) from:

Canada: Vancouver and North Vancouver BC, Richmond BC, Burnaby BC, Langley BC, Chilliwack BC, Mission BC, Calgary AB, Winnipeg MB, Montreal PQ and London ON.

USA: Bellingham WA, McMinnville OR, Montclair CA, Santa Barbara CA, Longemont CO and Florida.

Other International: Brisbane AU, Melbourne AU, Sydney AU, Mitaka Japan and India.

As mentioned above, we only have location information from those computers that logged into the chat space. A computer did not need to be logged into chat, in order to watch the play and forum. Chris Bouris, web master, has done a calculation of used bandwidth, and from this estimates that a *minimum* of 556 computers logged into the web cast. We know from our organizing work that in most instances, people do not watch alone and in fact, organize small parties to view the project. Being conservative, we can estimate that $(556 * 3) * 60\% = 1,001$ people watched the play and Forum on the web.

An edited version (edited for time) also aired on SHAW Cable on January 1, 2010. SHAW tells us that up to 15,000 people will view a show. Again, being conservative and taking 66.6%, this would mean another 10,000 saw the play, for a total of **11,001 viewers outside the live, theatrical audience.**

Some personal thoughts

There was a great deal of drama in the creation, rehearsal and performance of this project. There was, in retrospect, no way to expect to create a theatre project that was a “true voice” about these issues and not navigate many of the same issues that exist in the outside world inside the process. It is a testament to everyone involved that they hung in there, did not give up, kept showing up every day and giving so much of themselves. Yes, we were paying them all, but during the hard times (and there were some very hard times), the money would not ensure a person walked in the door, as is evidenced by the two people we needed to let go. The cast and production team’s creativity and perseverance gave the larger community in Metro Vancouver and beyond via the web cast, a tremendous gift. I give my heartfelt thanks and congratulations to them.

The “should Otis be allowed to stay in his tarp, in public view” question was controversial in many instances throughout the run. Very few (if any) want to see a tarp city become our “answer” to social housing. At the same time, the

answer cannot continue to simply be “we need more housing”. Of course we do. While we wait and wait and wait for that promised housing...what do we do? Personally, I am frustrated by the activism that insists we should not allow tent cities because doing so lets the Government off the hook. This is like saying to the pan-handler that s/he should just be patient because good and concerned people are working on poverty issues.

There is also a climate, I have come to think, of dependence on energies from outside the community to fix things. However well meaning, this just isn't successful often enough. The characters in our play CAN take control of local, grassroots solutions – they must – because we have all been waiting too long for solutions from above. This statement was made from the stage (not only by me) numerous times.

Politically, I want to articulate something. If the Canadian Government, the Province of BC, the City of Vancouver, the corporate and not-for-profit sectors can come together and harness both the finances and the human will to have the Olympics in Vancouver in 2010, there is no reason on earth we cannot solve the homeless issue. The Olympics cost, in fact far more money. The logistics are far more complicated. What we have here is a problem of will. It is possible that stems from a definition problem about the concept of profit. If we understood the actually monetary profit of having a universally healthy, housed population, and committed even half the monetary and human resources that have gone into the Olympics into homelessness, we would not be dealing with thousands of people living in the streets.

If you are reading this, it means that the Community Action Report has been delivered to the parties who agreed to receive it: the City of Vancouver, City of New Westminster, Province of BC, Mental Health Commission of Canada, Rain City Housing, Portland Hotel Society, and others. Of course, Headlines Theatre has no control over what these and other bodies do with the policy recommendations. We have a sincere hope, however, that not only are the recommendations useful, but that they also get put into practice.

We will keep people updated about this as much as we can via our monthly newsletter.

The Long Version

The build-up into the project

In mid-2008 we started wondering at Headlines what we could do that would contribute positively to solutions around issues of homelessness in Metro Vancouver. We knew very quickly that a play that rang an alarm bell and said, “Hey, Folks, we should look at this issue” was not going to be helpful. We are way beyond that here and all up the Fraser Valley.

After talking with people in the community it became apparent that what would be helpful was a project that asked questions about what it really means to create housing that is safe and appropriate in the context of people having been homeless and the mental health issues that often go along with that.

And so fundraising started, outreach and networking began. We went looking for people who had lived these issues who would be interested in being directly involved in the creation and performance of the play. We got 125 applications.

In the buildup into the production we ran a photograph contest open to anyone who wanted to participate, looking for the poster image. This was all about the poster being an authentic voice. First prize was \$500 and use as the poster. Second prize was \$250. Ten other photos (plus first and second) were juried and shown by Gallery Gachet, as part of a larger photographic show involving Headlines, the Oppenheimer Park Group and PIVOT Legal Society.

We went through a very nice creative process with Donna, the photographer of the winning photo. We all liked the photograph and agreed it was the best of what came in, and were concerned that in its original form, it lacked humanity. Literally, no “human” presence in it. She agreed immediately and said she had almost not submitted the photo for that exact reason. If there was humanity in it, what would it be, we asked? She talked about how she had imagined a “ghost” in one of the windows. This was great direction. Dafne searched through stock photos and found the image of the elderly woman that has now become part of the photograph and photoshopped her into one of the windows, in blue/grey tones, giving her a “ghost” presence. This addition really helps the image.

The chaos around BC Government cuts, in the end, had no effect on this project, although it will have a very negative long-term effect on Headlines.⁵

⁵ I am anticipating, by April 2011, a total loss of anywhere between \$18-58,000 in core operating funds. This is a huge chunk of Headlines’ yearly budget. As of early January 2010, no one can tell us how much the final cut will be.

We looked at the 125 applications from people who were living issues of homelessness; people who wanted to be considered as workshop participants/cast members. This was the highest number of applications for any project in Headlines' history. To a degree, this is a credit to Dafne Blanco's (Outreach Coordinator) outreach, but is also an indicator of the depth of the issue out in the streets. An "application" consisted of a written submission. Some of them were emails of a few sentences. Some of them were letters, faxes that have been up to 14 pages long.

Many of the applications were heart-breaking. People pleading to be in the process for various reasons: a desire to have experience validated; the money – which they were hoping would save them from eviction from current housing, or get them into housing, (we had the ability, via the Portland Society and Rain City Housing, to house homeless participants); a possible healing experience that they imagined they would get from the theatre. Many told gut-wrenching stories of abuse on and off the streets.

We had space for forty 30-minute interviews in four days. Out of this would come 14 workshop participants and 6 cast members. Everyone was paid \$600 for the week (cast members got \$650) and fed a continental breakfast and a catered, nutritious lunch.

And so what were the criteria for selection? We had to say "no" to 85 people off the bat. I was the most interested in people that talked about the issue in terms of *after* homelessness, and wanting to contribute to something that changed people's perceptions and also policies in this area. Mention of this, regardless of the person's dire circumstances, was an indicator that they understood what the project was about, and were not setting themselves and Headlines up for something that was expected to be a life altering experience. Of course this happens for participants, and happens often – but it cannot presume to be the focus of the work; nor should it be the reason to engage or to be hired.

And so emails got sent or phone calls got made to 85 people over two days, thanking them for sending in an application, explaining the numbers and how hard it was to make decisions and suggesting that if they needed to talk about the process, we would engage in that. Mostly emails came back thanking us for the project and for actually getting back in touch.

Actually, in the end, we did 42 interviews, just so we could say "yes" to two more people. If a person wanted to be considered for the cast (most did), then we did some improvisation work with them.

The interviews were, as would be expected, very intense. We went into this knowing that we could accept 22 (I made space in the budget for an extra 2), and this meant that 20 would not get into the workshop. Of the 42, 10 or 12 were obviously not going to be appropriate for various reasons. Mostly, this was that the reason they would give us to engage in the process was to "help others" or to "learn about the issue" but not to share their own experiences.

This, despite what they might have written in their letter or note of application about their own life experiences. I think that the interview was, for some, when they started to realize the personal nature and possible intensity of the work. The process could not be about a distant “them”...it could only be about a present “us”.

If someone wanted to be considered for the play, they did some improvising with me (and sometimes also with Dafne, if she entered the scene – which she had the permission to do). I set the same situation up with everyone:

We started with placing our hands on each others’ shoulders and pushing. Really pushing, using muscles. At first many were reluctant to be physical with me but I would just keep encouraging them both verbally and physically until they started to push back. ‘Did you feel that?...yes...OK – so when we get into the improvisation, don’t be afraid to push back emotionally.... psychologically....’.

Then a scene: the territory that we knew the project would live in is that space *after* being homeless and now entering housing. The idea of what housing *could be* (safe, appropriate) and the reality of what it often really is (very unsafe, without supports, etc.). I told each participant I wanted them to let themselves go there – to when this happened to them. In that place, all of us have voices in our heads – they aren’t the only one, we all do, voices that for instance, are saying “how did I get here...what now?...” Does this make sense, I would ask. (Almost always, the person would be saying – Oh yes...).

‘OK. So – I want you to start by sharing those voices with us. It is OK to move around, do things, whatever makes sense. At some point I am going to impose myself into what you are doing. Play with me. Dafne might also impose herself into this. If she does, play with us. Let’s just see what happens. From now on we are in theatre-land. Whatever happens now is theatre, because I might say or do things, or Dafne might, that are negative, nasty in some way. Don’t hold it against us later. (Almost always laughter here.) Start when you are ready.’

This led to very varied, sometimes intense improvisations. People were very good at understanding the boundaries that got set up between the theatre and real life and many, not all, were very good at using their real life understandings to draw on. Those few that had a hard time with this ran into (I think) one of two problems: Either they thought they had to “invent” everything, and would get stuck creatively, having a very ‘TV improv’ image of what I was asking; or (2 out of the 42) simply froze and would say “this is really confusing me”.

We were in delicate territory here. The theatre is an emotional, psychological, physical language. The process we were asking people to engage in would ask of them that they contribute, not by putting pen to paper, or telling long stories, but by making theatre. One of the reasons to do the improvisations was to try to gauge if there was a “fit” between the process and the potential

participant. We tried in the selection process to make sure we were including people with mental health issues (as this was part of the mandate of the project – homelessness and mental health), and, at the same time, we had to be able to do the work. The focus of the project was not “rescuing” people in some way – it was creating the best theatre possible, that was as true a voice as possible, to stimulate as deep a community dialogue as possible, to affect housing policy.

And so we progressed through, making notes, taking photos of each person. Then the selection process started. I started putting photos and notes in small categories based on age, experience that they brought into the process, various diversity issues. I wanted as much diversity in the room as possible. Then, out of these categories, struggled to eliminate 20 people. This left me with a workshop group of 22. Then I started trying to cast.

Some of the casting choices were clear. One woman had done a great interview and improvisation. It was fearless. Another brought both her experience in the street and her youth. One of the men’s energy, having come out of gang life and now having a partner and very small child, not being able to find a safe environment for them, being in his mid-30’s but “feeling” 17 and all the time he spent in the street, would, I knew be of great value in the play. Another was a very accomplished actor – I knew him as a colleague 20 years ago and then he disappeared into medical issues, addiction and homelessness. He brought all of this.

And then there was Walter⁶. He had been a police officer. He had what sounded like a manic episode, entered the other side of the law, spent time in jail, became homeless for many years and was now trying to pull his life together. He was very centred and did a great improvisation with us. He also had profound mental health issues. He was clearly who this project was about, in all of his complexity.

This was five people. We advertised that there would be a cast of six but every time I inserted a sixth cast member it felt wrong. Why six? A number I had pulled out of the air. And so I made an instinctive choice to limit the cast to five. If it became apparent we needed a sixth cast member, there were people in the workshop that we could draw on. The choices had to serve the play.

I say complexity with Walter because it was already becoming complicated. He was still using (heroin) once a week. When we talked about this he was very honest about how and why. ‘It is all about who your friends are’, he said. ‘In the last few years I’ve gone from every day to once a week. I know I don’t need it anymore, but still do it to keep my friends. If I enter a different community (he was currently homeless as was another cast member and four of the workshop participants), then it will be easy to stop.’ I am not naïve – have known my share of addicts – and I believed him.

⁶ This is not his real name.

But then...he missed an appointment with me. We couldn't get to him directly, because he was homeless and so messages got left with a social services worker, Adrian⁷. Adrian told me he thought Walter wasn't doing so well. I finally got him to the office on September 29. He had been on his way here on the 28th but had gotten attacked. He showed me where he got hit. And he was "flying". He got very anxious, in his words, over the week-end, and went to his doctor who changed his medication. The doctor put him on Venlafaxine (Effexor) – an anti-depressant. He showed me the pills. Walter thought the pills were reacting badly with his anti-psychotic meds. He was really confused and, in my experience of him, suddenly couldn't stop talking. He really wanted to do the play, and I wanted him to – for what he had the potential to bring. This new twist was very worrisome. He said that he thought that in a couple of weeks (when we started the workshop) his reaction would have calmed down. I was putting some trust in this at the moment and waiting.

The bottom line for me was that it would be hypocritical to be doing a project on homelessness and mental health issues and not be willing to work with the mental health issues. I was also aware that there must be boundaries to this in terms of safety for him, other cast members, Headlines, the project itself.

It turned into a long haul with Walter. He became (likely already was) very unstable. I met with him and his doctor. That day he seemed mostly fine – a little agitated. The doctor took him off the Effexor. I realized, sitting there, that the medical response to psychosis is to some degree just an experiment. 'Here, take this drug – let's see what it does'.

A day later Walter called here in an extremely agitated state, said he was too busy to talk and hung up the phone. Then he missed the group cast and support person contract signing, which we had moved to Friday at his request. Then we got word that after he moved in at the Portland, where we had helped him get into housing, there had been numerous (and some severe) incidents between him and residents and him and staff. His housing was secure – the Portland was (and remains) committed to try to help him, but they also knew him under a different name than the one he was using with Headlines.

Holly Anderson and I (Holly was the support person hired for the project) had a long talk and agreed that as much as we wanted to, the invitation for Walter to be a cast member had to be withdrawn. He was exhibiting behaviour that was just too erratic. He needed to be able to function in a group setting, and we had a larger responsibility to create a safe working environment.

⁷ Not his real name.

I asked him to come to the office and we talked, and he agreed. He expected the decision, and was happy to be in the workshop. He said himself that he'd realized he didn't think he could handle the length of commitment that the play would require. He was very grateful to be in safe and supported housing, after trying to get in for so many months, and was hoping that the stability this afforded him would help him stabilize in other ways. He knew he had been very erratic.

And so Gerald⁸ came on board as the 5th cast member.

Adeline Huynh, Production Manager, has written her own report regarding getting people into housing. It is remarkable, as a theatre company, to have accomplished this. It begs a question:

Some of our participants had been on a waiting list for up to two years. We managed to get them into housing in a matter of weeks, because of our relationship with the housing providers and their commitment to support the theatre project. if we could do this, why can't the Government?

From now on, all entries will be from my daily journals and so will be written in the present tense.

The THEATRE FOR LIVING community workshop process

October 17, 2009

Day 1

Introductions
 Point and turn
 Balancing
 Hypnosis
 Find the spot
 Lead the blind
 Energy clap
 Blind magnets
 Complete the image
 Groups of 4 (5)
 Animations
 Fox in the hole
 Circle

We've begun. 40 people, including Headlines' staff and production personnel to start and a bad surprise, although the day was great.

⁸ Not his real name.

We had decided to give all the participants \$200 on day 1, knowing they are broke, and the rest of their payment (another \$400) on Thursday, at the end of the process. Two workshop participants got their cheques and vanished, not to return. This has never happened to me before – being ripped off this way. Yes, I understand the people with whom we are working on this project have complicated lives – but they knew what they are doing in this moment. It is so disrespectful to everyone at Headlines, to the other participants, and also to the two people who could have been in the workshop in their place.

At any rate, we had a very strong day, with a lot of terrific focus in it. The “Lead the Blind” game gave us an interesting moment, of a large number of people making the same sound....a clucking sound....and this led to me thinking about how judgmental that sound is. What does it mean to have characters clucking at each other? A weird idea, I know but there is something there.



Lunch was very healthy (good sandwiches, wraps, salad and a rice/grain salad) and appreciated – a number of people mentioned to me it was the healthiest food they have had in weeks.

⁹



At this point in the workshop, I have given people the choice of making Images of “homelessness” or “after homelessness”. In order to tell a story about “after homelessness”, we need to spend some time investigating “homelessness”.

We made images:

Hidden Light – generated a great deal of discussion about who the woman is. Is she helping? Is she a part of the problem? Is she on the verge of “falling” into the arms of the others?



Caught Up – hit the group quite hard. When I asked them to “stand with the character” if they had been one of the characters, a great deal of the room stood with the character being arrested. This led to a conversation about the reasons people GET arrested – one of them being because jail is safer than the streets and

⁹ All workshop photos – D. Diamond. The faces of workshop participants have been blurred for confidentiality purposes. Cast members, having signed image releases for the stage and web production, are identifiable.

when one has no where to go, jail becomes an option. At least 50% of the people in the room indicated they had purposefully gone to jail in order to get out of the street.

Smoking Against the Wind – seemed like a simple Image off the top, until we started to investigate who the people really are, and what it is that is happening. The two standing, are they looking out for the other with the crack pipe, waiting their turn? Or are they public who know the issue exists but are ignoring it? Or are they an inanimate wall with a hole in it – a wall he is hiding behind somehow? What is the crack cocaine? Of course – a heavy drug....but what other addiction is the crack? How many have hidden behind a (real or symbolic) wall and looked out the crack in the wall? Almost everyone in the room raised their hand.

In the closing circle many talked about how the workshop was really different than they had thought it would be – in a good way, and also how tired they are. I have a concern – there is a fair bit of “sick” in the room (colds, flu...we are in the H1N1 pandemic – who knew this would be the case?). We are encouraging people to do a lot of hand washing and also have hand sanitizers available. There is only so much we can do. Of course this is a vulnerable population when it comes to things like colds and flu.

Sunday, October 18, 2009

Day 2

Fill the empty space
 Knots
 Clap exchange
 Glass bottle
 Finish groups of 4
 Blind busses
 Magnetic image
 American football
 Circle

So much happened today.

A female cast member didn't show up this morning. Today is her birthday and she, evidently, was out partying very late last night. We called and called and there was no answer. Adeline (Production Manager) checked in at one point today (Sunday) and I told her what was happening and she called and got through. This was about 12:30. The cast member said she had slept in and would come in this afternoon.

This is potentially serious. It is only the second day and it is highly likely that there was way too much drinking the previous night, perhaps other things – and reliability is a necessity in what we are doing. Holly (Support Person) and I had a couple of conversations about the situation (before we had made contact with the cast member) and agree there is an alarm bell

here. When she arrived, Holly had a lengthy conversation with her about how important it is to show up – especially for members of the cast. She apologized to everyone and has promised it won't happen again. I am now on alert, though.

The group had a really hard time with the clap exchange game. The difficulty of “listening” came up, as did the ability to be really present. There are so many layers to this. We are delving into the ramifications of homelessness – how trust of others and one's self gets stripped away.

We did the final Groups of 4 image: “Last Call” – a scene in a bar and a very long investigation about being needed, valued....being a “valued customer” – being valued somewhere, anywhere, even if it is a place that drains you of your money and feeds your addiction.



I talked with them a fair bit about depth before we launched into the Magnetic Image exercise and the results so far have been really good. I also limited the request this time to “after homelessness”, taking away the “during homelessness” option. Two Images:

Grieving: generated about an hour of animation and conversation about suicide; about suicide pacts among homeless people who get to the end of it all and decide to end it together. At least 80% of the room raised their hands when I asked about having contemplated suicide. Lots of tears. Many understood the journey of having been homeless, having found what was supposed to be safe housing and realizing it is more dangerous than the street, and this being so



demoralizing, disheartening, that suicide becomes a real option.

Resistance: involved a young guy in a room – a landlady entering and two Vancouver Police Officers entering. One of the really fascinating things here is that many of the participants can't imagine the police being anything but monsters. Their experiences have been so negative over so many years. The investigation led to a discussion about being tasered and how that happens to street people, and happens

very easily to people with mental health issues. About 70% of the people in the room know someone who has been tasered. One of the cast members has been tasered, as have numerous participants.

Monday, October 19, 2009

Day 3

Fear/protector
Boxing
Catch me
Magnetic Image animation
West side story
Cops in the head
Discussion
Circle

Remember I mentioned there was a lot of “sick” in the room? We lost another two today, both to the cold – one has actually been diagnosed with pneumonia. I am very concerned this is going to spread. Two of the cast members are now reporting “chills”. I’m bringing in some cold FX, hoping we can nip this in the bud, but it is likely too late.

There has been a fair bit of coming and going today. Of course people have lives and there is a lot of volatility attached to that. One participant had to go deal with some housing bureaucracy stuff at lunch today – and then returned at 4:30. Another forgot his medication at home and went and came back quite late. All of it valid, but it makes it hard for others to focus in the room when people are coming and going like this.



Having said that, we had another strong day. We did one more of the Magnetic Images, “Broken Peace”, which led to a long discussion about addiction and violence and a sense that people carry their positive expectations in front of them after homelessness and also their negative baggage behind them. Once they are alone in a room, that baggage comes out. There is an inevitability to it. It will have to be dealt with. During the animation one of the participants in the image also shared his rage with us – it was very intense for all of us (him, of course, included) and there was a way that the insight into the rage unified the four characters into one character – all of them being aspects of the same complex person.

The mental health issue was so evident in this animation (again – as it has been in most, if not all) This was a very natural lead-in to the Cops in the Head exercise in the afternoon.

The story: Man (M) is in secure housing – a place he likes, after years in the street. A new Woman (W) moves in to the development, someone who is paying market rent, while he is deeply subsidized. His friends continue to visit him – they have their shopping carts with them. He is not throwing parties or anything of that nature – is a soft-spoken, quiet tenant, who also lives in the world in which he lives. One day, someone delivers a pile of books to him. The next day the landlady brings him a letter of complaint from W. M sees W in the garden and goes to talk with her about the letter. She confronts him with statements like she doesn't want people “like him in her building”. In this moment there are all kinds of voices in his head:

1. Dad – who is saying to him, you should speak your mind to her but you won't....you are a fraud;
2. (also) Dad – who, with clenched fists is saying, punch her – hit her;
3. Jesus (there was a lot of discussion about what “Jesus” actually represented) who was saying – turn the other cheek...walk away...(and in improvisations later) come have a toke, a beer....

The entry into the exercise was a little rough – “cops” is often a difficult concept and in this instance, we are dealing with participants who have mental health issues. I wanted to do the exercise, though, because my instinct is that the internal voices figure prominently in the “after homelessness...” story. Once it became clear, though, that we were not talking about schizophrenia, but the voices from others that are naturally in all of our heads – many of the participants really launched into the exploration.

The impulse was to fight with the first Dad voice and this is just what he wanted. He is a ridiculing, demeaning voice – there had been a conversation about stigmatization during the set-up of the exercise – and when the idea was to really engage with him in an argument, there was little success. Then a woman yelled stop and confronted Dad with love. It was so disarming. This opened up a conversation about how we can sometimes transform the negative voices into allies – change our relationship to them.

The second Dad Cop's advice would have gotten M evicted – would have bought right in to W's perception of him. How to combat that? The intervention was very complex and it led to this Dad lunging forward and trying to protect M (his son) a huge shift in Dad. Why? Because it is what Dad really wants...but the only way he knows how to protect is with his fists. What does that mean to us in the “after homelessness” moment? When the language of the street is often violent, how do we learn a new vocabulary?

The “Jesus” Cop took us back into a conversation about addiction and tactics. One of the cast made a great observation that going for a drink or toke

AFTER dealing with W might in fact be fine. If it happens INSTEAD of dealing with W, then it has been running away.

Many of the group talked about how much they appreciated the exercise and how it was true that while it had come from one person, we did, in fact, own the story. I also think that a number of them were challenged by the afternoon – we are working very hard – harder than some of them imagined – although the final circle words of the participant who played the Jesus Cop are ringing in me as I type – “if this day three was the third day of my new full-time job, I’d be really happy”. One of the female participants, holding back tears, talked about how long it has been since she has been in a place where it is OK for a person to be just who they are.

I had a short chat with the cast before we left, a check-in....reminding them that a big transition is coming – when the workshop group will be gone and our task will be to honour the hard work that is happening in the room right now. Are they ready for that? Some are, I believe, and one appears to be mightily frightened, as he may be realizing that what we are doing (and the honesty of it) is very different than anything he may have done in the past.

Tuesday, October 20, 2009

Day 4

Leader of the Orchestra
Speed Gestures
Build Tableaux
Final Magnetic Image
Improvise with your Family
Circle

I’m soooooo sick. It started last night with a tight chest. Now a dry cough, chills, aches, sore eyes.... we also had a powerful day.

Two of the cast members couldn’t come today. One had a doctor’s appointment that (I think) was supposed to take the morning – but he was so sick yesterday that he might just be in bed.

Another’s little daughter is really ill and daycare fell apart. She hoped to be with us in the afternoon, but couldn’t.

My plan had originally been to make plays by the end of the day today – the plays that we would do Forum on during day 6. This morning I realized that this was both not necessary, and also unhelpful. We needed to spend another day exploring Images.

I used Speed Gestures to help them understand what it means to “accept” in an improvisation and then did some more straight Image work, but did not

photograph these. Then, although we were missing a participant who helped create the Image, we did the final Magnetic Image:

“Alone together” was a powerful improvisation that seemed to take place inside an SRO. A family is gathered around their mother, who has been homeless and she is dying. Dying of neglect, malnutrition, of being commodified, of loneliness (in a crowded room). Everyone has a desire to help. No one knows how.



During lunch I decided to do one more exercise and then get us out early today. Everyone is tired and I realized that all we needed to do today, in preparation for tomorrow, was know we could make plays. And so I did “Improvise with Your Family” – a fun, fast, quick and dirty way I have developed for groups to make wacky plays. Not plays for Forum – just character driven expressions of an idea.

As is often the case, the five plays that got made (in 15 minutes) were really rich. Many participants were, I think, surprised at what they could do.

One play took place in a drop-in centre. All the characters had some sort of mental health stress, some very extreme, others subterranean, and picked at each other mercilessly...were a (dysfunctional) community together.

Another involved a father and son (played by two women). There was so much history between them on the stage. The father, an alcoholic, is old and very ill and has hurt the son somehow. The son is all business – has achieved power of attorney and is taking over the father’s life. The father just wants his son to care for him – to get him a beer. There was a lot of language – so much talking....and an idea came – to take their language away and to limit them to these sentences:

Son: Power of Attorney” and “I’m glad you agree”
 Father “Son” and “get me a beer”

It was lovely what happened, as the actors calmed down into the nuances of these phrases – started to listen to each other – to play – to become authentic. All the original words were a mask. It was a good learning, I think, about the language of the theatre – which is not verbiage, but emotion.

The other three are fuzzy for me...brain not working. The texture of the work changed today. We are on the upswing, even though we are all tired.

Saturday, October 24, 2009

I haven't done any writing for a few days – been too sick and so much has happened. Going to try to reconstruct on a daily basis, although I am sure there will be gaps:

Day 5

The Plate
Diagrams
Song of the Mermaid
See plays
Rehearse
Circle

A cast member who has been in and out was not in again today. This means he won't be in the plays we make in the workshop and this is very worrisome as making and rehearsing them is a great preparation for the creation/rehearsal process later. We do think he is legitimately ill. Another workshop participant was away again today. He is having a tendency to roam in and out. He'll touch on very important issues and then leave for a bit and then come back. He is someone who has spent a great deal of his life in and out of prison. He's talked openly about how difficult it is for him to trust groups. Holly is in frequent conversation with him.

I made a point yesterday of telling everyone that (except for cast members), workshop participants were not obliged to go into plays as part of the workshop process – that if for any reason, someone could not commit to being with us for the rest of the two days, they should not put themselves in a play. Of course doing so, and then not showing up, would really compromise the group you were in. Everyone put themselves in a play.

And so, we made three groups using Boal's¹⁰ Song of the Mermaid and three rough plays got created.

#1 A group of five women. Susan¹¹ was homeless and now has housing. She has befriended Tracy and brought her over. A cast member lies on the floor, under the "sofa" throughout. Tracy wants to party with Susan and Susan is reluctant. A knock on the door. Susan's mother and social worker arrive together. Everyone starts to berate her about not being able to function, to pull her in various directions.

This piece was a kind of "Cops in the Head" moment and difficult to sort out. It was a partially realized idea, I think, from the cast – but they also had communication issues inside the cast.

¹⁰ Augusto Boal, founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed.

¹¹ All of the names have been changed in these Forum plays, to protect confidentiality.

I suggested that we turn the “dead body” into a living voice inside Susan’s head and they liked this idea.

#2 a group of 4 – three men and one woman. Oliver (O) has managed to get housing – a lovely place in a good building. He is cleaning and playing music. A knock on the door. It is Jane (J) – they are a couple – but they have agreed not to see each other anymore for at least 3 months. J is a junkie and O cannot be around her and that world and retain his housing. He doesn’t want to let her in but she convinces him, before he opens the door, that she is clean – she just really misses him – and then once she is inside, he is lost.

She gets his phone and calls her dealer, Sam (S) and his “sidekick”, Colin (C). O is frantic that these two will now know where he lives. They arrive and enter the apartment, get J her drugs, which she shoots up immediately. S and C try to get O to agree to use his nice, safe apartment as a storage place for merchandise. Of course he doesn’t want to do this – but his old life is invading this new place again.

As this conversation has been happening, J has slowly collapsed behind S on the sofa. They notice this and realize she has overdosed. S and C get out of there as O pleads with them to help him. Alone now, O wants to call an ambulance, but doesn’t, hoping that she will be OK and he won’t have to bring the police and medics to his new home, and risk losing it.

#3 Vivian (V) is living with Ted (T) in what is obviously a violent situation. They met in a shelter and managed to get housing together. Now, she cannot “afford” to leave – I write “afford” meaning that the devil ones knows is less frightening than the devil one does not know. As bad as the situation is, she has a roof over her head.

The play begins with her putting on make-up. Where are you going, asks T. I have a job interview, remember? I won’t be gone long. Well – when you finish, bring Ted some whiskey, says T. You know we don’t have money for that, she says – and T grabs her wrist. You know how to make money – he tells her.

The job interview quickly goes sour. There is a two year gap in her resume, from when she was homeless, that she doesn’t know how to explain. Her reluctance to answer questions about this makes the employer suspicious and this in turn creates other assumptions in his head. Her reference letter being from the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre also becomes a red flag. It is obvious she isn’t going to get the job.

She leaves there and is on the street, disheartened, and a car pulls up. A man believes she is hooking. She tells him he must be mistaking her for someone else but he insists...and tells her that he remembers her from before. This is a life she has left....he says he has money....and V needs money....so...once in the car she wants all the money upfront and he, having been ripped off before, will only give her half until they are finished. They argue, it gets

heated and she is about to bolt from the car when the Vancouver Police (two officers) arrive.

Officer #1 recognizes her from when she was on the street before. Officer #2 sends the man along his way. Officer #1 wonders why she is back and takes the money she is holding, leaving her with nothing. The officers exit. (This bit of the play is uncannily like a section of Practicing Democracy – an indicator, I guess, of how real it is.)

Disconsolate, V starts to go home. Her social worker has come up the street, though, and has been watching what has happened with the police. V is too embarrassed to tell the truth – too ashamed now to ask for help, even though the social worker keeps offering. And so – not being able to reach out through her shame, she goes home to T.

Mike (M) and T are finishing off a bottle when she enters. She doesn't want to have anything to do with either of them and says she is going to bed. T asks her if she has brought the whiskey and, of course, she hasn't. With the urging on of M (there is no help here), the beating starts, as T yells at her that he has told her over and over not to “fuck for free”.

In the final circle people were very pumped about having made plays.

Day 6

Rehearsal
Invited Forum
Final circle

The sick cast member is back. Another cast member, (she missed day two of the workshop and promised not to do that again) didn't return today. Dorothy Jenkins (Stage Manager) and Holly went to her place and there were people there – a party happening – but no one would open the door. She was in play #1, cast as the mother. Her absence threw the rest of the cast into turmoil, of course. Holly bravely tried to step into the part, but it was going to be too much work to rebuild, and the change threw other casts members so off balance emotionally that they had a hard time functioning. We tried various ways but in the end, I suggested they let go of the play and do Image Theatre instead. This was a good solution for some, but not for one, who was deeply disappointed in how things turned out.

This means that the absent cast member cannot remain part of the cast. We believe she already knows this, but Holly has taken on contacting her to make sure she understands and has the support she might need.

We had a two hour Forum Theatre event to finish the workshop. Some of the production team came, some staff and some friends of participants. I was very open about where we were in a process – the plays were extremely rough, were not product in any way whatsoever, and also were not meant to

be, in any way, the play we will be making for the main stage. This is the continuation of an investigative process and also a chance for people to start to understand and play with Forum Theatre.

Play #1 turned into Image Theatre, as explained. The image theatre was very lively, actually – and a reminder to me of how powerful it can be at a “public” event.

We could have done Forum on play #2 for the rest of the two hours. People experimenting with how to send J away, not let her in, and still be supportive – and still keep one’s housing safe. Once she is in, how do we deal with the dealers? Some of cast were very good in this.

After talking with the rest of the cast for their approval, I approached one of the female workshop participants to replace the female cast member who didn’t show up (again). I had to sort it out quickly (we start creation process on the 26th) and she will need to get time away from her part-time work. They have been very flexible about this – giving her time first to do the workshop and now to do the play. She confirmed yesterday (the 23rd).

Likewise, regarding Forum on the next, longer play – we could have gone for hours. A woman did an interesting intervention in the job interview in which she started fabricating a web of lies to fill in the holes. This was interesting (to me) because of the insight into how the situation of having been homeless creates the need to lie in the work culture – and of course, lies lead to lies.

We let the visitors go and had a group discussion for a while about the Forum, and then a final circle.

I also had quite a day with yet another cast member yesterday. It is a long story and, without going into too much detail – he had gone off a medication that he needs and says he is back on it now. The insight with him, and in the whole week, really, is the depth of the mental health issue inside the homelessness issue.

Personally, I’ve been feeling quite off-balance this last few days. There are a lot of good people and supports around, and at the same time, the land we are standing on keeps shifting under us. I have become aware that this state I am feeling might very well be the state of the issue; that where I am – this emotional/psychological place of confusion, imbalance, a certain amount of distrust, are all part of the issue we must investigate. It sits, just under the surface of every moment, but is also, in its own way, very hard to access. Why? Because of the stigmas attached, possibly. This will be part of the challenge of the creation process. To get at this aspect of the story.

The creation process

I think that before continuing it would really help any reader to either see the DVD of the play or read the script. What follows is a real journey, day to day, of our creation, rehearsal and performance process. As is the case in any creative process, discoveries that seem certain on any day may or may not

make it into the play. I have left all of this in the narrative that follows. My hope is that the reader can see the process evolving, ideas coming and going over time, as the final play emerges from the consciousness of the group.

October 26, 2009

One of the cast members arrived this morning in a borderline manic state and calmed down somewhat during the day but even calm, was quite volatile. Sometimes very insightful, but very hard to focus. I am trying to find a way to accommodate this volatility. The matter was complicated today (and set aside by me) by new news about the other cast member who we thought was now officially gone. Things may not, in fact, have been as we had believed them to be.

First however, the day's work:

Our first day after the workshop. All of us sorting out what the most important elements were that came up out of the week. I have been asking us to frame ideas in terms of things that need to happen in the play – things that are struggles *after homelessness*. Here they are in the order they came, which is no particular order of importance or story, over 7 hours of intense conversation:

- someone is homeless from the moment they are born;
- someone is stigmatized;
- there is no wind¹²;
- someone can't handle the bedbugs;
- someone needs to remain a "valued customer"¹³;
- someone is forced to become visible (accountable). Invisibility = safety¹⁴;
- someone falls back into homelessness;
- someone is trapped in shame, in a relationship, in an identity (in order to retain housing someone stays in an abusive relationship, and in order to avoid shame, refuses to ask for help;
- someone has to figure out the rules and how to play by them, when the rules and the actual workers keep changing¹⁵.
- "safe housing" does not equal safe housing. What appears safe externally is not, because of the voices within;
- someone cringes in a public/group bathroom¹⁶;

¹² After being outside for so long, the lack of weather inside makes it very difficult to live inside – the bush is better than a closed, shared bedroom.

¹³ Part of the homeless identity is being valued as that – a consumer of homelessness services. Once in housing, what is a person's new identity?

¹⁴ The homeless have an invisible quality. Getting housing means risking being a visible member of society again. For many this is a risky transition.

¹⁵ When homeless there are very few rules. In order to get and keep housing, there are so many rules. How does one learn them? Especially now, when individual workers are being eliminated and each time one goes for help, it is to a new person. There is no continuity of relationship in the system anymore.

¹⁶ All of the cast have dealt with this. What would they want most? A private bathroom – one that has a clean shower curtain, one that is not littered with used condoms and needles...one that is simply a place where others would not barge in. The bush, they say, is safer than the SRO bathroom.

- someone survives (or doesn't) under a tarp;
- someone is taken to the edge, who then explodes.

We had a long conversation about part of the set, off to the side, having a tarp, as people have erected on Hastings today to try to protect themselves from the rain. Many of the cast have been there, and all know people who died outside. This pertains to after homelessness if the character was in housing and left for various reasons above.

We (Holly, Dorothy and I) had a meeting with the “ex cast member” this afternoon, the cast member who didn't show up for the last day of the workshop. Before the meeting we talked with the whole cast about what they thought about the possibility of the cast member coming back. What we thought had happened isn't exactly what happened:

She says she was assaulted Wednesday night. I don't yet know the details of how this happened, but it is obvious it did happen – she can provide Doctor and ambulance records, and has a cut on the back of her head. Instead of calling us herself, she asked a friend to do so. He didn't until Saturday. When Dorothy and Holly went to her place and found the party, (they couldn't actually get in) the cast member evidently wasn't there – she was at a friend's, recovering, believing we'd been told what happened.

We all feel that what she brings to the project is of high value. We also agree this can't be the only reason she stays. We are convinced, though, that some of the events were outside her control and that her desire to be a part of it is legitimate. We are going to give it another try. I have made it clear to her that trust is going to have to be built among the cast members...and also with me. The cast is somewhat split about bringing her back. They know her and some of them do not think we are getting an accurate version of what happened. This last time also isn't the only time she vanished on us. All of us, including her, also all agree that this is the last time. And so this takes us back to a cast of six as originally budgeted.

The following are vague ideas only....food for thought:

The potential space is evolving in my head, of course, as we are working. The tarp to the side is a possibility. The main stage area might be common space in an SRO – a communal kitchen perhaps....with bedrooms off....

I am starting to wonder about a flexible dramatic structure in which characters can (sometimes) set up a scene – for instance, a scene with social workers, cast that scene from the actors – and now we are in that world – for this few minutes only. We couldn't do this too much, it would get confusing and repetitive, but it would give us flexibility.

October 27, 2009

We had a full and creative day today, with everyone there. To say this is a relief to all of us would be an understatement.

The cast member who has been borderline manic came in this morning much clearer than he has been and Holly thinks (and I agree) that the drug that he needs to be on may be kicking in. This has to be coupled with staying away from any alcohol, something that is a huge challenge for him. He knows, and has been straightforward with me about it, that it is the alcohol that sets off the manic response. The three of us had a conversation about how feasible this is. I have told him clearly that while I am naturally concerned about the project, I am also concerned about him. None of us want him to be doing something that is bad for him – regardless of how much he wants it. He says he has contacted other supports (a Sponsor) in Vancouver now and having put that in place and rehearsals actually starting, he will be able to stay centred. This mental health aspect is central to the issue of the play, as challenging as that is for all of us.

We started the day talking about an idea from yesterday – the statement “I have been homeless since the day I was born.” I did something unusual for me, and asked each of them to write a paragraph, that came from them – their own personal lives – that started either with that sentence, or “Homelessness was never supposed to happen to me”. Two of them did the former, four the latter.

Out of this, I am seeing a possibility for an opening – two very short, interwoven monologues, each in tight light. A light change would reveal the world of the play and the entrance of a third character, into the space that the two monologue speakers already inhabit together. What we would accomplish with this would be to have already “explained” the homeless issue as much as we need to and also say to the audience, this story includes each and every one of us in this room in a very short period of time. It would allow us to get to *after homelessness*, which is the territory of this play.

We added some things to our list of “what happens”:

- a warrant/breach happens

Something that should be inconsequential for a person in a ‘normal’ circumstance. They have a beer, they are late for curfew, they get a visit from someone (the “wrong” person) and this compromises the security of their housing.

- someone runs the Gauntlet

This came from a lovely Image a cast member made that others also related to very strongly. Every day, in the SRO, or on the street, or, everywhere, she

runs the Gauntlet of people who want things from her, have needs, demands, agendas. They are like vultures, especially on welfare day. Many of them are temptation that would jeopardize her housing, or where she has gotten to in trying to reacclimatize to Society.

This also led to an idea that the Gauntlet might manifest, in really subtle ways, at various times during the play. Maybe only once in “scene” form – although not even then as a real Gauntlet – but, maybe often when a character moves across the space – certain questions come... “you looking”? “got the money you owe me?” ... “want company”? etc....this could also come as taped sound.

- The carrot is compromised

People develop “carrots”. A son or daughter – a partner – a job – something outside of themselves that they can work for. Make themselves healthier for, because they can’t do it for themselves, they are just not important enough, not deserving, not worthy. If something happens to the carrot – a son is taken away, a job disappears etc., then all is lost.

We did a lot of character work today – spending most of the day completing one task. I asked each cast member to create an image of who they imagined they might be in this play, and to place the others in the image, as who they imagine the others might be in relation to them. This turned into a very rich exploration, as we created improvisations inside all of the images.

It started us playing together in a way that has to happen. It also gave us an insight into some possible characters:

Cloud¹⁷ and Otis knew each other in jail. Cloud has been out for a while and is trying to leave that life. He is trying to be “normal” – to acclimatize to having a job and a schedule and to find stable housing, now that he is out of the street. Having just come from jail, Otis’ solutions are crime-based. It is what he knows and he needs Cloud to agree – this is how one solves the problem of homelessness – how one does not end up back in the street. This creates a great character tension between the two. Cloud is not Katie’s son....but she relates to him like he is. She needs him to succeed. Why? Because her own success is tied up in being a role model for him. She can’t stay clean – can’t keep even the SRO housing she has, on her own – for herself. But she can do it to try to ‘save’ him. In the end, she is just another pressure for this young guy.

We know less about the other three at this point, but Nico thinks that her character already has one foot back in the street. She is trying to stay in this

¹⁷ Although at this point in the process we did not have “character names”, I am using them from now on so the cast members can have names. Character names were chosen by the actor playing the character.

building, but the pull back out is too strong. Still very vague – but the shadow of something is there.

And so we traveled a distance today, into a creative space.

October 28, 2009

A good and challenging day.

We did some work this morning on what happens in that moment when someone moves into the SRO. I had various cast members explore this.

Bob got in, checked the room for bugs – something that was a theme with everyone and then made a call to a friend. When it was time to hang up he was in tears; alone in a tiny room, scratching and wondering how he got there.

Cloud got in and immediately went to bed and started to scratch. But people kept interrupting him all night through until one of them, Otis, was someone he wanted to talk to.

Otis got in and got on the phone, trying to put together practicalities: to get a pillow, a broom, etc. At one point I took his phone away and he was momentarily lost. What now? This forced him to go do it, instead of tell us about it. This led to a very nice improvisation between him and another cast member (now a Ministry Worker) while he tries to navigate a \$25 Emergency Grant for these purchases. He has already had one, but instead of buying these sorts of things he spent the \$\$ on food. Because of this, the worker has to consult with a superior – and Otis has to come back later. He does – and gets the news they will give him the \$25 – only this time, and he is now over his limit for the year (Holly is going to check the legality of this out) and, to get the cheque – he has to come back again. When he comes back there is no cheque, it is a voucher for the Army and Navy where he has to go to buy these items. The process is so demeaning, degrading, and all for \$25. Why not just go steal/shoplift the items?

Nico got in, sat for a bit, and left immediately, not able to stay there. She went into the “lobby” and got one of the women to go get her some drugs; the first drugs she had done in 6 months. It was going to be her only way to sleep in a bug infested bed.

This led to me wondering where else Nico might have gone. The Tarp. And so we started exploring the Tarp. This seems to be Otis’ domain. (More about this later). We explored how it becomes “home”. And how people become territorial about this home. Not just anyone can enter, of course. This led to an improvisation between Bob and Otis. Bob is moving through the streets – looking for “Keith”. Keith has answers for him. He might have housing. He might have a job. Bob seems certain that Keith used to be living in this tarp. Otis insists that this was never the case and they spend time sounding each

other out. These two strangers who argue and also bond. Interestingly, when I asked the “audience” if anyone believed Keith was real, no one did. There was something about the scene, something about Bob’s state. We all knew that this character is searching the streets for someone who does not exist. This was a lovely gift to us today and also a moment of exposure for Bob – but not necessarily in a bad way. He and I talked about this later. He brings an expertise into the room that no one else possesses – and that is an expertise about mental illness. We have to embrace this, all of us, because only by embracing it can we work with it, and not against it.

After lunch I ran into a temporary brick wall. I thought it would be good to explore how it is that people are forced to become visible after homelessness – something important, I think, on the list. But we started spinning our wheels....at the Food bank....at a Doctor’s Office....and I realized we need to know more about who these people ARE. And so we went into Character Interviews. This is an exercise in which I follow my nose, asking the character questions that lead to other questions about themselves, their personal history, their relationships with others. The actor answers all questions from the perspective of a character we are discovering together.

Sarah¹⁸: Homeless from the day she was born. She has no family to speak of now. She has alienated herself from her friends and ex-partner. She wore out her welcome and ended up actually homeless physically, not just in her heart. She befriended Katie (a character in our play) months ago. Why? Because Katie wouldn’t rip her off. She doesn’t really like Katie – finds her kind of “yappy”.... She has a connection to Cloud (also in the play) – they met years ago at the Regent and played pool together. She’s good at pool. Cloud liked that and they hit it off. She trusts him. She is staying in the SRO and hopes to get out of there.

Cloud: Got out of jail recently. He seems to know everyone, and they all owe him favors. He makes certain of this. He spent years making money on the street, dealing. Always had new clothes, but never had a place. When I asked him what he wanted – his eyes welled up in tears and he said, “I want to stop being the bad guy”. Why? What happened? The death of his mother. It showed him his mortality and that what goes around comes around. He’s not religious, but has started believing in Karma. He’s started to try to live straight, but it is really hard. His only skill is dealing drugs. And he doesn’t like to beg. He met Katie through Sarah. Katie is a mother figure for him – after the death of his own. This is not, though, a healthy arrangement.

Otis: Is in his late 40’s and been in jail over 20 times, starting at 14. He has become something of a mentor for Cloud. Why? Because Otis is always cool headed. He doesn’t let things get to him, and he’ll help you out if he can. Otis won’t steal from ordinary people, but he has no respect for structures. This makes it really hard for him to play by the rules of Society. He’s decided he won’t go inside now. The Tarp, which is on Expo Boulevard, under the bridge,

¹⁸ Sarah later became Shawna, as we eventually had to let go of this cast member.

is his home. The security people around there think he's OK and don't bother him. He wants to get a small dog – a pit bull – to protect his stuff when he is away. I asked him if he thought that a puppy pit bull was going to protect him from the 2010 Olympics. I watched him “get it” and he said – no....I guess not. Soon, he is going to have to move on. Otis and Nico have a relationship. She almost fell into the Tarp one very stormy, terrible day, cold and wet. He likely saved her life. The Tarp is somewhere she can always go now and she does sometimes. They spend the night together, although they insist they aren't “seeing each other”.

When I asked Otis what it was he wanted, he said “to smile again”.

Katie: is staying in the SRO. She's been there for about 6 months and spends her days not doing much of anything, although she says her goal is to own a home again. She has a family but ran into a depression years ago and the depression led to prescription drugs and those led to other drugs and this led to other mental health chaos and eventually her family wasn't there anymore, although it really hurts her to think they abandoned her. She is a “helper”. She is trying to find family again, but as I chatted with her it started to become apparent that she “needs” so much from people that she makes real connections almost impossible. Of course she knows Cloud and Sarah.

Bob: He is living in a tiny, too expensive apartment in downtown Vancouver, hanging on by his fingernails. He worked for years in construction. Homelessness was at one time in his life, an impossibility. No more – not since he started having manic episodes. He is completely unprepared for what is coming and his mental health isn't going to help. He is on a search for his friend, Keith, who he believes can save him from the winter.

We will do the final interview, with Nico, tomorrow. There is already something about her character that has appeared through conversations in improvisations and also through the other interviews. I mentioned this and the cast liked the idea, as did she. She is someone who has one foot in the SRO and one in the street – the Tarp.

October 29, 2009

We started with the final character interview with Nico. She is in her mid-20's. A very bad experience with her parents from an early age led to being raised by her grandfather for whom she continues to have a great affection. She surrounded herself at an early age with other kids who were experimenting with drugs and transience. Many of them are dead now, some have straightened out their lives. In both cases she doesn't have contact with them. She is tired, though, and is making a concerted effort to get off the street and off heroin. The dream is to find what seems impossible – a place that is safe, bug free, drug free, drama free....for the shelter portion of welfare. She is in that cycle – you have to have an address and ID to get an address and ID. Her cynicism is high.

In the midst of this, though, there is Otis who she met a few years ago and who saved her life. (Just like her grandfather.) Otis is her grandparent, parent, boyfriend, friend. He is a stable place that exists for her and has been encouraging her to get off the street.

And then..... we dove in with both feet today. I had come in with a possible order of events, from the list we had:

Monologues

Someone arrives

There is no wind, but there are bugs

Someone is forced to become visible (and figure out how to play by the rules)

Someone is a valued customer

Someone is stigmatized

Someone falls

Someone is trapped in shame, a relationship, and Identity

A warrant or breach happens

The carrot is compromised

Someone survives (or doesn't) under the tarp

Someone is taken to the edge and explodes

None of this is written in stone – it is a place to start improvising from. We all have character names now:

Getting started, moving from *talking* about characters, *talking* about making scenes to *making* scenes is always hard, scary, somewhat paralyzing. I spun my wheels with them for an hour or so trying to find a way in, asking Katie and Sarah to invent their monologues at first. Of course they can't now, it's too big an ask just yet, but they can stumble through and maybe they can stumble through every day until sentences make sense. I can write these if I have to, from a compilation of what each cast member wrote, but would prefer not to.

Someone arrives (and leaves)....there is no wind, and there are bugs.

Nico starts with an echo of a conversation with her welfare worker – she is indignant. We hear her yelling at him as she comes down the aisle in the audience: All I want is a place with no bugs...no drugs...how am I supposed to get clean in a slum with a bunch of assholes? (His response to this, that we don't hear, is that she isn't paying \$1,200 a month for a luxury apartment somewhere and she has to be realistic and stop turning places down.) From the apron of the stage she turns back to him, defeated and says: OK. Fine. I'll take it. And she turns and enters our playing area to meet Sarah and Katie for the first time.

They are not friendly. They look at her and all three wait in silence, Nico hoping for some friendly word. Finally she asks them where room 22 is.

“around the corner?!?” Katie says as if Nico is an idiot. “that way”....and Nico goes to her room.

You didn’t have to treat her so mean, says Sarah and an exchange happens between the two women, who have known each other for some time. Why do you always have to be like that? Katie doesn’t like the criticism and exits, to her room, leaving Sarah at the table.

Very shortly after Nico comes back out, disgusted with what she has found in 22. She asks Sarah if all the rooms are that small and if they all smell so bad. Where’d they put you? In 22. Oh! ...they gave you 22!

Nico tries to find out what’s up and Sarah explains that the last tenant of 22 committed suicide there. Hung himself from the pipe. Oh. When? 3 days ago. Shit happens. Good luck in there.

Nico is really hit by this – there is no where else to go. Sarah sees this and could suggest Nico sit down, ask her about herself, reach out to her. She has her own problems, though, and opening up to people only ends up demanding things of you. She goes to her room, leaving Nico standing there.

As she has been leaving, Cloud has been emerging from his room. Checking out the hallway, he sees Nico – a new person. He floats down the hall, into her field of vision and looks her over. He asks her if “she is looking” (does she want to buy any drugs?) No. Nico has had enough for her first few minutes here and leaves the building, having decided to go see Otis. Cloud makes his way to Sarah’s room.

Bob seeks Keith (and Otis peeks out)

Bob appears upstage left and tries to clean up in a store window. During this scene he comes downstage, crosses over at the forestage to the Tarp area and upstage, back to the tarp area, and then back across and back where he came from. He seems nervous...talking to himself....we see and hear him (all outloud) do the following:

We wonders where Keith (a friend who owes him money) is and realizes he is being stood up. Keith’s gone drinking....where’s my money? Why won’t he give me my money? He checks his wallet – counts his money. It’s not enough – she’s going to kick me out...I need the money – he counts his money – where is Keith – why can’t I get my money – I’m going to end up down here....fuck, what am I saying, I *am* here....(he is crying) pull it together Bob....pull it together...it’s not enough money – Veronica... is Veronica here (he starts knocking on Otis’s tarp – but no one answers. I’ll leave a note – he opens his wallet – takes out a card leaves a note....starts to go....is suddenly afraid of leaving the note and sneaks back to secretly retrieve the note and runs away.

Otis peeks out from under the tarp. No one is there. Otis gets out and starts to tidy up.

Note to Design Team: Otis needs various things, among them: leaves, a broom, a shovel, a rope, a toaster, bread, a shopping cart, bottles, a sleeping bag....

Cloud is trapped in an identity

Cloud moves from Sarah's room to a table and waits. Sarah exits her room, having done a hit of the crack that Cloud supplies her with daily. Katie enters and knows immediately what is going on. Sarah doesn't want to be around Katie and gets a second hit from Cloud and goes to her room. Katie and Cloud have an exchange about how he is supposed to go clean if he won't stop dealing. This was a lovely scene they played in which we saw Cloud making money the only way he knows how to. This is who he sees himself as being, and he, in his own way, is taking care of the people he loves – including Katie. He offers to buy her lunch. With her drug money? No...he answers, with my earned money. But Katie won't have anything to do with this, and Cloud insists he has to go to work. He leaves the building.

Nico eats toast and spends the night

Nico exited up stage left and enters up stage right. She is on her way to see Otis. He is cleaning up leaves. They are happy to see each other; a warm hug. How's the new place? He asks....messed up....she says.

He invites her to wait inside while he finishes. She crawls in and sees his new acquisition – a toaster. You got a toaster??? She is laughing – yeah – I ran power from that building over there....he is very proud of himself.....Got any bread?....yeah – want some toast? They are going to have a party. Toast...peanut butter....

Nico asks if she can spend the night. But you just got a place, says Otis....she explains, briefly why she can't stay there....the suicide...bugs in the bed...the smell...the people....but Otis says no. He doesn't want her staying with him tonight – or any other night. This takes her completely by surprise but he won't say why – except to tell her that its time she started to be able to make it on her own.

(Otis had an encounter with the City Workers yesterday. They gave him prior warning that, although it is true he isn't hurting anyone, and he keeps the place clean...and he is actually good for security in the area....the tarp is going to have to come down. The Olympics are coming, after all. Otis has decided, though, that he is not going. He's been moved too many times. This is home. He doesn't want to fight with anyone, but he is not going. He knows this is going to lead to a confrontation with the police. He doesn't want Nico to be a part of this and he knows if he tells her....she will be there with him. His way to take care of her is this moment of tough love.)

Nico, of course, has no way to understand what is happening, and he sees her tough mask come off. This he cannot handle. He does love this girl and he can't hurt her....and so for now he relents. She can stay this night. This last time. They make more toast....he battens down the tarp hatches....and they settle in for a stormy, (but humanly warm) evening.

As rough as all of this is, it was a great way to start. It all came pouring out of the cast in the end – encouragement from me, questions from me, poking around...The cast were really excited at the end of this day. They can see now that their expertise, their knowledge of these issues, is the material we can work from. I can see, can hear them “getting it”.

Another thing about this – the understanding of the issues comes out of the small, human moments, not a didactic tirade. This is the power of the theatre.

October 30, 2009

A really crappy day.

Otis didn't show up today. We don't know where he is – have called many times – his phone isn't taking messages, called his place and left messages and now Holly left a note from me under his door. He had a friend die and the funeral was yesterday (which was also payday). Losing him today created a real mess. We haven't started calling hospitals or police – this seems really drastic, but it is very strange he hasn't called. I don't know what we are going to do if he is gone.

Sarah was also late today – it seems she slept in. Holly is going to be her live alarm bell from now on.

And so we really floundered around today. Partly without Otis but also because of somehow entering really UNcreative space. In retrospect it feels like it was generic space. And also – I was struggling today with various cast members to be specific (which was frustrating after the specificity of yesterday) and also to not always want to present themselves as the “nice ones”.

We did find a scene today:

Katie goes to the bottom of the list

Katie's meeting with her housing worker (HW):

| | |
|----|--|
| HW | Sit. What is your social insurance number? |
| K | x x x x x x x x x |
| HW | (types) Hmmm.... Last name? |
| K | Lawson |

HW spell that
 K (does)
 HW you aren't here. What did you come in for today?
 K what do you mean I'm not there?
 HW well – you aren't on the housing list
 K I have to be – I've been coming here for months – I'm supposed to be getting a better place any day now
 HW You aren't on the list. Have you been calling in?
 K yes.
 HW you sure? You must not have. You probably haven't been calling in.
 K I have!! I've been calling in every week
 HW well – if you were on the list, you've been bumped off – that probably happened because you didn't call in
 K that's bullshit – I've done everything I was supposed to
 HW I can put you back – at the bottom of the list
 K what the hell are you saying? This has taken months! I'm supposed to be-
 HW you'll have to fill out these forms (the puts down a HUGE pile of forms – inches thick)
 K I'm not filling out any more forms – just put me back on the list – please – I've done everything
 HW I can't do that. Fill out the forms again and
 K I'm not doing that! I'm not starting all over again!
 HW (standing) look, Miss Lawson – do you want me to help you or not?
 K your not helping me....
 HW I'm trying
 K you're just fucking me around
 HW do you want to fill out the forms? Do you want to fill out the forms? No? well, then – have a very good day. (she leaves)
 K (Is shattered. She stands and addresses the audience) Just when you start getting somewhere – you go back to the fucking bottom....what's the point of that?

It was very good to get this scene, which HAD to be in the play – it came up so often in the workshop – this very scenario.

We tried and tried and tried to do other work today. The impulse is to bring Bob into the world of the SRO – but how do we do that? For a while we thought, because he seems to really want to get stoned, that he'd buy drugs from Cloud on the street – but this was sooooo unsatisfying for so many reasons. It starts to feel like we are making a play about addiction. All Cloud ever does on stage is sell drugs. It becomes such a cliché and also....the characters are suddenly starting to do things dictated by the needs of the play – not the other way around. We got really stuck in this. For hours. And every time the door of the hall opened we hoped it was Otis. It never was. It seemed impossible to move on.

After a break I started to ask the characters, once again, what it is they want at this point in the play.

Sarah – I want better housing.

Katie – to get out of the SRO.

Cloud – to keep “working”.

Nico – to stay with Otis at the Tarp (not to go to the SRO – to have safe housing).

Bob – to be loved.

These are all really big answers. I started to understand that this is part of the problem we are facing. We don’t act because of these huge, amorphous desires. Our immediate desires are what create our actions. What does Bob want? We all want to be loved. He wants to pay his rent. He wants \$976.00.

OK – who has money? Cloud does. How much money? Cloud says – always close to a Grande (\$1,000). Really. Bob’s rent money. Bob is in a borderline manic state. Does he do something really stupid out of his desperation and fear – and try to rob Cloud when he meets him in the street?

We talked this through. In the previous scene, when we first meet Bob – he needs to decide that his medication is part of the problem he is having and throw his meds away, as often does happen in similar, real-life scenarios. This will help us understand what is happening with him.

Now, later, Bob is coming from the Railway Club (a local bar), having got kicked out for creating a disturbance. In his manic state, he has pocketed a butter knife, because he knows he is in dangerous territory. He is on his way back to where the tarp is – believing he is going to find an old friend. He runs into Cloud who asks him if he is looking for drugs. He goes after Cloud, wanting to know how much money he has on him. He pulls the butter knife on him. Bob is a joke for Cloud. A crazy White guy (Cloud’s words). He laughs at him – taunting him. This infuriates Bob who lunges at Cloud. Cloud so easily deals with this physically and now Bob is on the ground – still yelling. Cloud deals with him by stomping on one of his knees.¹⁹

All the yelling brings Nico and Otis out from the tarp. Otis and Cloud go way back. I am just realizing, as I type this, that this may be their reunion – each not knowing the other is here.

From this point, it is possible that Bob gets taken to the SRO by Nico – or abandoned behind a dumpster near the tarp – we don’t know. To be discovered.²⁰

¹⁹ This is a really good example of process. The butter knife was a very bad idea that seemed like a good idea at the time; one we had to work through on the journey to what this scene became.

²⁰ In the end, none of this Cloud, Bob, Nico, Otis scene made it into the play.

Katie – what do you want? Katie wants better housing....well – everyone does. What does she want, specifically, in this moment? After going to the bottom of the housing list, she wants is to get really stoned for the first time in many months...years? What’s the point of staying straight if you just get tripped up and go back to the bottom of the list? The place for her to get drugs is Cloud – but....(in a lovely turn of events) he will sell to almost anyone, but not her. She is his “street mother”. He is always taking care of her – giving her money – food....he won’t – can’t sell to her. This could create a lovely scene between them that also gives us an unseen side of Cloud and Katie’s relationship. It is an idea at the moment – at the end of the day.

What does Nico want? To stay in the Tarp? Sure....but if she can’t? Better housing – well, again....we all do. What would it take to get better housing? Concretely? If she committed to the SRO – she’d clean out her room, including getting rid of the mattress with all the bed-bugs in it. In order to even begin to do this, she’d have to drag that terrible, stained, bug-infested mattress into the hallway of the SRO. The only place she could rest it, on its way down to the dumpster in the lane, would be next to Sarah’s door. Sarah, flying on crack – would be more than infuriated by this. We verified that this kind of thing does happen in the SRO world. This simple act – hauling the mattress out – would open up the chaos inside the SRO – the volatility. We’d really be dealing with the bug issue in a concrete way – with the chaos issue – in a concrete way. We’d escalate the stories together to the next level – in a concrete way.

None of this was tried today – it all came in conversation in the last 30 minutes of a day full of silence and frustration. Hopefully, with a full cast, we will jump back in tomorrow.

October 31, 2009

Otis returned. His story from yesterday is horrendous and quite personal and has to do with his life outside the rehearsal hall. Anyway he is back. Holly and I spent time today processing with him. He does seem to understand that just vanishing, regardless of why, is not OK.

We tried to pick up where we left off and spent most of the morning reworking the scene when we first meet Bob. We incorporated him knocking on the tarp. This was very difficult work as Bob continues to come to work in very rough shape. This is a mix of lifestyle choice and medical issues.

Because it is so hard to focus, this took almost 2 hours to do. Everyone in the room was really frustrated. Tension is building around this issue. My challenge is to get us (actor and director) to be able to focus on simple moments without the constant movement into extraneous areas. How does one direct inside the mental health issue? I am starting to insist that he and I set things very early – clamp them down – so we have a chance of the scene being at least somewhat the same twice in a row. It is painstaking.

And so now, when Bob is looking for Keith and his rent \$\$ he awakens Otis. Otis plays this very well – the protection of his tarp and the instant shift into “friendliness” when Bob pulls out a cigarette. What we get from this scene that is new is that Bob’s pills have value on the street. He can sell them and get some of the money he needs for rent. We have to be careful here not to have people think he is a pill junkie. It must be clear that Bob is tipping into manic-ness, under the pressure of not being able to pay his rent.

We also found a scene, after where we left off – after Katie goes to the bottom of the list. Bob has spent the last few hours at the Railway Club. He gets expelled from there and it is getting later now – about 8PM. He can’t go home – the landlord, Sylvia is waiting there. He is sitting on the sidewalk, exhausted and spinning, outside our SRO. Cloud comes home – also having had a bad day. Bob sees Cloud’s shoes.

We play a scene – it works when it is filled with silence – that goes something like:

B nice shoes
 C thanks, bro
 B you live here?
 C you live there?
 B yeah. Maybe.
 C getting cold. Going to snow tonight, maybe.
 B that a hotel?
 C not really. By the month. You need a place to crash?

....Cloud isn’t a bad guy. This is a lovely thing – although it is also filled with threat – he can’t help it....and Bob enters the SRO with Cloud. Bob has a bottle of Jameson’s Irish Whiskey. Cloud awakens Sarah. A scene here in which we see that Bob sees himself as being above these people...but has no where to go. He ends up sleeping on the floor of the lounge area, under a table. Lights out.

Lights up. In the morning Bob realizes all his stuff is gone. Sarah has taken it all after he passed out. All his money, wallet, back pack, phone – everything. Not only does he not have rent money now...but everything is gone. He starts to wake people up. Everyone eventually comes out of their rooms and it gets violent. Cloud and Katie end up throwing him out onto the street. And now he has nothing.

We are in a place that I recognize inside this process. We are making a story with the “real actors” of the story. The incidents that come from them are, while not their own story, close to home – they are also, at the moment, really tentative. The tentative nature of them happens because of fear of exposure. The first layer that comes is often not very deep. This is simply where we are and will remain for a few days yet, as we struggle to find the rest of the story.

What happens to Bob after he leaves? Nico is about to emerge from Otis' tarp and return to the SRO – she needs to clean her room there, if she is going to commit to living there. This is going to create another kind of chaos. Everything in the world of the play is starting to vibrate.

I've realized overnight, also, that there is specific refocusing to do into *after* homelessness. For instance:

As the women do their monologues and we discover the play, the speeches are starting to become apparent to me. In Sarah's, she needs to tell us how every day she tries to get off crack. Now that she is off the street, this is the next thing, so she can find safer housing again. So when we see her using we see it from a different perspective. I think there might be a Cops in the Head scene with Sarah – one that investigates the voices in her head that come from being homeless, that keep her using.

In Katie's – who was never going to be homeless – I think it is something about how she isn't 'these people' and she doesn't belong here. That she is leaving the hellhole of the SRO any day now.

When Katie enters the scene with Cloud and Sarah, when Sarah is so stoned – we need to refocus that scene to Katie going after Sarah for smoking again. How is she ever going to get out of here if she can't get off the crack? And this includes Cloud selling. Sarah can run away from this conversation to her room, as she already does. This leaves Katie and Cloud in a conversation in which Cloud needs to articulate what he did in his character interview – that he doesn't want to be the bad guy anymore – he just can't see a way out. He wants to normalize but what else is he supposed to do for money? He doesn't believe he has any other skill set. This lets Katie ask him to come to the housing meeting with her – legitimately – and leaves Cloud squirming because he won't.

What I am trying to open up here is access to the character's struggles to break old patterns now that they are in housing – and form new ones. It isn't a play about drugs, it is a play about breaking an addiction to a way of living that leads back out into the street.

When Bob meets Otis, and they share a smoke, and Bob asks about the tarp – recognizing it is Otis' "home", Otis needs to open up a bit about how he went into housing – tried that – been there/done that....and left for the street again. This can lead into Bob being able to sell his pills – Otis is sharing his survival expertise here. I think he also has to tell Bob that he knows he is going to be moved out of the tarp – any day now. This will help us understand why he is telling Nico she can't stay, and open up his inability to ask her or anyone else for help.

A discussion with the set and lighting designers: It is becoming more apparent to me that we are not using the stage space as much as I thought. It would be great to open up the possibility of, instead of "doors" really far

upstage – we take up say...5 feet upstage of the 16 in depth and create the “rooms” inside the doors. These tiny spaces where Cloud, Katie, Sarah and Nico exist. It’d be great to see them sitting there...lying there....could we fit single cots in those spaces? Or a single cot in some – a chair in others? We don’t have to be able to see everything inside them all, but a theatrical sense of seeing inside them. If we can create them, lighting them from inside would be very nice. The ability for the actors to turn lights on and off in there....

November 2, 2009

Thoughts from sleep:

After Bob gets kicked out of the bar and he and Cloud meet and we take him into the SRO: While Bob is there, Nico hauls the mattress out, because she is going to sleep in her room tonight and won’t put her new sheets on this bug-infested mattress. This creates some chaos with Sarah etc. This would bring everyone into the “party” with Bob – a moment of camaraderie. A possible moment with Katie in which we see her give up – and know she is never leaving the SRO, embraced by this group.

Bob has the buggy mattress to sleep on. His choice in the end – the filthy floor – or the buggy mattress.

In the middle of the night – we explore some of the Cops in Sarah’s head.

In the morning we kick Bob out, stripped of everything – and we don’t see him again. We can ask the audience in the Forum what they think happens to him.

Otis emerges from the tarp. He addresses the audience saying he knew this day would come and why he believes he has a right to this home – as two of the cast get into either 2 police or 1 police and 1 city worker costumes. We tear the tarp down – and Otis resists – gets pushed to the edge.

Then...Lights up on the SRO. What does Nico do if she learns that Otis has either died or gone back to prison? A short possible scene here where Cloud realizes Nico knows Otis....they are old friends – met in jail. This will have great meaning to Cloud. He’ll take Nico under his wing in Otis’ absence. Nico falls right back into the life she has been trying to escape. She’d go back on heroin, she’d start selling for Cloud...we don’t have to get so far into this, the final scene might be opening this possibility the pull from the other side being Katie.

November 3, 2009

Everyone showed up for rehearsal today. I read my thoughts from the weekend to the cast and there was general agreement that this filled in holes, and also was a logical and realistic place for the play to end up. I had shared

these thoughts about Otis with Judy Rogers (the City of Vancouver homelessness advocate) and she wrote back a wonderful email:

What you have written here is pretty much what will happen. The scene as you set it in your first paragraph rings true to me. If I received that paragraph as an e-mail from an outreach worker, it would make complete sense to me. The second paragraph rings true too. With a guy like Otis - it will likely involve multiple taserings - he is a super survivor, may be using crack or meth to manage hunger, boredom and legitimate fear.

The events, step by step, would be something like this:

Otis would be seen by police or a VANOC contractor or Engineering or somebody. They would tell me they were "concerned" about him. I'd look for what they were really telling me - when are they going to force him out? I'd go to visit Otis. Let him know what and who were coming. Go over some of what his rights are living rough. See if he had interest in living indoors, or if we could help him find a safer place outside, where they wouldn't be trying to move him away. If Otis wanted to move - indoors or out - I'd do what we could to make that possible. If he wanted to stay, I'd clearly understand, we'd make sure he had my card in his pocket and I'd likely refer him to Laura Track at Pivot so he could know for sure what his rights were, and make a plan. Eventually police and Engineering would come, Engineering would remove his tarp and possessions, while police stood by to "keep the peace." This is when the altercation and tasing would happen.

This email from Judy (although terrible in reality) is very validating for the direction the play is going.

And so we got down to work. We ran what we have and a lot of it was retained. The shape is there, and we have a great deal of work to do finding the human complexity.

We created the scene where Nico goes to the welfare office for emergency money. Cloud ends up becoming the Welfare Officer – and does a great job of it. This scene is a “bubble” created in the same way we create the scene where Katie goes to the housing office – a light and sound change, a couple of lines directly to the audience. Nico is made to beg for \$40 in emergency money. She is grilled and told she has to sign up for a special program. It is really demeaning and real. A light and sound change – a reverse costume change for Cloud, and we are out of the scene.

In watching/thinking about these 2 scenes today (the housing and welfare offices), I am realizing it'd be great to find a stylized way to do them – break the realism of the play. I am not certain right now what that is.

Then we brought Bob into the SRO again, this time incorporating the addition of a sofa in that space. We were really getting trapped at the table. In reality, there would not be a sofa there. Why? Too dangerous. It would be full of rigs (used needles) – but instead of denying ourselves the sofa, which really opens up the space and blocking, we are going to use this problem and

have a sofa that may be full of rigs. It is this kind of detail that is starting to emerge.

And so Bob and Cloud chat a bit upon his entry – Bob offers Cloud the whiskey but Cloud doesn't drink. It makes you slip, he tells Bob. Cloud goes to get Sarah. She has been pacing in her room. (Pacing, evidently, happens a lot in these small rooms. There is nothing else to do. Pacing in an SRO...pacing in a prison cell.) Sarah needs a crack fix, but she has no money. She's really happy to see Cloud and asks him to front her (meaning she'll pay him later). Cloud never does this and he berates her for not getting out and working to earn enough money to buy her drugs. She is a cash cow for him. Being nice, he takes her to Bob, who she immediately recognizes as a "mark". He must have money, and she knows how to get it from him. He offers her the bottle and she takes it, immediately owning it.

She moves across to the table and Bob follows her, as does Cloud, and they settle in for some serious drinking, when Nico bursts out of her room, swearing up a storm, and dragging a terrible, old, stained, bug infested mattress with her. She has decided to stay and is cleaning up. She hurls the mattress into the hallway, up against Sarah's door. Sarah goes ballistic. The noise brings Katie out of her room. The two women go after Nico, a big argument that almost breaks into violence, and Nico, leaving the mattress in the hall, slams her door shut. The two women get the mattress, break her door down, and throw the mattress back in her room, telling her to stay in there or they will kill her.

Having found this scene, the woman playing Sarah started laughing and said that she actually did this....the mattress incident....it is really real.

Katie notices Bob and decides to stick around. We focus back into the whiskey. Bob likes the look of Katie. He offers her some and Cloud says, on her behalf, she doesn't drink. (Katie has been sober for almost 6 months – the same amount of time she has been waiting to get to the top of the housing list). She really wants a drink, though and, obviously in an internal struggle....tells Bob to give her the bottle. Cloud is upset by this – he looks to her as an example – but she takes a strip off him...after 6 months of trying she is back at the bottom – she's never going to get out of this slum...who is he to judge her....just a drug dealer....and she breaks her sobriety.

Bob tries to buy his way into a room, but neither of the women will let him in for the \$20 he is offering. He is told he can either spend the night on the floor or the sofa. He drains the whiskey bottle as the lights go out.

We stopped here today, because we had a photo shoot at David Cooper's, which went quite well. Tomorrow, we dig in and need to spend the next 2 days at the very most, finishing finding the structure. We took a good step today, in the kind of detail and tension we found in this last scene.

I did a lot of talking today about needing to see the dysfunction of the SRO and the residents. We need to break through the desire many of the cast have to be seen to be nice...the characters are making bad choices. If we don't do this, the audience will have nothing to work on in the Forum.

At the end of rehearsal, Cloud was beaming – and said, ‘right....all the characters get pushed to the edge....they all arrive there at the same time.’ Yes...exactly. Cool, he said....and I know he gets it.

November 4, 2009

We did some good work today, and then ended in a scary place.

We spent the morning understanding how to throw Bob out of the SRO. It now involves all of the inhabitants and shows us some of Cloud's complexity – his desire to help kindred and also his violent side – even directed at the same person, flipping from one moment to the next. This scene will play in it's physicality.

We then spent a really hard afternoon finding the scene in which we taser Otis. To prepare for the scene I did some “memory” work, a scene between the City Worker (Sundown) and Otis in which the Worker gives Otis a cracked shovel. Who is the Worker? Frankie. A Prairie Boy. He grew up in the country – he is not an urban animal like Cloud. He has a big heart and as a child, knew this old man who lived in a trailer. The old guy had his roof torn off in a storm and Frankie and the old man bonded fixing the trailer up again. There is a relationship between Frankie and Otis that echoes this childhood relationship.

Frankie had to go tell Otis that his days in the tarp were numbered. Had to deliver official notice to him. So Otis knows – from the very beginning of the play – before the start of the play – that the tarp is coming down. So....when Frankie arrives with the police, he is not surprised.

Frankie apologizes for what he has to do, and asks Otis to co-operate. Of course Otis has decided that he is not moving. And he hates Cops. The Police, though, would be there to “keep the peace” and protect the City worker. Otis tells Frankie he isn't going anywhere – this is his home, and he's sick and tired of being moved around....he isn't bothering anyone. Frankie knows this is true, but tells Otis again that he has to do his job here today and the tarp is coming down. As the scene escalates, the Police Officer (PO) notices the shovel Frankie gave Otis, and seeing it as a possible weapon, moves it away. Otis yells at him to bring back the shovel – and also reminds Frankie that he gave him the shovel and that this is his home. PO tells Otis this can't be his home, it is public property and he needs to comply.

Frankie asks Otis to calm down and tells him that he is going to remove the tarp now. Stay calm, please – don't get yourself hurt here today, Otis.

Frankie starts to remove the tarp. Otis lunges for it and drags it back over the frame, yelling. PO grabs Otis by the wrist. Otis throws the Officer off his arm in a large movement and keeps yelling. The taser comes out. PO is now yelling at Otis to back away from the tarp and put his hands where he can see them. Otis, knowing what he is doing, lunges at the tarp, and the PO tases Otis. He goes down, body rigid. When the power is turned off, Otis is in a lot of pain, yelling at them....and starts to get up again – and is tasered again. Otis goes down, body rigid....when the power is turned off PO tries to turn him onto his belly to handcuff him and he fights back. Frankie is yelling for them to stop....but Otis is tasered a third time, handcuffed, and dragged away.

If this sounds extreme, it isn't. We agree that Otis would not give up, having decided that this is his home. Once he has lunged at the Officer, he would be considered a threat. And the assault has its own momentum.

And so (offstage) Otis is taken to a hospital. His heart doesn't handle this, though, and Otis dies in the hospital. (We don't see this).

Twenty four hours later, Nico wanders out of her bedroom, having gone looking for Otis and having found the tarp gone she went asking in the street and of course news of what happened spread quickly. So she knows that Otis died and how. And now she knows why he wouldn't let her stay with him the day before.

Cloud wanders into the common room. Nico is now a resident and he greets her and sees she is really troubled. She tells him that her friend was just killed by the police and, as they chat, Cloud realizes her friend is Otis. Cloud and Otis did time together in jail. This is also Cloud's loss, Otis was a protector for Cloud. This makes Nico family. Out of respect for Otis, Cloud will take care of her. From Nico's perspective, Otis abandoned her in this hell hole SRO.

We played around with Nico wanting Cloud to give her heroin...she has been trying to get clean....but this takes us further down an addiction path when this play really needs to be about housing and "after homelessness".

What seems to make more sense right now is that Nico decides that if she stays in the SRO she'll hang herself in her room, just like the tenant before her. Right – I just saw the scene we couldn't find today.

After realizing the Otis link, and Cloud promising to take care of her, Nico explains that Otis was a bastard for abandoning her in this rat hole. She knows he'd want her to stay here and get off the street, but screw him – if she honors what he wants, she's going to end up dead. It is safer for her in the street. I can hear Cloud, as she goes to get her stuff in her room..."Don't do that girl, its harsh out there....Otis would want me to look after you..." – but she'd refuse, Otis having taken "home" away...and head back out into homelessness. Cloud would watch her go.

We did a “run” of everything we have at the end of the day. Of course it would be rough. At this stage of the process, though, it was really, really rough. We’ve worked the final scenes in a more detailed way than anything in the first 70% of the story. And so the earlier scenes are really skeletal and deteriorate really easily into “yes – no – yes – no” arguments between characters (actors) floundering in something that they don’t know. Somehow, I thought we had more than we have at the moment and so the “run” was a real “downer”.

We are at this turning point. Some of the cast are relying on me to give them anything they should say and of course, I can’t do that. More than that – because of the thin-ness of the early scenes, there is very little for them to commit to emotionally at this point. And so scenes that seemed like good ideas days ago are “air” right now. We have to go back and give the first 70% the relevance and immediacy that the last 30% has.

Some of this is action-based. It all goes so much better when they have things to DO. Something came up, for instance, with the sofa. It is full of used rigs – that’s why no one sits on it. Does anyone bother to try to keep it clean? Katie does. It turns out that the woman playing Katie did exactly this in a place she lived in...and so Katie is always picking used rigs out of the sofa. This gives her something to DO at some points in the play.

Conversation with the designers: this means we need rigs. Minus the needles, of course – that would be too dangerous. And we need one of those boxes to put used rigs in. You see them in public bathrooms.

This play is going to need that kind of detail. Same with the tarp. Otis has prepared a list of things he needs – Dorothy (Stage Manager) has it. The more we can give him, the more the tarp becomes a real home for him, the more “Otis” will be able to commit. There is, suddenly, a living environment to create.

November 5, 2009

We started very detailed work from the beginning of the play this morning; working, literally, second by second – beat by beat. The task now is for every moment to have the integrity of being rooted in a character history. This will be essential for the interactive Forum, and also is what makes it possible for the actors to remember what happens next. I say “x” now, not because it is my next line, but because it is what I am compelled to say in this moment. This is why I am insisting the cast not start making lists of what they say – something a couple of them really want to do (and it turns out have been doing secretly – I put a stop to this). I think we got to a place in rehearsal today where they understood, from the inside, the difference of how it feels for the line to be sourced from an internal emotional reality – and not an external intellectual reality.

And so we worked the opening sequence:

We have the two monologues (not worked yet) and then (sound of shopping carts) Otis arrives at the tarp, coming from the bottle depot, and finds a notice from the City that he has to vacate. He crumples it up and says he isn't going anywhere, and gets inside.

Table light up in the SRO – Katie is at the table, looking at rental listings in the paper. Too expensive...not in this neighbourhood...Sarah comes out of her room and looks over her shoulder and asks why she bothers – she can't afford anything anyway. Katie says at least she is trying – she is determined not to stay here. How long you going to be using the paper? Asks Sarah. As long as it takes....you kept me up all night last night again – fuck that, says Sarah and grabs the paper out from under Katie, opens it and starts to read. Katie is intimidated by Sarah and while she calls her a bitch...sits there, stewing.

Nico enters down the audience stairs. We delineated 3 separate moments:

Another place on Abbot?? Yeah - I know I've turned 2 places down, but the first was full of bugs and the second there was a rig under my bed!

How do you expect me to get clean if I'm surrounded by drugs and drug dealers?

She now has some keys....a long breath....Fine. If you need me to take it – I'll take it. And she reluctantly enters the SRO.

Then we did a run for the Design Team and some Headlines' Staff. I spent some time preparing everyone for how rough it was going to be – the cast were really nervous about showing anything. But, (damn them – and I mean this in the nicest of ways) they really shone with some “strangers” in the room. The difference between yesterday and today was really night and day. Don't get me wrong, we still have heaps of work to do, but there was an actual story and scenes there.

Dorothy and I were both amazed. Are they already bored doing it just for us?

We had a very productive production meeting – wonderful to know that these other very talented people are off creating the physical world, light, sound...and then a bad thing. Otis didn't come back (yet again) after lunch. There is a real pattern here – every pay day. No phone call. We called numerous times. Nothing. And so...I do imagine he will be here tomorrow, and something dramatic will have happened. I am going to have to don my employer hat. Truly a drag.

The detailed work continued after lunch through the scene between the three women, Katie escapes to her room, Nico returns to ask about blankets and learns that someone (a friend of Sarah's) hung himself in her room 3 days

ago. A new texture is how much this upsets Sarah – and she obviously has no one – and she escapes to her room and her window.

Cloud has listened to part of this conversation and introduces himself to Nico – sees if she might be a new customer. She wants to be...but resists. And we have our first “bubble scene”. A light shift, Nico explains to the audience that in order to get blankets she had to go to the welfare office for emergency money – Cloud transitions into the actor Sundown and then into the Welfare Worker. He is doing this very nicely – a different (more straight) persona. I did an exercise with them – simple – he had to do it double time. The speeding up really helped him in this scene – find a larger style. Candelario is going to put together a collage of bureaucracy sound, which will also help.

We didn't work the Bob scene as Otis wasn't there, but Bob and I agreed that two invisible characters are enough – we cut the third. And so he calls Sylvia, his landlord and begs her for more time and not to call the bailiff. Then he tries Keith, who owes him money and can't get to him. The yelling he does into his phone over Keith will bring Otis out of the tarp. It is, we agree, completely unrealistic for Bob to start knocking on the tarp.

Then we went back into the SRO. Cloud is fronting Sarah some crack and Katie sees it. Katie takes a strip off of Sarah for being a Junkie and pulling Cloud down. Sarah flees (she does a lot of this) and Katie takes a deep breath (my instruction – so she won't yell at/lecture Cloud)...and loves her “street son” instead. Bringing this scene down, making it so much more human, changes it completely. It is really embarrassing for Cloud. We see right through him here (Sundown is actually a lovely actor – he has an ability to let the vulnerability come through Cloud's really tough exterior.) He's been promising her he will stop selling, but doesn't know how. Why does she need him to? Because she can't get out of this mess alone. She isn't strong enough and she knows it. If Cloud can't change, she doesn't believe that she can, and if she can't, she is trapped in this hell hole.

November 6, 2009

Hello from the roller coaster.

Otis didn't show up today. He isn't at his place, and he isn't answering the phone. He does, though, answer the phone all the time when it rings in rehearsal. We don't know what has happened. This is the third time. Each time he promises it won't happen again. There is always a “good reason”. This behaviour is, of course, unworkable. Last time I told him that if it happened again, he was out. Holly has offered to deliver a letter of dismissal from me, explaining the situation, to him – although the best we can ever do is leave a note for him at the desk of the hotel he stays at. This is, of course, really sad. It must happen, though, both for the overall project and because it is unfair to the rest of the cast. How do we create safe space in which to work when some of the cast don't show up? This is one of those moments when something

is clear. We are not doing this project as therapy for the cast. We are paying them above union wages and they have to show up for work.

We talked it over today and Martin²¹ (a workshop participant who is currently choosing to live in a tent for very similar reasons to Otis) could take over. I spoke to him on the phone after the Advocacy office located him very quickly, and he is starting on the morning of the 6th. I discussed the role with him, the challenges of it, and the ultimate demise of his character. He was very enthusiastic and confident in his commitment. In fact, he shared that he was hoping for such an opportunity. The Portland will provide accommodation.

Sarah²² also called in sick this morning. Also the day after getting paid. This is also a pattern. It is also the third time, and after the last time we had a company meeting in which she promised everyone it wouldn't happen again. She promised to get in to rehearsal after lunch.

With the two of them not here, it was impossible to work, so I released the cast until after lunch, when Barbara Clayden was coming in to do costume conversations and we did that with Cloud, Nico, Bob and Katie. Sarah didn't show up.

I called her cell and talked with her partner, who explained that they both had the flu – the girlfriend had been so sick yesterday, that she couldn't make it to work. She fears she has given Sarah her flu...Sarah took a night time flu remedy this morning and is conked out....The problem is, the girlfriend came here yesterday to get Sarah and was fine – dancing around, in fact. Holly and some others in the cast dropped them off at a sky train station after work. No one was sick. This was all a story. It was pay day. I told the girlfriend to wake Sarah up and get her to call and talk with Barbara, at least. The phone never rang.

Speaking personally, I am really heart-broken over this. I really like Sarah and have been cutting her a lot of slack. This is the third time (fourth if we count during the workshop) she has done this, and each time she has promised it will never happen again.

Holly is on her way to see Sarah, but in the meantime, I am investigating replacing her, as well. There is no one from the workshop who could do the part. What a day, after a really good day yesterday.

Holly did come in and had talked to Sarah on the phone, she was very apologetic and said she would be in tomorrow morning. The cast, though, have expressed that they can no longer trust she is going to show up, and Dorothy and I both agree. Holly and I both also agree that it is terrible – it is clear that she really does want to do the project – she just doesn't know how

²¹ This is not his real name.

²² I am continuing to use character names here for reasons of confidentiality.

to. I have to get really practical, though. We started to try to call her back 10 minutes after Holly talked with her and she had once again stopped answering her phone.

Melanie, in Headlines' Office, suggested Sandra Pronteau. Sandra was in *Practicing Democracy*, a Headlines' Forum Theatre production a few years ago. She has been our Downtown Eastside Liaison on this project. She knows some of the cast. Sandra has lived the life and also has done Forum Theatre. I called and talked with her and she is available and interested. We talked over the character. She understands all too well. I have offered her the position and she has accepted.

I finally got Sarah on the phone, after many attempts, late tonight. We talked for quite a while. It took some time, I think, for what I was saying to sink in. She bargained, of course. Finally, I told her that talking with her I can hear that she doesn't have the flu (no sneezing, coughing), and that I have known she wasn't being honest with me for some time – but today, and after three warnings, it became impossible to continue. To her credit, at this point, she started talking about what has actually been happening. 'She hates money. She has never stopped using hard drugs. She knows where I am coming from she had the possibility to do this great thing and she fucked it up' – her words.

I stayed on the phone with her for some time, and have let Holly (support person) know, and told Sarah I would call Holly and when Holly called her – she should answer the phone.

As this was happening, Otis²³ called Holly. Of course there is a long story but the fact remains he didn't get in touch with us for a day and a half. I am not hard to find – neither is Headlines' answering machine. Holly told Otis to call me – he hasn't. I called the number he called her from. It is the hotel and he isn't there. We imagine he will show up at the rehearsal hall in the morning and we will have to deal with his dismissal then.

I keep thinking it is possible to stop writing but I hit "save" and the phone rings. Otis called. It could be that the drama unfolding in his life is true. When I said to him, though, that the pattern is that he gets paid and then vanishes, he did stop, think, and say – yeah – I can see how it looks like that. I explained that it was not OK, under any circumstances, to vanish for a day and a half, without even a phone call. I explained about Sarah and having to replace her today. And in doing so, I also heard him start to understand how serious it is. 'Right...he said....you are going to have to do what you are going to have to do.' And I explained that I had to replace him today, because, regardless of the reasons, he keeps disappearing without any word, and we (all of us in the rehearsal hall) can't handle that anymore.

²³ Still character name.

He said he understood, and that he'd be there in the morning to pay me back the advance I loaned him last week when the other disaster happened, and to get some things he left at the hall. Again – very sad this, but in fairness to the others we have got to stabilize the process. Showing up is a clear and written part of the contract we signed with everyone.

And so we've lost a day and a half, and working two new people in is going to eat up at least two days. It will be essential to really dig in and work as efficiently as possible.

I am hoping we can get back to where we stopped – have our structure back – in two days. This demands of the two new cast members that they absorb a great deal in that time. I don't think we can get back into "rehearsal" though, until they understand the scenes. Fortunately, both of them have lived the characters that have been created, so...with some luck this will move quickly.

This will leave us 4 rehearsal days until we must be in runs of the play.

November 7, 2009

We made headway today, although we didn't get as far as I'd hoped. We got to the end of Katie at the BC Housing office, which leaves 2 big scenes I wanted to do today that we didn't touch.

Otis was going to come for his briefcase and glasses and to pay me the money he owes me (and, it turns out, two other cast members as well). He never appeared.

We started at the beginning. The monologues might work. Sandra (the new Sarah – I will know tomorrow what her character name will be) will have to learn the words from the page in this case and we will work to make them her own.

Martin brings us a much gentler Otis. This has its plusses and minuses, to be honest. He has chosen to keep the character name. It is hard for him to get aggressive, and he must if we are going to taser him. His gentle nature, though, does a very nice thing the first time he meets Bob.

"Morning" and "Nico arrives" are pretty much as we created them. The textures are different, but the same scenes. No changes in the scene where Nico goes to get emergency money.

Bob still appears talking on the phone with Sylvia, asking for an extension on the rent, pleading for her not to call the Bailiff. He still calls Keith. Otis comes out from the tarp because he hears Bob yelling, and watches him...at the end of the phone call, Bob is crying.

You OK? Asks Otis. Fine, lies Bob. With friends like that, who needs enemies, Otis thinks/says out loud. Bob pulls out his pills. Takes a lithium. Takes a

Seroquel. Washes them down with whiskey. What you got there? asks Otis. Bob names the drugs. Otis knows what they are – he has been on them himself. Hey – you should have some food in your stomach with that...and all he has on him is two crackers he took from a soup kitchen...he gives them to Bob – an offering to a bi-polar comrade. Bob tears the plastic off and devours the crackers, washing them down with whiskey. Otis watches...making a diagnosis. Do yourself a favor, he tells Bob, and get yourself checked into the hospital, before you get hurt out here. That's what my Doctor says – says Bob – and my mother. And my brother. And my landlady. And my dog...there's nothing wrong with me! He goes on and gets louder and resents that Otis is assuming the same diagnosis as everyone else. Otis, sensing the aggression building, moves to protect his home. Bob moves towards the tarp and Otis yells at him to back away. Bob, seeing this, realizes he has gone over the top with this guy and, vibrating, embarrassed, insists he wouldn't hurt him, and that he doesn't need any help. Off he goes.

This scene plays better than the one we had, especially going into Forum. Ironic that the guy in the tarp knows something about helping Bob – and sad that Bob can't listen.

One of the cast is having a very difficult time staying focused. Holly and I keep talking with the person – but getting the cast member to settle down seems impossible, although the person shows up for work every day – and truly wants to be here and help and be involved. We are navigating the mental health issues that are in the play, in rehearsal.

We move back into the SRO. Cloud and Sarah (still Sarah for now) are coming out of Sarah's room. Sarah is tweaking – she needs a hit of crack. Cloud wants Sarah to check out where someone is for him. Sarah is on all fours looking for crack crumbs she knows she dropped under the sofa. Cloud lounges on the sofa arm, toying with Sarah, knowing she will ask him to front her some drug. Of course she does, and he agrees...and he hands a small amount over.

Katie has come from her room and sees this and yells at Sarah – why won't she leave Cloud alone? To Cloud – you promised me....to Sarah – you're nothing but a fucking crack head. Sarah has no need to argue – she has what she wants and is off to her room to get high.

Katie changes her approach to Cloud. It is gentle...she pleads with him to stop and he tells her he can't – what else would he do. She reminds him he is her "street-son" he agrees and she paints the picture she imagines of hem making a home together somewhere – other than this stinking rat-hole. This isn't a home. It's my home, counters Cloud. This isn't a home, insists Katie.

She reminds Cloud that she has her housing meeting today, and that she has a bad feeling about it...he remembers. She asks him to go with her, he refuses – he has work to do. She starts to insist. She takes his arm. She needs his support, and he tries to leave – and she won't give up. Katie crosses a line

with Cloud. The idea of “home” in the way she wants it scares the shit out of him. He grabs his arm away and yells at her to back off and get out of his face. He hurts her...and he leaves her standing there to fend for herself.

Cloud was great in putting these last two scenes together. Something about Sundown, this guy who has never been on stage before in his life. He has the ability to receive a bit of direction – an emotional clue – and take it inside him and translate it into words, gesture, feeling, and then set it and do it almost word perfect each time. It is wonderful.

The next scene was, at one time, Nico going to Otis, but it makes more sense to flow Katie straight into the housing meeting, and not waste the emotional place we leave her. So, in the same way that Nico sets up the emergency money meeting, Katie sets up this BC Housing, (addiction housing) meeting. Sandra becomes the housing worker. The scene plays pretty much the way we constructed it.

When we ran what we had so far today, some of it was there and, of course, some of it was not. Sandra and Martin (and other cast members) had a lot to absorb today. The clock is really ticking on us. I am not sure how to speed this process up of reclaiming the play with two new people. They did great. It is just going to take time.

November 8, 2009

We had quite a rough day today. The dual diagnosis issues with one of the cast members in particular are challenging all of us. I have struggled with how to write about this and still respect people’s confidentiality. The only decision I can make is not to go into a lot of detail.

A cast member is calling both me and Holly in the middle of the night (3 and 4 AM). These are obviously calls wanting help, and yet when we offer, or when we get face to face, all offers are refused. The level of belligerence in rehearsals is increasing, and takes up so much of everyone’s time. I also, though, know that the issues we are facing here are exactly the issues of the play. How can we make the play we are making and not find a way to navigate the issues in the rehearsal hall?

We ran what we had from yesterday, and it was pretty good. A lot of retention. We picked up where we had left off and started working the scene where Nico goes to visit Otis. The toaster has become integral and fun: we will have to time the beginning of the scene and how long it takes the toaster to make toast. We will put a small cue-light in the tarp. At an appropriate time, Dorothy will cue Otis in the tarp to start the toast. Then, when Nico arrives – depending on day to day timing, one of two things will be able to happen:

1. the toast will pop up about 30 seconds into the scene, letting Nico go – what’s that...toast?!? You have a toaster?? (and they eat toast). Or,

2. she will get to that moment and have to say – do you smell.....toast?? and Otis will be proud of the toaster, the power...and they will eat toast.

In either case, the theatre should fill with the very nice smell of toast from the tarp.

Otis starts the scene in a bit of a sketchy state. Knowing the tarp is going to come down is stressing him out. Nico watches him have a real problem with the trash can – getting the lid off – and she knows something is wrong.

He denies there is anything going on and diverts to her “new place”. She explains how terrible it is, but he counters with, well....the reason to go in was to get off the street and it has to be better...and it is just a stepping stone to something better...and she tries to stay – and he won’t let her. In the version we rehearsed in the morning Nico got to stay eventually, but only if she promised Otis she would go in the morning and make a go of it at the SRO.

We realized later, though, that this in fact does not work with the timeline and she HAS to leave the tarp. So we had to go back and rework the scene again, and get her out.

Then we moved to getting Bob out of the SRO. This scene took most of the rest of the morning. After lunch we still have to do the tasing Otis scene and “find” the end of the play. We skipped over the tasing because we think we know what it is. What we found is this for the end:

Nico is moving back and forth from her room to the table, packing up her backpack. Cloud enters from outside, asks what she is doing. Leaving. You just got here...the Police killed my Homey...Cloud discovers this is Otis, his old friend. He offers to take care of Nico. She says that even though she promised Otis she would try to stay, she has to go. Cloud agrees that the street is probably better for her than here. She asks him why he stays. He tells her that this is my home. Well...that’s pretty fucked...she tells him (not with anger – just a truth) and she leaves the SRO.

Katie has entered from her room and sees Nico leaving. She asks Cloud where she’s going. Back into the street. Katie, defeated by going to the bottom of the housing list and breaking her sobriety, sits.

Shawna²⁴ enters. She has paid Cloud his money (from Bob’s wallet) and has no debt now. She asks Cloud to front her some more crack. The same conversation that happens every day starts...as the lights go down.

All this happens over the course of a few days, Nico gets housing and then goes back to the street; Otis not only loses his home but dies; Bob runs off,

²⁴ Sarah has now been renamed Shawna.

manic, into the night; Katie gives up....and the water just rushes back in and it is like nothing really happened.

We did a run of the play before we left. It ran 29 minutes – not bad, considering there is quite a bit of “fat” in it at the moment. Some of the scenes worked, mostly the sequences were there. We have accomplished a lot in terms of getting back to where we were last Thursday, as horrendously hard as it has been.

Other thoughts:

I am considering cutting the monologues at the top of the play. There was a time that we needed them (before we knew the play) but we don’t anymore, and I don’t think they are going to work. A more effective opening might be:

From black...Cloud, Sarah and Katie’s room lights come up. We see them in various still places in their rooms. A light inside the tarp also comes up when the room lights do.

Shopping cart sound. Lights up on the tarp – light fades out inside the tarp. Otis enters and finds the notice. Goes into the tarp. X fade to the SRO. Katie turns off her light and enters...goes to the table, starts reading the rentals section. Sarah turns off her light and enters to start the scene with Katie. When Cloud enters...later to meet Nico, he turns off his light before entering.

November 10, 2009

Rehearsals

We’ve moved to an evening schedule – noon to 8:00 for now, starting to make the transition into 8PM shows.

We found the taser scene again and played a bit with the end of the play. I let go of the monologues and worked the new beginning as detailed earlier. We think it will work very nicely.

Now that we know what the structure of the play is, we went into “rehearsal mode” on the scenes, starting at the beginning. The structures and character work of the first scenes held together well, allowing me to work on the communication between the characters. Ebb and flow. Detail. Also opening up moments between characters for possible Forum. This involves a different kind of micro-dramatic structure than in “normal” drama. Some of it is really counter-intuitive for the cast; moments that they want to resolve, but mustn’t, as this opens up possibility for the audience.

We did detail work like this on:

Morning – Otis arrives and finds the notice; Katie looks for a place to live, Shawna wants and takes her paper. Cande and I talked about sound in here. Very nice to have him in rehearsal and to engage creatively this way.

Nico arrives – Nico argues with her worker but takes the room at the SRO. She enters, and meets Shawna and Katie, finds out various things and inadvertently insults Katie. She meets Cloud and wants to accept his offer of drugs – but resists.

Nico Grovels – Nico goes for emergency money.

Bob falling – we did good work on this scene where we meet Bob and then Bob meets Otis – Otis tries to help Bob but ends up driving him off. Martin is giving us a rich Otis – he is making great strides.

Addiction – we worked this scene – a difficult one for Shawna – in which she has to really expose her addiction, especially when Katie attacks her. We need to see Shawna’s vulnerability and this takes a great deal of courage from the performer.

And then continuing this scene between Katie and Cloud. The key here is that Katie can’t lecture Cloud. She falls into this really easily. When it isn’t a lecture, though, when it is full of love and longing – it is lovely and really puts the screws to Cloud – who rejects the offer of home with Katie – even to the point of running away from the housing meeting. If we can crack this, and I think we can, it will be heartbreaking.

And so these scenes are in not bad shape right now. We did a run of everything and some later scenes, like Otis and Nico, are a real mess at the moment. They are going to need time and patience. Patience we have...but as we all know, we are running out of time.

November 11, 2009

Not a bad run at the end of the day, but a period of time with real remembering problems on this Remembrance Day.

We started the day working on Katie’s scene in the BC Housing office and spent quite a long time getting the sequence of events straight. Having done that, what makes the scene work, is Katie’s emotional commitment to wanting to get out of the SRO, expecting this to lead to housing, and for reasons that make no sense, being taken off the list and having to start again. The scene needs to be devastating for her. In order for this to even be remotely possible, we have to get the sequence of events right, so she can commit to the journey in the scene.

This scene and the other “office” scene are also posing me a creative problem for which a solution is not coming. The scenes need to be....surreal...is the

best description I can come up with; exist in a different reality than the SRO/tarp. In a reality that is off-kilter. The lighting and sound can help.

The other thing, though, is how to eliminate the “introductions” of the scenes. They seemed like a good idea at the time – to set the scenes apart – but they are confusing in this very realistic play. We need to cut them. In order to cut them, the sound/light transition needs to accomplish what they are trying to accomplish – which is to “pop” the scenes out of our story, into a reality outside the SRO.

We worked on the scene between Otis and Nico for almost two hours. It is quite complicated – a lot happens:

Otis is in a bit of a freaked out state when Nico arrives – because of the imminent eviction. She sees this, asks him if he is OK, and he diverts the attention to her recent move. They have toast and it is fun. She takes the sheets out of her jacket – he realizes she’s been shoplifting again, and worries that if caught, her breaking probation will take her to jail. She diverts by suggesting she spend the night and they have sex. Otis really wants this....but....no. She insists he tell her what is wrong and tells him she can see his hands are shaking. He says it is because of this guy this morning....(Bob)...and refuses to say more. He makes her promise she will try to make the SRO work. He insists she leave. She tries a last time. He asks her not to be mad at him. Exasperated – she goes, and says she’ll be back tomorrow.

They did lovely work on this, and it is a lot to remember. We need runs.

We managed today to create the “Cops in the Head” scene with Shawna. After Bob passes out. We are in black. The light in her room comes on. I’d like to light this scene, if possible, with only the bulb in her room. She comes out of the room, talking to herself.

I can’t sleep....shit....(sees #22 and remembers her friend, Garnet)...why did you do that, I don’t want to end up like you – don’t want to kill myself over crack....she gets to the SL chair. Shawna, pull yourself together, girl...she sees Bob, asleep on the sofa...who does he think he is – he thinks he’s better than me? She sees the backpack. Backpack...money in there....just once more – just this last time, one more time...OK – it’ll be OK...OK...OK....(and she takes the pack and goes back to her room). She turns her light out.

Black. Lights up. Bob is now on the floor. He wakes up, realizes he has been fleeced, wakes everyone up, Shawna gets accused, she denies taking the pack. Bob tries to get into her room, Cloud pushes him away, threatens him with a chair. Bob pleads – begs for his pills. Cloud has had it, though, and throws him out. Outside, Bob makes one last attempt and Cloud, with no respect or sympathy at this point – just tells him he is crazy and leaves him standing there. Bob goes off, yelling, into the morning.

This is as far as we got today. We did a run of the whole play, really improvising the tasing and final scene, and a lot of what we worked today was there. It ran 31 minutes – which is about 6 minutes too long.

November 12, 2009

Well – life is breathing into the play. We did some good work today.

We reworked getting into and out of both “office” scenes, eliminating talking directly to the audience. We’ll be relying on sound first, in one case quite loud sound...to create the transition and following the sound, light. Cande (sound) and Conor (light) and Dorothy and I talked this through this evening. Cande will be in rehearsal from now on, building sound cues with headsets on. He and I will be able to listen to cues on breaks and over lunch.

We did detailed work on numerous scenes and it is possible we found the end of the play today. The scene begins with the SRO lights and all the room lights coming up, Katie pulling rigs out of the sofa – her daily ritual. As already worked, Nico is packing to leave. Cloud comes home, asks her what is happening. (Now that she has actual stuff...he can actually offer to help...and rolls up a sleeping bag for her during the scene – it is really nice and practical.) She explains about Otis – and Cloud knows Otis from prison. He offers to help her out. Otis was family – so is she. Katie has been listening. She seizes on this – sympathizes with Nico for her loss, and says that she and Cloud can take care of Nico. An exchange of how harsh it is in the street...and what “home” is...and Nico – really wanting this – explains that she can’t; that the SRO will kill her and she’d rather try her luck outside. She leaves.

Shawna enters. Cloud and Katie are at the table. Cloud is mourning the loss of his friend. Katie, as usual, wants a “front” of crack. Katie, in a silent way, can’t handle it. She goes to her room. Cloud refuses Shawna – the crack dance starts all over again. They sit in silence as the lights come down in the SRO, leaving all the room lights on. Cloud’s light fades off. Shawna’s light fades off. Katie’s light fades off. Nico’s light illuminates her empty room and the stage, and it fades off. Dark.

And so we end the same way we started. It is as if a huge storm happens, creating really turbulent water, even a parting of the seas. A path of possibility opens up and then the water comes back in. It is as if nothing ever happened. The cast really like the sense and theatricality of this. I think we can make it work.

More of the set and costumes are arriving – thanks, folks.

We did a run of the show. A lot of it was there. Unfortunately, it ran 38 minutes. I am aiming for no more than 25 because of the Forum Theatre aspect and an audience having a time span, generally, of no more than 2

hours. What can I say? There IS some “air” in it – but not 13 minutes worth. We are going to have to start thinking about cutting material.

November 13, 2009

This day went by way too fast. All of a sudden we had to go home.

We started with notes from last night and working some bits. We spent quite a bit of time working out how to flip Otis onto his stomach, after the tasing, hand cuff him, and get him on his feet without hurting him.

We cut the welfare scene. Everyone agreed that Nico can just make a reference to it when Otis sees she has been shoplifting again and it was, in a way, an unnecessary repetition of the BC Housing scene.

We spent quite some time on the relationship between Cloud and Katie. Trying to get the two of them to understand the vulnerability between the two of them and how hard it is for Katie to think of losing Cloud and vice-versa – making it personal.

I want to write about the media a bit: In the middle of the really quiet and intense rehearsal above, the folks from the Globe and Mail arrived and, walked right across the room, quite loudly, to sit in some seats and watch, and shattered what we were doing. This happened twice, actually – when the reporter came, and then again when the photographer arrived. The two cast members were really upset – I am asking them to do something very difficult and there was no way for them to focus.

We are getting a lot of pre-production press and this is great, both for the play and for the issue. Dealing with the media can be a really hard tightrope to walk – the balance between inviting the media in (we want them there) and keeping the rehearsal hall safe. The safety of the hall fell apart in this moment. I’ve asked Dorothy to have a sign up from now on when the doors need to be closed. Visitors coming, even on a schedule, will wait in the foyer until we have a natural transition, so the door doesn’t swing open in the middle of the kind of personal exposure that it did today. If we know people are coming, Dorothy will be the gatekeeper and let them in.

We worked many of Shawna’s scenes. We had a good talk about embracing the reality of the moment – about addiction and how devastating it is and hard to stop and self-hatred, and we got “Shawna” for the first time today, sketchy, awkward, frightened, desperate, lonely, outraged.

We worked Bob and Otis again. There is a point in the scene where manic Bob and manic Otis recognize each other. They are the same, these two – from opposite sides of an economic reality – and they can’t reach across it. If we can do this in the scene, then we have something real.

We did a run. It was really and truly terrible. Everyone knew it. Yesterday the show ran 38 minutes. We cut a whole scene, and this run took 38 minutes. You could have driven tar sand trucks through the moments. Of course, hand in hand with this kind of molasses goes a complete lack of commitment to the moments.

And so we did some notes from this and did another run at triple speed. In an exercise like this the actors have to do the play, have to “hit” all the moments and make them “bigger”, more intense. Everything is faster. Larger. The whole show, same lines, same actions, took 27 minutes. They cut 11 minutes of “boring nothingness” out of the play. Much more important than that, for each and every cast member but one, it had emotional meaning for the first time in a while. The “stakes” went up. This is a natural side-effect. This was not a good run for Cloud. It took Cloud “out” of the play. The actor has a natural ability to be inside. This was too artificial for him.

Now we could talk at a different level. I’ve been saying to the cast all along – yes, it is theatre about real life, but it is not real life – it is the theatre. We’ve all gotten trapped this last little while trying to put real life on the stage, and sometimes real life travels at a snail’s pace. Theatre can’t. It isn’t real life. It is the theatre. Some were astonished it should be that fast. Holly and Dorothy, though, backed me up. They had just witnessed the material come to life.

Cande and I spent about two hours after rehearsal listening to sound he’s been putting together. Some of it “real environment” and some of it textural sounds. A rich palette, and creatively discussing blending some, what scenes they might work with, transitional sounds. A good conversation from which he will continue playing in the hall with headsets for now.

We have some working time tomorrow and an “invited Forum” at 7PM. The workshop participants, design team, Headlines’ staff. Although we are not completely secure with the play, we must move into this next layer of Forum Theatre.

November 14, 2009

Long day. We reworked, again, the end of the play today and it took 2 hours. We are having retention problems with one of the cast. She goes into “loops” or blanks out entirely. When she can trust herself and try to stop remembering her lines, and engage emotionally, she knows what to do. The hurdle is to get her to trust herself.

After dinner we did a run. It went pretty well, but was supposed to be another “double speed” and it ran 33 minutes. Really long. We did notes.

Then the invited audience came. About 20 people – a mix of staff, design team, workshop participants and some of their friends. We were going to

start at 7:00 but by the time we got going it was 7:30. The run went pretty well, but again, 33 minutes. We did it in 27 or 28 yesterday. We CAN do it.

I think, generally, the audience were impressed with the play. Not a huge amount of feedback on that. I think we could have something powerful on our hands, especially if some of the cast can get over their fear (I think it is fear) of the exposure of feeling really authentic emotions in front of people. They have no problem with anger, but won't go to the vulnerable places we need to go, that we have rehearsed. The light and sound layers being integrated will also help. My concern about these, also, is that they will add time.

I say this because the Forum, without even touching every scene, went for 2 hours 40 minutes. 2:15 might be OK. 2:40 is not. This was our first (and my first) crack at it, so there may be some ways to speed it up.

The cast responded pretty damn well, I thought. We have some talking to do about there always being some kind of possibility for shift – a “brick wall” does not make for valuable Forum Theatre. This is going to be a challenge in some moments, but we can work through that I think. Having said that, the Forum generated quite a bit of laughter. Not that we are doing a comedy – but being able to have fun while investigating something this heavy is really important.

I will have to work hard, too, at the questions that translate the human moments into policy suggestions. Taking the human to the structural, keeping in mind that it is our patterns of behaviour that create structure – not the other way around.

I wondered about doing forum on the first scene, when Otis finds the letter from the City, but there was an intervention there and so I may play with it again in Preview. My intention had been to start the Forum with the women and the paper. I may have to decide to do this anyway – just for time. We also learned tonight, confirmed, really, that while Bob's entrance on the phone is important for the play, we won't do it in Forum. We will start Bob with Otis in Forum.

There were a mix of interventions tonight, as I think will always be the case: Some really informed, and some wishful thinking. Some really informed about the complexity of mania, some wishful thinking about the police changing their mind once Otis starts to fight back at the tarp. Two of the more interesting moments led to a conversation about mental health support lists being given with any mental health related drug prescription; also of transforming the SRO environment, somehow, into more “co-operative” housing, as a way to stimulate “community” in the building – a sense of ownership, which would lead to more safety in the building.

We have taken real steps forward in the last couple of days. Tomorrow is our last day in the rehearsal hall.

November 15, 2009

Long day, again.

Melanie (Outreach and Publicity Support person) had asked me what I had thought of the run and I said, the question is, what did YOU think of the run? When she started expressing how very powerful it was, how it disturbed her so deeply that she needed time to process it, I suggested she tell that to the whole cast. They had been upset by the lack of response to last night. They thought it meant the play was crappy, and they were crappy in it. I think they imagined raucous applause after, and also people lining up to make interventions. It took a lot of explaining for them to start to see that the silence was a kind of compliment. Holly also explained to them that she had been outside with people after, and that they were really moved and impressed. Unfortunately, no one said that to any of them last night. It is hard to remember, I think, what a vulnerable place they are in, and they are immune in a way to hearing things from me. Anyway – hearing from Melanie and Holly was great.

We worked bits for the first part of the day (2PM – 5PM). The opening again, the toast scene, throwing Bob out of the SRO, the tasing and the final scene. All these had been rough for us in the run last night.

After dinner we did a run that was supposed to be “double time”. Keeping in mind the statements above, it sucked, at 33 minutes. Everyone knew it. What happens? Part of the issue, I think, is that the cast needs an audience. But there is also the issue of “armor”. The cast, having the life experiences they do, easily put their armor back on. The armor leads to emotions other than those that come from vulnerability. It is the vulnerability through which we care. If the characters don’t care, if they are just going through the motions, or are always angry, all the words can be there, but there is nothing to care about on the stage.

Tim and Cande had set the sound system up, because Cande had hoped to start inserting sound into the scenes today, and through that, also start the process with me of final sound selection and cues etc. We agreed, though, that the cast were not ready to absorb that layer, when the runs were still tentative and fractured. He had a good idea, though.

After a break, we sat with everyone, and he played all the cues and explained where in the play they will be and how. In the midst of this I was able to give him creative feedback. The soundscape starts off in realism and then moves into more “manufactured” sound. It will be very powerful. And hearing it, I think, did a good thing to the cast. It gave them, through their ears, another layer of the world they will be inhabiting.

And so we did a third run. Our last kick at the can in the rehearsal hall. I told them to imagine 100 people out there. I also talked with them, again, about letting go of the anger in many of the scenes.

We had certainly the best run of the day – and a lot of it was lovely. Even though it was 33 minutes. Dorothy thinks it might be possible when she did the 27 minute timing that she made an error. How could they possibly have taken 6 or 7 minutes out, when they are consistently coming in at 33? It is likely we have made a play with too much material in it.

First the lovely, though. They managed to take a lot of the anger out, except when it is appropriate. This allows us to care about all of them more. In the toast scene we really believed, for the first time ever, that Nico and Otis are lovers. In the Cloud/Katie scene, that they want to be “family” and don’t know how. In the final scene, that Nico goes back into the street, not because of an argument with Katie, but because her heart is breaking; breaking over Otis and her inability to “make it” inside. I hope, I hope, I hope they can hold onto this.

Now the problematic: I needed the play to be about 25 minutes, because of the time it takes to do Forum. There are no more scenes to cut. I have some serious thinking to do about what we will not do Forum on, and also about how to adapt the Joking so that we can move faster, without annoying the audience. Apart from integrating the sound and light into the flesh and blood, along with the very talented design/technical team we have, this is my next big challenge.

November 17, 2009

We had three hours in the theatre tonight, courtesy of an ahead of schedule technical get-in. We really needed it.

We did a run and, as would have been expected first time in the theatre, scenes were gone and, more important, the emotional content was gone. We did notes, worked the BC Housing scene, did not have time to work throwing Bob out of the SRO or the tasing. Running out of time, we did a second run, after another talk about emotional commitment. The second run was quite a bit better in many ways.

The toast scene was brilliant. Really. Something happened. Otis “clicked in” all the physical business just flowed. He was in his “element” this kind’a crazy guy in the tarp. He didn’t get absolutely all the right lines out – but it didn’t matter. We “saw” him and his love for Nico and her love for him. It all just worked. He was really happy, because he felt how this really worked, and how simple it is, actually.

As previously explained in this report, I won’t go into tremendous detail about what follows – but one of the cast has become so erratic this last couple of days that the trajectory of the character is almost unrecognizable. We keep talking, I keep asking to play the scenes the way we rehearsed them and the cast member counters with “I am exploring new possibilities”. I want to be clear. It isn’t that the cast member can’t settle in. the cast member won’t. I

have discussed this with Holly and with others who are now witnessing rehearsals, seeking advice about what to do. This is so deeply unfair to the rest of the cast, not to mention that we are in technical rehearsal tomorrow, in which we have to integrate all the light and sound into set cues.

The play ran 35 minutes in the 2nd run. The longest it has ever been. I am trying to think of what to cut but everything seems essential. I am concerned we are never going to make it through Forum in two and a half hours – let alone 2, with the play as it is.

November 18, 2009

We had a remarkably productive day, with no drama – other than the appropriate kind.

Kudos to the Tech side. The physical show looks great. Thanks Yvan, Barb, Conor, Cande, Dorothy and Tim. Dorothy (Stage Manager, who steered with a really gentle hand today) and I had a conversation on the way home how wonderful it is to work with design/technical people who know what they are doing. We had a chance to “paint” today with light and sound. Cande and Conor provided a rich palette and the Tech was a truly collaborative 8 or 9 hours (depending on how one calculates). I don’t know the number but am imagining that with light and sound there would be up to 80 or 100 cues in this 30 minute piece. And the cast were really, really patient – all of them, and absorbed the tech side with a sense of wonder. I know many of them talked with Dorothy about how really interesting the day was for them, seeing it all come together.

The task now is to run, run, run. My concern, of course, is the length of the piece. We didn’t time the run this evening, but we all know it was slow. We will work a couple of scenes first thing tomorrow (starting at 12:30) and have time for a few runs and then a photo shoot with David Cooper at 6 and final “Dress Tech” at 7.

November 19, 2009

Nice articles in the Province, Straight and Megaphone today. We are hoping this will really give a kick to reservations.

It appears we may have a play on our hands. The Dress Tech went quite well. Most of the sound/light cues were where they were supposed to be – no mean feat as there are a lot of them for a 30 minute play.

We started the day working bits – the ‘toast scene’ again, the ‘chair’ again, the end of the play again. Going back to them paid dividends, I think, in that Otis is hanging on to more of the toast scene more consistently, Shawna is doing the same and we had never found the “musical beats” that create Nico’s exit back into the street. We might have today.

We did a run and it still felt slow in places, but timed out at 31.5 minutes. An improvement. We worked bits again and did another run – more scenes came together – it is all about finding the flow now. Timed out about the same.

Preview Performance

November 20, 2009

There's good news and there is bad news.

The good news is that the Preview was almost a full house. We are, I think, sold out for opening and Sunday is booking fast. The show was very strong tonight and we had a pretty good Forum. I have some things to sort out yet. A standing ovation at the end, and feedback from the audience after was very positive.

The bad news is that Otis didn't show up today. We had a 3:30 call. No Otis. There was some discussion about possible confusion on his part about call-time being 6:30. He has no phone. We started calling contacts we have for him. Headlines' Staff called the hospitals and the jails – not there.

He was on the Skytrain out to Surrey with Nico last night to visit a friend who was in some trouble. Nico says he was in great spirits. The people at the Support Services where he does volunteer work saw him earlier in the day today and say he was happy and really excited about an audience tonight. But he has vanished. Of course we are all really worried about him.

As the time passed and we got closer to an audience arriving, we had to do something. Two choices, really: cancel the Preview or have someone step into the role. Holly had been at all the rehearsals and, although this is really not what she signed up for, she volunteered. We had one hour of rehearsal. Everyone really pulled together, and Holly was brilliant as Otis.²⁵

I have never done a project in which so many cast members have come and gone. Walter (before we even got started) the first Otis, Sarah and now this Otis – who I am going to start calling Martin²⁶ again, because it is just too confusing. The subject matter of course is homelessness and there is a pattern here of people finding a place that might be (a temporary) "home"by that I don't mean bricks and mortar, but a scarier concept of home. A home that is a sense of belonging to something. I am wondering if this belonging is just too much for some.

We did the play and the Forum. There was a beautiful intervention about what I wrote above tonight, the very last one, a young woman came and replaced Katie and wanted Nico to sit down before leaving. This Katie had a

²⁵ We acknowledged the cast change before the play and also that while Holly is female, the character is male.

²⁶ A reminder, this is not the person's real name for reasons of confidentiality.

vision of them all working together to fix the SRO up, of creating a real community in the SRO. She was so passionate about it she was crying. Nico's "secret thought" after insisting she was leaving was that she wanted to stay. Shawna's was that if it happened she would get involved. Cloud said no way, but *my* secret thought was that if it happened, he'd come around.

Gail (Community Scribe) who is preparing the Community Action Report was really pleased with the evening. She was well fed, she said.

There was some audience "tension" about the play not being about the bigger systemic stuff. I encouraged the audience to think symbolically about this, like we did in *Corporate U* (2000). I have some other thoughts about this though, now that I am writing. Of course the systemic changes need to happen. Of course I support the work that continues on that front. In the mean-time, what do people DO in this moment? Wait for systemic change? While we wait, what do we do?

Call time is 6:30 tomorrow. I have not called the Company in for afternoon work, even with the Martin situation. We are hoping he will be then and I will spend time tomorrow helping Headlines' staff try to track him down. In either case, we will work some Otis scenes so either Martin or Holly can feel more secure, but the Company is exhausted. The adrenaline of an audience will carry the show tomorrow, and Tech is in good shape. They need some rest.

The question is, what if Martin does show up? I know Holly doesn't want to remain in the role – but will if necessary. I will need to assess what shape he is in – what happened? Can he do the play? How do the rest of the cast feel?

I just called Headlines' office voicemail to see if he had left anything – no – but Shawn from the Portland's Beacon, where he has been staying in Vancouver called and there has been no sign of him.

Opening and the run at the Firehall Arts Centre (Vancouver)

November 21, 2009

4:45 PM Leaving for the theatre soon. No word from Martin. Holly talked with the RCMP today, at my request, and filed a missing person report. The Advocacy people saw him early Friday, when he told them he was looking forward to an audience that night. We just don't know more, and Holly and I agree that neither of us saw this coming.

The next day. Well, opening night was sold out, which means 136 audience and a standing ovation. We turned about 20 people away. It went very well, the Forum was really lively and the feedback is wonderful. And it is all overshadowed by the news about Martin.

We found out at about 6:00 PM, via a call from Dafne, that he had been found and had attempted suicide. He is alive and in the hospital. In the last 18 or so hours he has been moved to the psyche ward. This is good news, as it must mean he is stabilized physically.

We are all deeply affected by this, of course. Writing about the opening seems trivial right now.

When we decided to cast Martin, we knew of his history of mental health issues, as he was always upfront about this. However, he was so confident that he could do this project, (as were the support people in his life) we had to trust that he was the expert in his life. Mental health issues are complicated and Holly and I agree there were no warning signs that his mental health was deteriorating.

Martin explained to both me and Holly, days later, that the trigger was a phone call from a friend who was also struggling with issues in his own life. He wanted us and the cast to know that it had had nothing to do with the play. I remember the phone call and it seemed a relatively insignificant part of the day that day – which really demonstrates the unpredictability (and volatility) of mental health. The incident came as a shock to all of us: me, Holly and the cast. Martin consistently presented as incredibly positive, with a great outlook on life. Once again, the reality of the issues faced by those living on the street had come into the process.

November 22, 2009

Home from the Sunday evening show. We had a company meeting before the show and discussed some things:

Holly and I offered to get someone in to do a workshop to help people deal with the attempted suicide. None of the cast wanted this.

A card went around that will go to the hospital with flowers. There is a sense from a cast member who spoke with him on the phone that Martin might be afraid we are all mad at him, and we need to reassure him we are not. We can't get in to visit yet.

I suggested that we take the money that would have gone to him in salary to the end of the project and make a fund for when he comes out of the hospital. We'd need to give it to some place like the Advocacy Centre where he has support to administer for him, as him having a whack of cash land on him would not be a good thing. But a financial cushion would.²⁷

We agreed that I would explain from the stage, in very general terms, that a cast member had to leave the play. We have to say something from the stage to explain Holly playing the role.

²⁷ This was followed through on and did happen.

The show tonight: 80+ people – very respectable, and a very, very tough crowd. The show was a little tired, but played well nonetheless.

Forum wise, the quietest show yet. For instance, we have never had silence when Bob, Shawna and Cloud are at the table and Bob offers Shawna \$\$\$. We've never had silence in the "toast" scene. A "Sunday" Theatre crowd, perhaps. But I mean it when I say that the silence in the theatre is the silence "out there"....

I asked the audience about the silence and the answer was that they were people of privilege and didn't feel comfortable offering suggestions. Joan (Headlines' Financial Administrator who was there) said she heard a number of them saying that they'd had no idea that people lived this way. So for them this was a different kind of education. This information led me to change the invitation I was making from the stage, to recognize that this issue belongs to everyone, whether we are aware of that or not.

November 23, 2009

I spoke with Martin today. He called the office and spoke with Adeline. Adeline gave me the "patient number" to reach him at. He was so very worried about what was happening with the play and apologetic. Of course I reassured him that we were OK – that no one was angry and that we all loved him. I asked him if he knew what we had done and he asked if Holly had taken over, as he knew she knew all the lines. I told him that was indeed what had happened and yes, she did know all the lines!, and got a small chuckle out of him.

I stressed with him numerous times not to worry about us and the play. He is in the hospital on a voluntary basis, a good sign, an indicator that he knows he is best there – not being held against his will. He sounded very coherent.

Adeline is getting his things to him from the Beacon and his most recent pay check. I told him we would be setting up a fund for him, with the money we would have paid him for the rest of the run. He was very appreciative of that, and we agreed it should not go straight to him. He is OK with the people at the Advocacy Centre administering it – he trusts them.

He explained on the phone that had got news that, in his words, "his buddy" was in trouble. He said he knew inside he shouldn't be going out to see him, but he had to try to help his friend. This is really him, as I have got to know him. He talked about having been off his meds for some time now and, when he got together with the friend, it was too much and it set him off. He took a whole bunch of pills, immediately realized the consequences, and got himself to the hospital.

For reasons that are obvious, I think this is important for all of us inside the project to know this information. Many, myself included, have been

wondering about what we could have done. That question is still inside me, and I also know that the answer may be nothing, without also invading his private life in ways that I still believe are inappropriate.

He wondered about coming to see the play and we talked about how long he might be in the hospital and agreed that the New Westminster shows might be appropriate timing.

Holly also had a long talk with one of his doctors today, and is on her way to see Martin right now, as he is open to visitors. She is also going to call the cast and give them all the update.

I also want to write about some of the great things that have happened in the Forums so far, that I haven't reported. My heart/brain are that relieved that Martin is OK – it was very good for me to hear this in his voice.

Opening was really spectacular. We were all “on a roll” – peaked at exactly the right time. It was fun and also poignant, as it should be. It is fascinating what happens, we all talked about this, the situation with Martin made it even more important to be focused and really give the event to the audience, and so all of us, temporarily, set our worry aside.

Of course support inside the SRO comes up a lot. Last night an intervention came from an Outreach Worker that was support that visited regularly. This has to be requested, and can be requested by tenants, but is more usually requested by management or BC Housing.

Something innovative was that with all prescriptions for Lithium or other such drugs, a resource list of support services should be given.

Another possibility was turning SROs into some kind of co-operative – tenants having a kind of “ownership”. This could lead to healthier relationship to the living environment.

A set area where people could put up tents and tarps comes up. Controversial, of course. The response to this being it must not become the “social housing” we need. This is the dichotomy between needing political action, and not sacrificing people while we wait.

November 24, 2009

The day began with a call from Nico. Last night she was on her way to the corner store near her place for milk and got “jumped” by someone who she thinks was trying to rob her. She had very little money on her. Once she was on the ground, two other people started kicking her. She's quite sore. Talking with her it sounds like nothing is broken. She agrees, this is likely the case. It sounds like she might have a bruised rib.

She was supposed to be on the panel today for the first Community Dialogue²⁸ “Location, Location, Location”. I suggested that her time might be better spent getting a doctor to check her out. Maybe she needs bandaging up? Maybe x-rays?

We agree that we have to do the show tonight; there was ever any question of this from her. Depending on what shape she is in, I might announce her situation from the stage, with her consent, of course.

It is endless, eh? She and I were both laughing about this on the phone. Of course her being mugged is part and parcel with the issue we are dealing with. She came off the street into quite unsafe housing in which she is raising a small child.

The Community Dialogue went really well. Kudos to Dafne and the rest of Headlines – there were 40 people there. Katherine Gretsinger was fantastic as Moderator, trying to keep things focused on what can be done – on solutions – not on what has been done and complaints. Gail was writing furiously.

11:15 PM We had a really good show tonight – about 80+ people in the audience, I estimate – fantastic for a Tuesday night. The woman at the Box office told me today the previous show played to about 10 people every night of its run.

One piece of news – it appears there will be no mainstream reviews. This is really irksome. Not because we need them to build houses, but because the act of reviewing validates the work in the mainstream world. As a theatre artist, as director of Headlines, this is important to me. So in the absence of that, here’s what I think we should do:

I am going to start making the announcement of that after the show every night, explaining what is happening, and asking people to go home and send us a review, to the “info” email address. We should do the same, and explain why, with anyone who has already signed up on the mailing list during this run. We will create our own media.²⁹

Nico was a real trooper – bruised cheek, ribs and all. The audience was very lively tonight. So different from the previous show. You just never know how it will be. Some interesting interventions:

A young guy replaced Cloud in the scene with Katie. He found a way to agree to stop dealing – in an authentic way – it wasn’t fake. This guy knew what he

²⁸ Part of this project was three days of Community Dialogues.
http://www.headlinestheatre.com/past_work/after_homelessness/cds_after_homelessness.htm
 Dafne Blanco (Outreach Co-ordinator) is dealing with these in her final report.

²⁹ There are pages of quotes from audience members attached as Appendix 3.

was talking about. In discussion he talked about wanting the connection, and having the courage to say yes.

Another young guy replaced Cloud and reached out to Bob in the SRO – before anyone else got involved. It was a little “magic”, Cloud suggesting Bob get in touch with PIVOT Legal. But at the heart of it Cloud does reach out to Bob. The difference here was that it was less cynical and, we agreed, meant Bob would not get fleeced tonight, would not lose everything, would not go running off into the morning.

A young woman replaced Nico with the bug-infested mattress and organized the people in the SRO to deliver it to the mayor’s office. The audience loved this idea.

A woman replaced Otis in the tasing and tried to invite the Cop and Frankie in for toast. This didn’t work. It did lead to her agreeing to pack up. Watching her make this choice was very interesting – a denial, really, of Otis’ strongest desire to stay, but also saving his life by accepting this defeat. A complex moment. Of course it led to being able to talk about whether or not Otis should be able to stay where he is. 85% at least of the audience thought he should.

A woman replaced Katie, and got Cloud to go with her, to follow Nico out into the street and talk with her there – not in the SRO. There, they asked Nico to stay, and give them a month, with the idea that they would pool their money – 3 is better than 2, which is better than 1 – and try to get a place together. Nico, the hard negotiator agreed, for two days. But perhaps two days would lead to four....

A standing ovation. After the show various people came to me. Francis Flanagan and Hillary Strang, both well known actors in town came tonight. I really appreciate the theatre community coming. They truly loved it. Were blown away, in tears. A man and woman also came – he is on the Board of Directors of Cardboard Citizens, <http://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/> a theatre company in London (UK) that works with homeless people. It is run by a good friend, Adrian Jackson. The Board Member is working in Portland, Oregon right now, directing an opera. He thought it was brilliant and understand Forum Theatre and all that that involves. All in all some very nice feedback.

One of the things that happened tonight, I think, is letting go of the burden of feeling responsible for what happened with Martin. The last few shows have been really rough. But he was really clear with me about what happened regarding his friend and Holly says he did the same with her when she saw him. Personally, I feel like I can breathe onstage again.

November 25, 2009

4:25 PM a quick note – very good turnout for the 2nd Community Dialogue “What makes a Home a Home” – 59 people there, in the pouring rain.

We went into tonight with over 90 reservations. Amazing for a soggy Wednesday night. Congrats everyone. This is a combination of good PR, good networking/outreach and good word of mouth from a really strong show.

We have 136 seats, so I imagine we had 100+ in the audience. A very good representation from all strata of society tonight – this is one of the things that creates the magic in the theatre. It started slow but then when it started, it was like a dam bursting. A very, very lively evening.

I discovered a key, I think, to “opening up” the room for the Forum. I have started saying this:

I want to talk, for a moment, to those of you who did not raise your hands when I asked about connection to the issues in the play. We are very glad you are here. We knew, putting this together, that we would play to the general public. There is something I have discovered working on this project: there isn't a single human being in Metro Vancouver, up the Fraser Valley, who is not affected by these issues of homelessness. We all pay a high price, in various ways, for the terrible situation that exists. Because of this, the “after homelessness” issue is not only “their issue” to address, it is “our issue”, whether we are aware this is the case or not.

And so I have a request. Please don't allow your own sense that the issues are not “yours” stop you from sharing your ideas tonight. Here we are in the theatre, and we want your creativity. These are issues of humanity on the stage and being humans, inside the metaphoric language of the theatre, we have a way to understand.

And so we had interventions from a broad cross-section of people – and the “homeless” did not “take offence” that people from outside the core issue were trying ideas for solutions. We heard over and over from the people who identified themselves as the “core community” how much they loved the evening and what it was doing and the larger community solidarity that was created.

There was a wonderful woman who intervened three times tonight. A self-proclaimed addict and “shy person” (her words) – she was drawn onto the stage by the urgency of the issues. She inspired characters in various scenes to break through their isolation – she created community everywhere she went.

A young man replaced Cloud and, instead of attacking Bob with the chair, took a very, very deep breath. It was not magic. It was about protecting one's own home with a sense of integrity. Can the drug dealer do this? Yes he can. He got the bag back from Shawna – Bob did not go screaming off into the morning – in fact – having had this other experience he went to try to sort things out with his landlady.

A woman who has done a lot of Government of BC work replaced the BC Housing worker and broke the rules (as she used to do in her job) and put herself at risk by back-researching what happened to Katie. There was no guarantee this would work, but for Katie this woman putting herself at risk, created a more level field between the two of them. She appreciated this so much. She was almost certain that regardless of the outcome, she would not compromise her sobriety that night. We never know what we do.

There were many of these well thought out interventions tonight and Gail (Community Scribe) said to me she was very happy. Another standing ovation.

November 26, 2009

I didn't get any writing done last night – had a friend come to the show and got home way too late.

We had another almost full house last night. The Forum was quite lively and also a lot of work. We are really pulling the mental health community into the room. Of course this is good, and it has its challenges. There was a woman there last night who was obsessed with Free Trade and Immigration. Every time I asked the audience something she would start to yell, sometimes irrationally, about this and it was hard to get her to stop. Even her friends, there with her, started telling her to shut up. My attempts to include her in the event might have only encouraged her. Finally, about 70% through the evening, I said to her that I appreciated she was concerned about Free Trade, but it wasn't what we were here to talk about. At that point she left.

One of the people with her made an intervention in the first tarp scene. He replaced Otis and had a very wonderful sense of Otis' life and what Otis knew, and how he wanted to help Bob and how he could. Bob didn't think he needed help at this point, but the intervention was lovely and real. This same man yelled "stop" at the second tarp scene and didn't understand that Otis already knew that he was going to get evicted. He wanted Nico to move in with him. We got to talk about valuable things from this, but it was becoming clear he wasn't following the story. He yelled "stop" again at the third tarp scene, wanting to be Otis onstage, and I went to someone else who had also yelled stop in the same moment. Not having chosen him for a third time, he left.

I've taken time to write about this because there is a core issue here. Of course the Forum isn't happening to serve any one or two audience members. There were, last night, about 120 other people in the room. It is always a struggle to balance off the needs of the one with the needs of the many. (Gee, I think I just sounded like Spock, from Star Trek.)

A way this happened well last night was with a young man who had a severe speech impediment. It was like he couldn't articulate portions of each word. I imagine this is a cognitive issue somehow. He was obviously really intelligent, just couldn't communicate clearly. He was really hard to understand, and was the first intervention in the Forum, replacing Shawna with Katie and the paper. He gave us a more patient and generous Shawna. He saw, really clearly, how a small amount of helping each other in the SRO would change the environment. And Katie was great at listening and playing with him. He participated in the discussion in between interventions as well, the room knowing, I think, that we had to take the time to try to hear what he was saying. We went to almost 10:20 last night and his caregiver(s) left at about 10. He left momentarily with them, but then came back until the end. After, he came onto the stage and tried to tell me something but it was too hard so he asked for pen and paper and started writing a very long note. I had a friend from out of town waiting and couldn't keep staying so Dorothy, he and I agreed he would give the note to Dorothy with his email address and I would get it today.

There were also other interventions – a woman replaced Cloud (many Cloud replacements tonight – people wanting him to be the solution) and he convinced Katie not to drink when Bob gives her the bottle. This is believable – he already asks her if she is going to throw her sobriety away over the BC Housing list. He suggested they talk about it in the morning. And so we went to the morning and this Cloud turned his back on Katie all of a sudden and said, well, last night was last night and today, I can't help you and got up and left.

People understood the truth of this intervention – things being so much in the moment – and also how much it hurt Katie and jeopardized her relationship with Cloud. This seemed to come as a surprise to the intervener. Learning here....you could feel it in the room.

Email has gone back and forth between Martin and me. He has checked himself out of the hospital. He will come see the show soon. I've asked that he do this with a support person.

Melanie, from Headlines' office just sent this. A lovely read:

<http://glenngaetz.com/2009/11/27/after-homelessness-what-does-it-mean-have-home>

November 27, 2009

Another almost full house. A box office issue to sort out for the next two days:

The way things are supposed to work is that if people do not pick up their tickets (comps, vouchers, purchased tix) by 7:45 – the people on the waiting list start to be let in. What happened tonight (now that we are dealing with being sold out) is that people were coming to the theatre and hoping to get tickets and the box office was telling them we were sold out and none were available. They should be asking them if they want to go on a wait list. At 7:45, the wait list starts being let in. A large group booking wasn't showing up and so the box office was waiting for them. In the end, we had empty seats, and didn't get the doors closed until 8:15.

This puts tremendous time pressure on me in the Forum. Tonight it meant that at 10:10 people started to leave – they have parking, babysitters, other plans...have been there, some of them, since 7:30...I couldn't get the Forum done until 10:30 tonight.

The show was strong tonight. When I asked how many of the audience relate to the issues inside their own lives a good 70-80% of the hands went up. The Forum was lively and the “discussion bits” in between even more so.

There were two quite profound interventions tonight. A man replaced Bob with Otis at the tarp. In his own words, he “broke through Bob's pride and asked Otis, someone beneath him, for help.” The intervener had lived in the street. He knew what he was talking about. He also has a bi-polar diagnosis and was very well informed in this instance. This opened up space for Otis to end up walking Bob to the Carnegie Centre where he will get a meal, maybe get hooked up with services, in other words, let Otis change Bob's trajectory in the play profoundly.

A woman replaced Nico and didn't “push” Otis in the toast scene, but really used their friendship in a wonderful way, so that Otis had to let her stay. This Nico wanted it for herself. She wanted Otis' friendship in her own moment of despair over the SRO. The result, though, was that Otis told her about the eviction notice. Having heard that a number of things would have happened, all of them, according to the two of them, leading to Otis not getting tasered. This woman didn't yell stop to save Otis She yelled stop to try to create a safe sense of home for herself. The result of this was really beneficial to Otis.

Gail was inundated after the play with a crowd of policy suggesters – people I sent over there who still had ideas they wanted to put forward.

November 28, 2009

Remember I mention the young man with the speech issue who made an intervention was writing a note? Here it is after transcribing from his printed version:

“I wasn’t in a situation like this before, but being homeless made me realize that not everyone is bad. It is the people who judge. And having money is good but also it can be bad and a big problem is greed, corruption loses people close to you, lose things etc. But I have a creative mind and I just put myself in someone’s shoes and try to look at it in a different matter cuz there’s always a better way with solving issues. Not everything needs violence or weapons, or fists, its talking civil that helps make the world better for everyone. Also I thought I was just fine when I had everything but one thing that got me to open my eyes was tough love and poverty, which made me a better person. If U want, I can think up another play for another day. Something that could make U look differently after losing everything.”

Clayton

Emails went back and forth between him and me for a few days.

November 28, 2009

Where to start? I played Bob this afternoon (see below) and tonight, as well as Joked the Forum.

Today was the rehearsal day for the web cast tomorrow and so the SHAW crew and also Chris Bouris (web master) and all of the web actors were there and ready to go at 4:00PM. The SHAW Crew arrived and started setting up at 10:00 AM. Five cameras, sound equipment, all the cable, a remote studio outside the theatre, a bank of computers, changing lighting levels, etc. This is Mike Keeping’s (TV Director) chance to help the camera people (all volunteers) to get their camera shots sorted out. We need to run the play for them with no audience in the room and run some scenes again. Bob knew the call-time and didn’t show up.

Again, it is difficult to write about this in a public report without crossing confidentiality boundaries I don’t think should get crossed. Suffice it to say something significant that also involved a company decision took place in order for the drastic measure of me taking the role over to happen. Bob was back in the play the next night for the web cast and the rest of the run.

I had always imagined that being in a play and also Joking it was a bad idea. Although completely necessary on this occasion, doing so confirmed my suspicion. The feedback from people was very positive, but once we got to the Forum, from my perspective, it was just too schizophrenic to be “inside” and “outside” the moments at the same time. I believe I managed to pull both roles off at an acceptable level, but that also means that neither got done extraordinarily well.

This audience was quite challenged by the material. When I asked how many related, only about 20-30% put up their hands tonight – an unusually small number. The demographic changes so much each night. Last night 70-80% put up their hands.

Miloon Kothari the Former Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing from the UN Human Rights Council was there and he, living and working in New Delhi, loved and appreciated it.

Martin came to the theatre after the show to talk. He hasn't seen the play yet – is waiting for us to move to New Westminster. He wants to come back into the play. We went to eat and talk. Where we left it was this: he understands and shares my concern about all that has just happened, and the possible stress of him stepping back into a play where his character dies every night. He is saying that he is back on his medications now, in housing (he got a basement suite) and he has support around him etc., and also if I say no, he understands and appreciates why I would make that decision. He does sound and look good, but I will not make this assessment on my own.

I told him I want to talk with both his Advocacy support person and also his doctor, and that I would want an assessment from both of them, in writing. Both Holly and I agreed that he would need the full support of his medical team and his support team to re-enter the project. I think it is really important for him to do the show in New Westminster, as he wants to finish what he started. We would all love to have him back, but not at the cost of jeopardizing his health. He just got out of the hospital.

The web cast

November 29, 2009

People logged into the chat space (you could watch the web cast and not log into chat) from:

Canada: Vancouver and North Vancouver BC, Richmond BC, Burnaby BC, Langley BC, Chilliwack BC, Mission BC, Calgary AB, Winnipeg MB, Montreal PQ and London ON.

USA: Bellingham WA, McMinnville OR, Montclair CA, Santa Barbara CA, Longmont CO and Florida.

Other International: Brisbane AU, Melbourne AU, Sydney AU, Mitaka Japan and India.

As mentioned above, we only have location information from those computers that logged into the chat space. A computer did not need to be logged into chat in order to watch the play and Forum. Chris Bouris, web master, has done a calculation of used bandwidth, and from this estimates that a *minimum* of 556 computers logged into the web cast. We know from our organizing work that in most instances, people do not watch alone and in fact, organize small parties to view the project. Being conservative, we can

estimate that $(556 * 3) * 60\% = 1,001$ people watched the play and Forum on the web.

An edited version (edited for time) also aired on SHAW Cable on January 1, 2010. SHAW tells us that up to 15,000 people will view a show. Again, being conservative and taking 66.6%, this would mean another 10,000 saw the play, for a total of **11,001 viewers outside the live, theatrical audience**.

Another packed house. I started the web cast really nervous – unusually so. Hadn't had the time I needed, always so much else going on, to prepare what I wanted to say for the web cast, and so got things a little turned around in my head. O well. It all came out, just not in the order I'd wanted. The play was also a little nervous. The cameras and knowing people all over the world are watching creates a new tension. There was also, I understand a sound problem.³⁰

This audience was very quiet throughout the play. Some audiences laugh a lot – audiences who understand the junkie behaviour, the tarp behaviour – they get the jokes in the play. But when the play was over, there was really strong applause. They'd been there and paying attention. Perhaps the cameras also created a “quiet” for the audience.

The Forum went really well, although the TV time pressure always makes me have to rush³¹. Interventions started early and kept coming. The first one from Australia on the web. There were actually three web interventions from Australia! I have done a lot of training workshops there, so there is a network of people.

The intervention that stands out for me was the last one. A woman in the audience yelled stop and replaced Nico when she is packing. She started crying loudly. She wailed about Otis, about why he had to die, about wanting to see the body, about doing something to remember him. In conversation after something became clear to me. Her need to feel about this issue is our collective need to feel – or the flip side of our collective desire not to feel. It is central to our inaction to actually solve the problem. It is something we intellectualize, because if we feel it, what do we do? I asked the audience if they understood what I meant and so many raised their hands. What if the policy we made was not from our heads – but from our hearts?

In the winding up, I read the list of locations that had logged into the chat space. A prolonged standing ovation for the project, and also I think tonight, for the global reach.

³⁰ This turned out to be major. Shawna's mike didn't work at all and others kept dropping in and out. Mike Keeping spent many hours trying to rebalance the sound for the DVD, but could do what he could do. This is so tragic, as the DVD becomes, in a way, what the project was.

³¹ Even though this wasn't a live telecast, it was going to air on SHAW Cable, from tape, in a 2 hour time slot. If I didn't bring the show down in 2 hours, it would have to be edited.

We had a company meeting after the show to discuss what had happened with Bob. We needed to do this in order for the company to be able to move over into the New Westminster space in good faith. We also talked about Martin and the possibility of him coming back into the play. The company agreed with the process I had laid out in order for that to feel healthy for everyone, and agreed that if it was going to happen, we would need to spend some unscheduled time back in rehearsal, which they were all willing to do.

The run at Holy Trinity Cathedral (New Westminster)

December 1, 2009

Holly and I each spent a good part of the day today trying to talk with the relevant people regarding Martin. In my case, this led to a conversation with a knowledgeable support person who, although she knew how much this meant to him, was not certain it was a good idea. This was also my (and Holly's) instinct. Holly was unable to reach a doctor on the list. This was complicated by the fact that Martin leaving the hospital was not at the hospital's instigation – therefore was not being followed by a mental health team in the community.

The set, lights and show look great in the Holy Trinity Hall in New Westminster. The technical crew did a spectacular job building a theatre in there using our touring stage and a full lighting grid and sound system.

The cast, Stage Manager and I got there for 2PM. With one thing and another Technical Rehearsal didn't start until almost 3, but went fairly quickly. We reworked a number of entrances and exits, made sure the chair fight in the SRO was safe, and reblocked the tasering completely so it would be safe on the portable stage. Then we did a rather sleepy run and notes.

We set out 80 chairs, going into the evening with 56 reservations. The show was a bit sleepy (emotionally) tonight. It "woke up" about half-way through.

The Forum was quite rich. A young guy replaced Otis with Bob and invited him for toast. They had a really human exchange – one that changed Bob's trajectory completely. In discussion I asked the intervener if he knew Otis and he said 'no' and then his eyes teared up and he said 'yes'. 'I haven't lived in a tarp, but I have felt homeless'. We talked about homelessness as a state of mind as well as a physical reality. You could feel the emotion in the audience, and this being an access point to understanding the issue, reaching across a psychological divide to people living under bridges.

A man replaced Cloud in the scene where Katie drinks and, trying to get her to not drink, said – you say I am your street-son, I want to be your son. This led to an interesting domino effect. Shawna was happy there would be more whiskey for her; Bob offered her \$40 and slept on Shawna's floor; he didn't

get fleeced, didn't go running off into the morning. We never know what we do.....

We are all really tired and have to find the energy for this final leg of the run.

December 2, 2009

103 people in the audience today. "Not bad" for a Wednesday night in a New Westminster Church Hall! ;) We had to pull out more chairs.

When I asked the question about connection to the issues off the top at least 80% raised their hands, and only 5 people had been to Forum Theatre before. It would be 50-60% each night in Vancouver. This means we are playing to a very new audience here.

The play wasn't as tired today as last night. And the Forum, while it had some long silences in it, didn't have "scary" silences. They were deep thinking silences. And there were some great, complex interventions.

A man yelled stop and replaced Nico and convinced Otis to come to the SRO with her, to protect her from Cloud. Cloud and Otis know each other, of course and so this "reunion" was weird for Nico. Cloud agreed to take care of Nico – if Otis would come to work for him. This took Otis down a whole other path that Nico didn't want, and did nothing in the end to protect Nico – Otis still insisted she stay at the SRO and not the Tarp. One of the most interesting things about this intervention was the authenticity of the intervener, himself a homeless person, highly invested in what was going on. Of course this opened up insights for everyone into the complexity of the relationships, and how hard it is to trust those relationships and build real community.

Martin was at the play tonight. I acknowledged him at the top of the play (when I explained the cast change, as I always do). We also asked him to join us on stage at the end of the evening for curtain call. Lots of hugging.

I sat and talked with him a bit after about the realities of coming back, as we had agreed, but he had already decided himself that it was unrealistic. It is possible that after my conversation with his support person, that she talked with him herself.³²

I'm too tired to write more tonight. I'll just say that when I asked one of the interveners if he had anything to say before he left the stage, he said "Bless this play."

³² I have been in touch with Martin numerous times in person and via email, into the New Year. His living situation remains fluid, as perhaps it always will, and he also sounds healthy. He continues to express gratitude for his participation in the project.

December 3, 2009

More about last night: A man replaced Otis in the taser scene and worked hard to not lose his temper. This led to not getting tasered but did not resolve the housing issue.

When we left the theatre one of the audience members was outside. A homeless woman who (I think) had come with one of the groups. She was clutching a potted plant. She had no where to go. Gail Franklin (Community Scribe on the project) called around and found her shelter in Abbotsford (where Gail lives) and took her there.

I went into tonight's show thinking we were sold out for some reason – not certain where that info came from. We had 60+ reservations and possibly 70+ people in the house. A good turn-out but a disappointment for the cast, who are now used to larger houses. It is being difficult to explain to them that the numbers are actually really good numbers, especially considering we have no track record in New Westminster.

I'd say a good 30% of the audience had mental health issues tonight. This is a positive thing, as we are drawing the base of the issue – and also a very challenging thing. It really freaked the cast out.

A man yelled stop, came to the foot of the stage and when I asked him who he wanted to replace he said “the lights”. Stopped me cold. Pardon me? Who do you want to replace? I don't know. Do you have an idea to create safe, appropriate housing? I think so. Who do you want to replace? The Crack Head. OK – the intervention is to replace Shawna. From where? Reading the paper. OK. And then he started reading the paper. Really reading the paper. After awhile I asked if he did have an idea that he wanted to try. He responded with, “I think I want to go back to the audience now”. OK – loud applause from his support people.

A young man yelled stop and took over from the same place and gave us a Shawna who was more interested in Nico, one who understood about the room and it needing cleaning, and the meaning of the friend's suicide in the room. This Shawna and Nico would collaborate on cleaning the room. The beginning of community building.

A man yelled stop and replaced Bob with Otis. He wanted someone to be the “bad voices” in Bob's head and say mean things to him. OK...Bob agreed to play this role for the audience member. A scene with Otis started in which a connection got made between the two, but the intervener never once addressed the voices in his head, having asked for them to come alive on the stage. I asked him if he was getting what he wanted and he explained that, yes, he wanted people to see that Bob had voices in his head. This lead me to asking that interventions not be attempts to show the audience things, but attempts to create safe, appropriate housing. Still, I wondered, what could we understand from the way Otis and Bob bonded, because this changed Bob's

trajectory through the whole play if these two could break through the barriers that separate them. It was really important to find both dramatic and issue value in what had just happened.

A young man replaced Katie and, when Cloud gave Shawna the crack, insisted Shawna enter detox. This set Shawna off – very angry – timing is everything, of course. It is hard to suggest detox in the middle of a drug deal.

Two different women replaced the BC Housing worker, both tried to be “nicer” to Katie, and both ended up pissing her off because all they could/would do is have her at the bottom of the list in a nicer way. This did, though, allow us to talk about being trapped inside a system that isn’t working and policies to make it work better.

Later, the young man (again) replaced Bob in the SRO when Nico hauls out the mattress. He took the bug-infested mattress and hauled it over to Otis and the tarp!! (THIS has never happened before.) Otis, remembering Bob, set up a little porch for him next to the tarp, not wanting the mattress inside. Innovative, yes, but would Bob do this?? Never, insisted our Bob, who is falling out of a high-rise in the west end, and I believe him.

And it went like this – some very complicated interventions that took really a lot of time – so much so that I had to skip large parts of the play.

After the show many cast members were “down” about tonight. It was too weird for them. I found myself challenging their perceptions of the evening. In the same way we talk, from the stage, about the solutions to the issues needing to meet people where they are, the play and Forum need to do the same thing. This Forum tonight *was* odd, and it was also very successful. This audience went from dead silent to highly animated. It was like riding a bronco sometimes. This Forum was what this audience made it into; it was what they needed it to be, and it wasn’t a failure – it was really successful. It isn’t our place to judge the audience. Our role is to respond, in character, as honestly as possible, to what they are bringing to the stage.

December 4, 2009

120+ people there tonight. We had a very good show and Forum. Fascinating, when the audience was streaming in, I was worried. They looked so middle class (here I am, judging the audience – so hard to stop). But there was a great deal of knowledge in the room – people coming to the stage who had lived under tarps, in SRO’s and who did advocacy work in the homelessness arena. A reminder that we mustn’t judge people by their appearances.

The “should Otis be allowed to stay in his tarp” question was constantly controversial. No one wants to see a tarp city become our “answer” to social housing. At the same time, the answer cannot continue to be “we need more housing”. Of course we do. While we wait and wait and wait for that housing...what do we do? Personally, I am frustrated by the activism that

says we should not allow tent cities because doing so lets the Government off the hook. This is like saying to the pan-handler that s/he should just be patient because good people are working on poverty issues.

There were some very heartfelt interventions tonight. In particular at the end of the play from an elderly woman who replaced Nico and wept with Katie and Cloud – cried for her loss of Otis, and how alone she felt. Her courage in allowing herself to mourn with these two people who are reaching out to her in the SRO created the space for community connections to be made.

December 5, 2009

Another full house – at least 110 people in there. Exact numbers to come.

Every audience and night is so different. The show was a little emotionally flat tonight and the audience response to the show was really quiet. It usually gets some laughs. None tonight.

But the Forum started fairly quickly and was lively throughout, with a real mix of knowledge and naiveté on the stage. Neither is good or bad, really – we learn from both.

A man who had been homeless himself replaced Otis and agreed to pack up his things and go with Nico. A huge sacrifice for Otis, but it comes out of his friendship and using that as a way to crack through his isolation.

There were some unusual interventions. One from a woman, thinking wishfully, that Nico, listening in her room, would rush out just before Katie is going to break her sobriety and “partner” with Katie – take her for a walk outside. Of course our Nico suggests that the chances of this happening, just having had her buggy mattress thrown back in her face, are as good as a snowball’s surviving in hell. However, there is a real desire there in Nico for connection that we can relate to and work with. If Nico can find a way to reach out this way – reach through her isolation and distrust – so many things change. Her trajectory in the play, of course changes. In this instance, taking Katie out of the SRO puzzle temporarily, so did Bob’s trajectory change. No sleeping on the couch, no getting robbed, etc. Fascinating.

As has happened a few times a man replaced Cloud and got Bob his bag back in the morning. Cloud taking responsibility – creating safety of sorts in his own home.

I have a feeling that some of the interventions like this are both people who have lived these issues reliving successes and also experimenting ways to create a better environment for themselves in situations in which they are currently living.

There is a climate out there, I think, of dependence on energies from outside the community to fix things – but this just isn't successful often enough. The characters in our play CAN take control of local, grassroots solution. They must, because they have been waiting too long. This statement was made from the stage (not by me) a number of times.

Nigel Harvey, a community-based theatre director came to the show tonight and loved it. He also really appreciated the practicality of the quick conversations around policy. Gail was swamped at the end of the evening, again. One final show tomorrow.

December 6, 2009

Closing night. Somewhere around 110 people tonight. Houses have been great – congrats, everyone.

The show was solid tonight – emotionally engaged. A good final performance. The audience was deeply engaged. After the show a woman came to me and started to say thank you and then burst into tears. Through the tears she told me that her relationship to the homeless issue will never be the same after tonight – it has become un-ignorable. She gave me a big hug, and left.

A woman replaced Shawna in the first scene and wanted her to be the bridge-builder in the SRO – to embrace Nico when she walks in the door, to get Katie to help the two of them clean out Nico's room. When I asked our Shawna how feasible this was, her response was, "not at all, all I am interested in right now is where the next hit of crack is coming from". We do have to work through Shawna's addiction in order to find an authentic solution.

A woman replaced Katie in the BC Housing scene and gave us a very organized Katie – one that had an advocate. During the intervention another woman wanted to replace the BC Housing worker and did so. She entered that character's struggle and offered to try to sort something out "by tomorrow, if Katie came back". Really? I asked? You going to do that? Yes. Katie, are you going to come back? Yes. OK then, it is tomorrow. The woman turned to me and called me a bastard (A joke, I think) and continued. She offered Katie a "small apartment" that had come up, if she could move today. Katie leapt at it. "How many in the room think this is possible?" Maybe 15%. Impossible? Maybe 70%. Why impossible? The places don't exist. She doesn't have the power. This led to many policy suggestions for Gail.

An elderly woman replaced the Police Officer in the tasing tonight. She tried, really hard, to get Otis to agree to go to another shelter. He refused. She was certain that, unless he agreed, she would taser him, even though she didn't want to. This woman represented something tangible in the audience tonight – the "other side" as it were – and it is great that these folks were in the room. She believes that Otis is obliged to accept the shelter option and if he refuses, should be removed by force.

Another example, when I asked about whether or not Otis should be able to stay where he was, a man yelled – “yes, as long as he is not outside my business”. This is the dilemma, exactly. I thanked him for speaking his mind. The presence of these people and the ideas they express, add to the depth of the conversation in the room.

We had a nice curtain (another standing ovation) with some of the workshop participants, production team and Headlines’ Staff on the stage. Bouquets of flowers and really handsomely done mounted posters were handed out. Audience members, as they have been doing, swamped Gail.

I’ve said this before but will repeat it – this has been a tremendous team on this project. I am certain that not only was the theatre solid, but the activist side of the work did real, lasting good. Thanks so very much – one and all.

Stay tuned for progress reports on the Community Action Report.³³

Closing Party

We had a lovely closing night party with the cast, including Martin, many workshop participants, the production team and office staff. People were given very nicely mounted posters and full publicity kits. I was presented with a lovely hand-made gift from the cast – a really accurate model representation of the tarp part of the set, complete with shopping cart, toaster and other tiny props. We watched a slide show of production pictures, got a preview of the DVD, which was still in process, and did a lot of hugging.

³³ The Community Action Report is available at:
http://headlinestheatre.com/past_work/after_homelessness/reports_after_homelessness.htm

Appendix 1 – Housing the Participants and Cast Report

Adeline Huynh, Production Manager

Introduction

From the inception of the project we had budgeted to provide temporary housing for some project participants for the duration of the project and a few weeks beyond to allow for a transition period. The initial offer in our recruitment brochure was to arrange accommodation for up to two workshop participants for one month, and for two cast members for three months. We knew we could not ask people to commit to intense eight-hour days exploring issues out of their own lives around homelessness and mental health, and then have them return home to unsafe conditions in shelters, tarps in the park or unsupported SROs. Unless, of course this was their choice to do so, however, to have choices meant that there had to be options.³⁴

The lesson learned from working with street-entrenched people during our 2004 project “Practicing Democracy” was that supported housing not just temporary accommodations would need to be provided for both workshop participants and cast members³⁵. Back in 2004, two workshop participants were put up at the Del Mar Inn for approximately three weeks and two cast members for approximately two months. However, this temporary housing situation came with some complications:

Ironic this housing problem... We are coming face to face with a core issue with people who are homeless...it is hard for Rick to fit into the structures that exist... The places that are affordable, like the Princess Rooms, are where people are getting beat up in the hallways. At the shelter where Rick was living, he talks about rolling over onto needles. Maybe this is something that makes it into the play, it is certainly affecting our work.³⁶

Unsafe housing of course would become the focus of our current project, five years after these issues first became apparent in “Practicing Democracy”. The mental health aspect of our project was also a big concern. As I was exploring short-term accommodations, applications to be a part of the project were coming in from a

³⁴ One cast member who had been living in a tarp for years, chose to have a room set aside for him at the Beacon Hotel so that he could be indoors when it got too cold and rainy, while also maintaining his home in his tarp.

³⁵ Housing was also provided to the street youth involved with “Squeegee” (1999).

³⁶ From “Practicing Democracy Final Report,” by David Diamond, 2004, p. 18.

wide variety of people that had been or who were currently homeless. It soon became clear from reading the application letters that temporary accommodations like the Del Mar Inn could not address the support that many of the applicants with mental health issues would need.

Process: Finding Housing for participants

I started to explore the possibility of finding supported housing and reached out to a contact I made during “Shattering” the 2008 remount of our addictions project – Erin Matthews, Director of Programming at the Stanley Hotel (run by the PHS Community Services Society³⁷). From the start she was an enthusiastic supporter of the project and of Headline’s work in communities. She offered to support me in navigating BC Housing but we both knew that with the long wait-lists it would be impossible to guarantee that those in our project who needed to be housed would be done so in a timely manner.³⁸

When Erin went on a leave from her position a few weeks before the interviews began to select participants and cast members, she handed over the coordination to two very capable colleagues – Mariner Janes who was taking over her position at the Stanley and Nikolas Longstaff, Program Manager of the Beacon Hotel. All three were extremely generous with their time. Mariner was especially helpful when it came to putting together a Housing Questionnaire (see below) that was distributed to workshop participants and cast members that had indicated during the interview process that they were in need of housing.

By the time the workshop began on Oct. 17, 2009, four workshop participants were housed in PHS buildings (one at the Stanley Hotel, two at the Beacon Hotel, and one at the Rainer Hotel³⁹). While, one cast member had an extended rental at a hotel outside of the DTES that was being partially subsidized by Headlines Theatre, and another was actively looking for housing with the help of a homelessness outreach team from RainCity Housing and Support Services Society. I also

³⁷ The PHS provides low/no barrier transitional housing to the hardest-to-house, and aims to create stability for residents who need support because of mental illness, addiction, poverty, or any other reasons.

³⁸ The workshop was full of horror stories of years-long waits to get into BC Housing accommodations.

³⁹ Alcohol- and-drug-free housing for women in transition from detox. The focus of the facilities is for former sex-trade workers who are self-referred or referred through their detox program. Women access the Rainier after completing detox treatment, and remain in the program to stabilize their health and they establish a foundation for ongoing recovery.

connected the cast member who was staying at an extended-stay hotel with the RainCity Outreach Team, and towards the end of the run of the play he also began to actively look for affordable housing with the Team's support. In mid-December, after the play was finished he found a place in North Vancouver. In addition, the Counselor/Support Person attached to the project was invaluable in providing support to those who were settling into new housing, for some it had been years since they had been indoors.

Challenges

I greatly appreciated the PHS' policy of low-to-no barrier housing. On several occasions, I would make a phone call in the morning on behalf of a project participant and was told that that person could move in that afternoon. This was especially impressive considering that every single person we placed in one of their buildings came with extremely complicated life situations and needs. For example, one workshop participant who had been in-and-out of shelters for years refused to move indoors without his girlfriend. Furthermore, because of his particular situation they needed to share a room (which is against PHS policy's of one person per room). Another issue arose for one workshop participant who had been having some difficulties getting into supported housing in the DTES because a nurse who was part of the medical team that provided regular visits to many of the supported SROs had a restraining order against him. The staff at the PHS handled these challenges as they came up, and no one was turned away.

The PHS staff at the Beacon Hotel was also very supportive when a crisis occurred the day before the opening night of the play. A cast member did not show up for rehearsal on preview night, as this was very uncharacteristic of him it caused alarm from the onset. He was still missing that evening and as Headline's staff went into crisis-management mode, I was in regular contact with staff at the Beacon. We also knew that this cast member divided his time between staying indoors and sleeping in a tarp that had been his home for a long time. The night before he disappeared he did not stay in his room at the Beacon. He was eventually located having checked himself into a hospital.⁴⁰ It was beneficial to Headlines' staff to have personal and direct access to support staff inside the buildings that project participants were housed in. In contrast, I found it difficult to communicate with

⁴⁰ See Artistic Director's report for details.

participants, who often did not have phones, who were staying in unsupported SROs.

Another complication that arose occurred for one cast member who was in a situation that made it impossible for him to be placed in a PHS building (not only did he have a court ordered ban from being in any hotels in the DTES, but he had a family that included an infant daughter). I reached out to some of our community contacts at homelessness and housing organizations and was given some very valuable advice. But it was RainCity that offered concrete support.

With the help of Alison Homer and Jesse Grub, two members of the RainCity Homelessness Outreach Team, the cast member and his partner were able to better navigate their BC Housing application, and were given support in searching for affordable housing, dealing with landlords who often have a bias against renting to people receiving welfare, and filling out rental applications and contracts. They were able to secure an apartment and moved in at the beginning of November. RainCity also provided the young family with a housing subsidy. However, with the astronomical cost of living in Vancouver, the only apartment they were able to afford with the amount of money they received through the housing portion of welfare, and even with the added RainCity subsidy was in a run-down building in a rougher neighbourhood. The cast member told me about finding a needle on the floor in the apartment and being worried because what if it was his infant daughter crawling around that came across it first? While it was not an ideal situation, he was happy to not be couch-surfing at friends' places, something the young family had been doing for over four months. The family is currently navigating a move, with continued support from Headlines, through BC Housing.

Follow-up & On-going search for housing

Although the project is over for all intents and purposes, we have maintained contact with some cast members and workshop participants that have gained access to housing as a direct result of the project. At least two cast members are actively looking for better housing with the help of the RainCity Outreach Team. The consensus is that the on-going search to find affordable, appropriate housing in Vancouver and navigating BC Housing is beyond frustrating, but that support from RainCity has been invaluable. The two participants housed in PHS buildings that I have contacted are still very happy with their housing situation. The participant who is residing at the Rainer Hotel is especially benefiting from the support and

sense of community that she has found living in a building that is specifically designed for women in recovery. While, the cast member who had been residing in both the Beacon and his tarp chose not to stay on at the Beacon, he did find an affordable rental suite in Surrey. However, at the time this report was written he had decided to move back outdoors. This is the cyclical nature of the issue.

Conclusion

Taking on the task of finding housing for project participants entailed a lot more work than I originally anticipated. Without a doubt it has been a great learning experience for me. It allowed me to gain insight into the BC Housing process and the multiple systemic barriers people who are homeless come up against in their search to find a home. Not to mention that many also have mental illness (often untreated), addictions and concurrent disorders to contend with as well. I have also witnessed first hand, that not only is low/no-barrier housing provided by organizations like the PHS and RainCity absolutely essential, but that their staff and support workers need to be able to have the flexibility and permission at a systemic-level to make decisions in a humane way. I am certain that finding housing for project participants in such a short time frame combined with the challenges and barriers that they arrived with would have been impossible without the active support of the PHS and RainCity. Through this experience, I also saw first hand how essential Headlines' practice of reaching out to grassroots organizations working on the issue really is. This enabled me to use existing relationships to seek support when I needed it, and in turn to introduce project participants to community resources they were not aware of before.

Organizations that provided housing/subsidies/support:

The **PHS Community Services Society** – provided ongoing support to facilitate the housing of up to 4 workshop participants and cast members. Two workshop participants was given long-term housing, a cast member was given temporary housing at the Beacon Hotel.

Raincity Housing and Support Society – the Homelessness Outreach Team is providing ongoing support to three cast members to find affordable housing outside of the DTES. Also, provided housing subsidies.

Organizations that offered support:

Additional support in the form of information provided and guidance were given by **Lookout Society, More Than A Roof Mennonite Housing Society, The Salvation Army shelter in New Westminster, The Kettle Friendship Center, The Carnegie Center, Gospel Mission shelter, and Judy Graves the Housing Advocate for the City of Vancouver.**

Housing Questionnaire

The following questions will help us to determine your needs in terms of supported housing. Headlines Theatre is working with the PHS Community Services Society to help facilitate placement in one of their supported housing units for up to 2 workshop participants and up to 2 cast members. The more detailed and accurate your answers are, the better we can help you find housing that is appropriate for your needs.

Name: _____

Gender: _____

Age: _____

Contact Info: _____

1. Are you currently receiving social assistance from the Government (Eg. the Ministry of Housing and Social Development)?

Mark with an X: _____ Yes _____ No

a) If yes, what kind and for how long?

b) If no, do you know if you would be eligible to receive social assistance? Please explain.

2. Are you currently living at a shelter? _____ Yes _____ No

Name of shelter _____

3. Please describe what your current living situation is:

E.g. "Couch surfing"; Temporary in a hotel/motel; Living in the street

4. Are you in recovery from a drug and/or alcohol addiction?

_____ Yes _____ No _____ Currently struggling with addiction

5. Do you prefer to find housing in a building for people in recovery?

_____ Yes _____ No

6. Have you been diagnosed with a mental illness by a doctor or psychiatrist?

_____ Yes _____ No

a) If yes, are you currently taking medication? _____ Yes _____ No

*7. Do you have any physical challenges and/or health issues that you would like us to be aware of? _____ Yes _____ No

a) If yes, please explain:

*Most of the buildings operated by the PHS are NOT wheel chair accessible, and so we may not be able to accommodate some physical challenges.

+Please note that currently the supportive housing units run by the PHS are located in the Vancouver Downtown Eastside.

By signing this questionnaire you are giving Headlines Theatre permission to share the information provided here to relevant parties such as employees and persons acting on behalf of the PHS Community Services Society, BC Housing and others.

Signature

Please Print your name

Date _____, 2009

Appendix 2 – Box Office Figures

VOUCHERS = FREE ENTRY FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS / COMPS = COMPLIMENTARY TICKETS FOR OPENING NIGHT, SPONSORS, ETC.

Box Office Breakdown - After Homelessness - Firehall Arts Centre

| | No. | Price/ticket | Total | less \$2 s/c | less \$1 En. | Total |
|--------------------------------------|------------|--------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------------|--|
| Friday, November 20 - Preview | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 29 | x \$12 | \$ 348.00 | \$ 58.00 | \$ 29.00 | \$ 261.00 |
| Y - Half Price | 33 | x \$6 | \$ 198.00 | | \$ 33.00 | \$ 165.00 |
| Vouchers | 20 | | | | | |
| Comps | 33 | | | | | 84.56% |
| Total | 115 | | \$ 546.00 | \$ 58.00 | \$ 62.00 | \$ 426.00 |
| Saturday, November 21 | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 51 | x \$12 | \$ 612.00 | \$ 102.00 | \$ 51.00 | \$ 459.00 |
| Y - At Door | | x \$10 | | | \$ - | \$ - |
| Vouchers | 22 | | | | | |
| Comps | 63 | | | | | 100.00% |
| Total | 136 | | \$ 612.00 | \$ 102.00 | \$ 51.00 | \$ 459.00 |
| Sunday, November 22 | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 28 | x \$12 | \$ 336.00 | \$ 56.00 | \$ 28.00 | \$ 252.00 |
| Y - At Door | 20 | x \$10 | \$ 200.00 | | \$ 20.00 | \$ 180.00 |
| Vouchers | 15 | | | | | |
| Comps | 45 | | | | | 79.41% |
| Total | 108 | | \$ 536.00 | \$ 56.00 | \$ 48.00 | \$ 432.00 |
| Tuesday, November 24 | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 42 | x \$12 | \$ 504.00 | \$ 84.00 | \$ 42.00 | \$ 378.00 |
| Y - At Door | 27 | x \$10 | \$ 270.00 | | \$ 27.00 | \$ 243.00 |
| Vouchers | 36 | | | | | |
| Comps | 2 | | | | | 78.68% |
| Total | 107 | | \$ 774.00 | \$ 84.00 | \$ 69.00 | \$ 621.00 |
| Wednesday, November 25 | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 59 | x \$12 | \$ 708.00 | \$ 118.00 | \$ 59.00 | \$ 531.00 |
| Y - At Door | 18 | x \$10 | \$ 180.00 | | \$ 18.00 | \$ 162.00 |
| Vouchers | 54 | | | | | |
| Comps | 4 | | | | | 99.26% |
| Total | 135 | | \$ 888.00 | \$ 118.00 | \$ 77.00 | \$ 693.00 |
| Thursday, November 26 | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 61 | x \$12 | \$ 732.00 | \$ 122.00 | \$ 61.00 | \$ 549.00 |
| Y - At Door | 24 | x \$10 | \$ 240.00 | | \$ 24.00 | \$ 216.00 |
| Vouchers | 40 | | | | | |
| Comps | 4 | | | | | 94.85% |
| Total | 129 | | \$ 972.00 | \$ 122.00 | \$ 85.00 | \$ 765.00 |
| Friday, November 27 | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 84 | x \$12 | \$ 1,008.00 | \$ 168.00 | \$ 84.00 | \$ 756.00 |
| Y - At Door | | x \$10 | | | \$ - | \$ - |
| Vouchers | 48 | | | | | |
| Comps | 3 | | | | | 99.26% |
| Total | 135 | | \$ 1,008.00 | \$ 168.00 | \$ 84.00 | \$ 756.00 |
| Saturday, November 28 | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 57 | x \$12 | \$ 684.00 | \$ 114.00 | \$ 57.00 | \$ 513.00 |
| Y - At Door | 29 | x \$10 | \$ 290.00 | | \$ 29.00 | \$ 261.00 |
| Vouchers | 27 | | | | | |
| Comps | 10 | | | | | 90.44% |
| Total | 123 | | \$ 974.00 | \$ 114.00 | \$ 86.00 | \$ 774.00 |
| Sunday, November 29 | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 70 | x \$12 | \$ 840.00 | \$ 140.00 | \$ 70.00 | \$ 630.00 |
| Y - At Door | 13 | x \$10 | \$ 130.00 | | \$ 13.00 | \$ 117.00 |
| Vouchers | 26 | | | | | |
| Comps | 10 | | | | | 87.50% |
| Total | 119 | | \$ 970.00 | \$ 140.00 | \$ 83.00 | \$ 747.00 |
| Box Office Total | | | \$ 7,280.00 | | | |
| Service Charge Total | | | \$ 962.00 | | | |
| Endowment Total | | | \$ 645.00 | | | |
| Total FireHall Box Office Fees | | | \$ 1,607.00 | | | |
| Total Revenue | | | \$ 5,673.00 | | | Percentage of House @ 136 seats 90.44% |
| Total Tickets | | | 1107 | | | |
| Total Advance Tickets | | | 481 | | | |
| Total At Door Tickets | | | 131 | | | |
| Total Half Price Tickets | | | 33 | | | |
| Total Paid Tickets | | | 645 | | | |
| Total Comps | | | 174 | | | |
| Total Vouchers | | | 288 | | | |
| Total Comps and Vouchers | | | 462 | | | |

VOUCHERS = FREE ENTRY FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS / COMPS = COMPLIMENTARY TICKETS FOR OPENING NIGHT, SPONSORS, ETC.

Box Office Breakdown - After Homelessness**Holy Trinity Cathedral - New Westminster**

| | No. | Price/ticket | Total | | | | |
|------------------------------------|------------|--------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Tuesday, December 1, 2009 | | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 35 | \$10.00 | \$ | 350.00 | | | |
| Y - At Door | 2 | \$10.00 | \$ | 20.00 | | | |
| Vouchers | 18 | | | | | | |
| Comps | 8 | | | percentage of House @ 100 seat | 63.00% | | |
| Total | 63 | | \$ | 370.00 | \$ | 0.63 | \$ - \$ 369.37 |
| Wednesday, December 2, 2009 | | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 14 | \$10.00 | \$ | 140.00 | | | |
| A1 - Advance - Discount 10% | 30 | \$270.00 | \$ | 270.00 | | | |
| Y - At Door | 2 x \$10 | | \$ | 20.00 | | | |
| Vouchers | 49 | | | | | | |
| Comps | 7 | | | Percentage of House @ 100 seats | 102.00% | | |
| Total | 102 | | \$ | 430.00 | \$ - \$ | - \$ | \$ 430.00 |
| Thursday, December 3 | | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 39 X 10 | | \$ | 390.00 | | | |
| Y - At Door | 9 x \$10 | | \$ | 90.00 | | | |
| Vouchers | 24 | | | | | | |
| Comps | 3 | | | Percentage of House @ 100 seats | 75.00% | | |
| Total | 75 | | \$ | 480.00 | \$ - \$ | - \$ | \$ 480.00 |
| Friday, December 4 | | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 71 | \$10.00 | \$ | 710.00 | | | |
| A1 - Advance - Discount 10%10 | 0 | \$9.00 | \$ | - | | | |
| Y - At Door | 9 x \$10 | | \$ | 90.00 | | | |
| Vouchers | 49 | | | | | | |
| Comps | 3 | | | Percentage of House @ 100 seats | 132.00% | | |
| Total | 132 | | \$ | 800.00 | \$ - \$ | - \$ | \$ 800.00 |
| Saturday, December 5 | | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 71 | \$10.00 | \$ | 710.00 | | | |
| Y - At Door | 1 x \$10 | | \$ | 10.00 | | | |
| Vouchers | 26 | | | | | | |
| Comps | 4 | | | Percentage of House @ 100 seats | 102.00% | | |
| Total | 102 | | \$ | 720.00 | \$ - \$ | - \$ | \$ 720.00 |
| Sunday, December 6 | | | | | | | |
| A - Advance | 64 | \$10.00 | \$ | 640.00 | | | |
| Y - At Door | 0 x \$10 | | \$ | - | | | |
| Vouchers | 32 | | | | | | |
| Comps | 0 | | | Percentage of House @ 100 seats | 96.00% | | |
| Total | 96 | | \$ | 640.00 | \$ - \$ | - \$ | \$ 640.00 |
| Box Office Total | | \$ 3,440.00 | | | | | |
| Total Revenue | | \$ 3,440.00 | | | Percentage of House @ 100 seats | | 95.00% |
| Total Tickets | | 570 | | | | | |
| Total Advance Tickets | | 324 | | | | | |
| Total At Door Tickets | | 23 | | | | | |
| Total Paid Tickets | | 347 | | | | | |
| Total Comps | | 25 | | | | | |
| Total Vouchers | | 198 | | | | | |
| Total Comps and Vouchers | | 223 | | | | | |

Appendix 3 – audience response to *after homelessness...*

Positive Feedback

“I lived on the porch of Rectory/Holy Trinity Cathedral for almost 5 months. *After homelessness...* really hit Home, so to speak. I thought it was very well done! It has inspired me to try to help the Street People I met while I was outside. I was never homeless while at Trinity. Many thanx for an excellent play.”

Lawrence, audience member

“*After homelessness...* may be the most important show you can see this year.”

Jerry Wasserman, Vancouverplays.com

I attended the *after homelessness...* performance last night. I am blown away by the creativity of this project & integrity it gives all in allowing us to truly empathize and take responsibility for the tragedy that this city has been riding through for years. Bravo for all your hard work, you should be highly commended for this important piece.

Lisa Fox Valdes, audience member

“*After homelessness...* is unlike any other theatrical experience I had ever seen. It felt like we were watching real people facing real issues. In a conventional play, no matter how much I suspend my disbelief I know that I’m watching actors playing roles. Here, while I knew that these actors were playing fictional roles, the experiences were real and their performances were coming from a very real place. It wasn’t just acting, it was re-acting, and, quite possibly, re-living. Knowing the context of the source of the material made the play more visceral...the actors were completely believable.

Even more powerful than the initial performance of *after homelessness...* were the performances of the (audience members) who took on the re-imagining of roles. With the performance pushing just over two hours with no intermission, it actually felt too short. Even thinking back about it now makes me emotional. This play was a gift to people who needed a way to speak, because by speaking truthfully they can become strong and heal. I am immensely grateful to have experienced those moments. Remember, it’s not about you and me or them, *it’s about us*.

Glen Gaetz, audience member (from Glen’s blog)

“Some of the most profound moments I have ever experienced in theatre occurred during this performance (*after homelessness...*). Don't go if you want to feel comfortable and secure in your life. It is only for those who want to feel hopeful, uncertain, aware, responsible, angry - in other words, connected.”

Jennifer Brooks, audience member

“I participated in Headlines Theatre’s *after homelessness...* last night and it was an awesome experience! Totally engaging and thought-provoking. No easy answers of course but there were intriguing contributions from the audience, many of whom had had personal experience with homelessness or could relate to some of the feelings and experiences depicted. (It is) an experience like no other you have had. It is significant to our lives as people in this community who are engaged citizens; people who together can take actions to effect positive change. As David Diamond said, in one way or another, we’re all affected by homelessness. And it’s true.”

Melinda Suto, audience member

"I have just been to see *after homelessness*.... This was the first time I have been "in" an SRO, although I have heard the term many times, and the first time I really grasped the horror of living there. Now I can understand the need to create and enforce legislation dealing with SROs.

This was the first time I really understood the depth of attachment a street person can have to their shelter (a tarp in the play). Now I understand why people are calling for "tent cities" here on the west coast. I understand why it's important to have safe, humane policies for moving the homeless and their improvised shelters. The play's director, David Diamond, explained to us (the audience) that one of the purposes of theatre is to create an image of reality and place it before the eyes of the audience. He and his theatre company accomplished this around the issue of homelessness and a whole roomful of people were the wiser for it."

Michael Duff, audience member, excerpted from a letter to the Premier of BC, Finance and Culture Ministers.

"*after homelessness*... is phenomenal. Giant congratulations to all of you. I have passed the following along to all my local friends: Please see this life changing show! We've all driven by the homeless and wondered what to do. You can be part of this dialogue with your fellow humans who have struggled with homelessness."

Kim Hayashi, audience member

"*after homelessness*... is a remarkable piece of theatre. Images of the play have stuck with me. It was sold out Saturday night, I think (or very close to it) and it certainly deserves to be sold out every night."

Jennifer Gray-Grant, audience member

"Your insightful production (*after homelessness*...) gave me food for thought. Law makers need to get rid of having to chase soft drug dealers, instead, government should be making money in the marijuana industry. Then use this money in the health care industry beginning with mental health. What the hell, we claim to love our children. We have telethons for them we do wonderful things - then what happens after they are no longer cute little kids; or the kids that slip through the cracks.

I have lived in horror watching my children crumble from substance abuse. No one is watching, no one is there. Any how loved your play. Please continue the good work."

Elinor Stock, audience member

"I attended a performance of *after homelessness*. I would just like you all to know, cast, crew and anyone who helped. YOU ARE TRULY DOING SOMETHING!!!! Words cannot express the enjoyment and the thought-process that the play gave to me. I myself was left with an urge to become more involved in my city's crisis. This is theatre at its most genuine form, thank you very much for this great experience."

Alec J Ross, audience member

"Congrats on *after homelessness*... - a superb community engagement project . I can't wait to see the report that comes out of this. I was only able to see one community dialogue and one evening play, it was wonderfully authentic and generous.

We were also able to project the webcast at the Squamish Helping Hands Society, so about 10 homeless adults here were able to see it too. From reports I heard of the evening, their eyes were glued to the screen. It was a miracle that the community here got together and made it happen but it was sure easier than getting people to Vancouver to see it. Not the same as being there live, but the webcast is such a great mechanism for getting people connected. Thank you so much."

Nicole McRae, audience and Headlines' Board Member

“*After Homelessness...* was gripping, while excruciating. One couldn't help but think, “How can I know this and not act to help?” The acting was intense, as most of these performers had intimate experience of homelessness in some respect. The humanity of the homeless characters was authentic. This theatre piece did not just entertain. It sent the audience out with a mission: to engage others in dialogue about homelessness, to advocate for homeless people, and to demand government action on homelessness. There is no more noble goal for theatre than that it change people's lives. In the case of *after Homelessness...*, change occurred, not only in the lives of the audience, but, hopefully, in the lives of many homeless people.”

Faune Johnson, audience member

“*After homelessness...*” is a compelling production, guaranteed to rip away the don't-get-involved complacency of any middle-class viewer. The play features six main characters, performed by actors who have all known homelessness in their own lives. These range from Nico, a young, dreadlocked rebel with a punk attitude and a desire to remain drug-free, and Shawna, a crack-addicted thief, to Bob, a near-broke man on lithium who finds solace in alcohol after eviction from his condo. In another play, these characters could well appear as crusty stereotypes, eliciting pity or even dismissal from a contemptuous audience. (*After homelessness...*) invites audience-members to think beyond knee-jerk responses and bureaucratic models that degrade people and their situations. Instead, it offers viewers the chance to respond immediately, from their guts.”

Heather Conn, audience member

“*After Homelessness...* was my first ‘theatre making policy’ show ever. I very much appreciated the way you facilitated audience participation and conversation. Your questions for the actors and participants drew out responses that were helpful in really connecting with the ‘dialogue behind the rhetoric’ and deeper thoughts and feelings. Thanks for helping us to better see and understand.”

Lisl Baker, audience member

“I was at *after homelessness...* last night. Congratulations on a remarkable production....the most powerful to date.”

Beryl Wilson, audience member

“I just wanted to thank you for our clients to be able to go and see *after homelessness...* I only got positive feedback from clients who attended. Our clients sometimes experience homelessness and poverty first hand, and they were able to emotionally connect to the production for sure.”

Kathy Bencsik, Burnaby Family Life/Life Skills Services

“I attended *after homelessness...* and was amazed at the style and grace that came from the players and the direction of the show. The play was so well written, acted and kept me on the edge of sanity. I was in that place in one time in my life and was brought back to that way of life very quickly. The intervention aspect was invigorating. I was immediately up and acting in the production. I really hope that this gets some well deserved credit.”

David G, audience member

“Magnificent show!”

Judy Graves, Coordinator, Tenant Assistance Program, City of Vancouver

“I really enjoyed *after homelessness...* My husband works for Project Comeback out of Newton Advocacy and I work as a nurse in Surrey in the community so am not a stranger to the homeless population. I think the actors did an amazing job, especially if it was an emotional experience for them. It was well presented, the content was great, and it gave me a greater understanding of the need for proper housing. I hadn't realized before what a toxic environment these people are faced with every day. Thanks so much for a very enjoyable evening.”

Cathy Anderson, audience member

"I found the whole experience of *after homelessness*... quite gripping. The participation of the audience in the scenes was very educational for me. I left the performance feeling like I knew more than I did when I came in...and that for me was gold."

Mark Cseszko, audience member

"I found myself learning about something I thought I "knew" in *after homelessness*.... It is a hard topic to deal with and to make it work because the media is always talking about it on the news. The fact that the actors have experienced the hardships of homelessness/poverty/drug addiction/alcoholism leaves a strong mark as spectator. The idea of the director encouraging the audience to participate and put themselves in the shoes of the characters is excellent. Real, Wonderful and touching! Thanks and hope to see more of it."

Carolina G., audience member

"This Friday I had an experience that helped me to understand the power of theater as a tool to not only tell stories, but to retell them in new ways until the injustices within them are healed, and how acting can be used as a tool for empowerment, community building, and as a way to reclaim dignity. I went to see Headlines Theatre's production *After Homelessness*. Right away, the set got to me. I chose to sit in the first row and the bare light bulbs in rooms smaller than prison cells, the stained couch with dirty rigs hiding in the cushions and the walls thick with scum, made my Kitsilano born and raised self uncomfortable. When the play started, I didn't feel like I was watching a play, the characters were so real and I was so close that I felt like I was halfway in that "hotel". The characters were that real party because most of the actors have lived or are living the stories they were telling. The specifics were fictional, but by reading the bios in the program and by seeing their integrity on stage, I got the impression that they were telling a story that they felt in their bones and they believed really needed to be told. They brought humanity to the oppressive and inhuman conditions of the SRO hotel and sent a clear message to the audience that no person on this earth deserves to live in such a hostile space.

One of the most powerful moments in *After Homelessness* was when a well-dressed woman in her 50s replaced the character of a crack addict. She was able to improvise a few lines, but then she began to weep uncontrollably. I didn't get the impression that it was her pity that was making her cry. I identified with her privilege and maybe I'm projecting, but what I thought made her break down was something that I was also experiencing: getting it, for the first time, an understanding of the indignity and inhumanity that homeless people face everyday and that we, the audience, share our common humanity with the characters on stage."

David Q., audience member

"I saw *After Homelessness* at Holy Trinity Anglican Church in New Westminster. The play was very impressively done. I thought the cast did an excellent job. Diamond's effort to find answers had some very effective moments. The result is an audience that becomes seriously connected to the issues bringing their own experience and values onstage."

John Klassen, PhD, audience member

"It obvious that complaining about our citywide (homelessness) problem is not the answer. There needs to be more of an attempt to come up with solutions. One man, along with a team of upstanding individuals, is our best bet. His name is David Diamond, and he has created the forum theatre-based production, *after Homelessness*... In Diamond's words "The theatre can take statistics and transform them into personal stories; the theatre can be a true voice of people who are struggling with various aspects of the homelessness issue; the theatre can open up the irony of the creation of 'the other' in a world where in fact there is only 'us' and in doing so, re-personalize 'the other'."

“After viewing Headlines Theatre’s performance (*after homelessness...*) on November 28, I can honestly admit that no one is doing what this production is doing. With a cast that has either experienced some, or all of the issues of homelessness, addiction and mental illness, the audience is given the gift of a genuine production. “

Alec J. Ross, audience member

“I was extremely impressed with the fact that the people were able to interact with the play (*after homelessness...*), as it gave some interesting solutions to the parts in the play. It goes to show how important it is to go to the people who are struggling to find answers that will work, instead of someone who learns something through video, and classes. The people who actually live these problems seem to have a better idea as to what will work and for the most part came to solutions that would not cost millions of dollars to do the research necessary to put plans into action. This play was extremely informative and gave a very reality like impression. I hope that I could attend something similar in the near future.”

Alec Athey, audience member

“I attended *after homelessness...* with my 16 year old daughter who like many of us is increasingly concerned about homelessness in Vancouver. I was very happy we came, the evening was both educational and inspiring. I surprised myself by stopping the action and jumping into attempt to change the situation. It was a lot more difficult than I had anticipated and although my intervention was unsuccessful, being part of the process provided a greater appreciation for the complexity of the problems.

The authenticity of the actors impressed me as did their ability to improvise through all of the changes that the play took. There were times however that it felt uncomfortable to be a spectator of people’s misfortune. Perhaps that is not such a bad thing to feel uncomfortable about. Again the process of forum theatre provides one with an opportunity to not just be a passive spectator out for an evenings entertainment. Thank you to all who created the play.”

Teresa McDowell, audience member

“*After homelessness...*, is not traditional theatre. The play allows for the complex theme(s) of the play to transcend into an authentic theatre experience for the audience, who are not permitted to be ‘merely an observer’; but rather an active participant either in thought or action or both.

After homelessness... goes well beyond a theatrical experience, the collective talents of those associated with this play can be very proud of the fact that their contribution has illustrated the reality without sensationalizing it. A profound desire in humanity, has come to be within this exploration, likely as a result of all of us being asked to look within for the solution. Unlike Traditional Theatre, Forum Theatre leaves its characters in our hearts and souls, well reliving their stories in our thoughts.”

Don Rock, audience member

“I have not been able to stop thinking (or talking) about *after homelessness...* and the issues that were discussed there. Thank you for involving multiple communities in this discussion- poverty, addiction and homelessness are not the problems for only the poor, addicted and homeless to deal with. It's something that all of us as members of our community need to demand answers and solutions from our government. Your play has helped me move from a state of paralysis where I was unable to move when faced with the topic of affordable housing to a place where I feel like my voice has a place in the housing crisis debate. And you can be sure that I will loudly be adding my voice to the debate. Thanks for the food for thought - I will be chewing for a long time into the future.”

Melinda Mennie, audience member

“Just wanted you to know what a wonderful experience it was to see *after homelessness...* the other night. I found it to be a powerful experience. Bringing the audience into the equation made it all the more dynamic and personal. I often feel that the problem of homelessness and the myriad of issues faced by homeless people are overwhelming. This play presents these issues through real person’s stories which makes it a very personal piece. Because the audience is challenged to involve themselves by replacing a character in the play it engages audience members to think about the issues from start to finish. This format is a powerful tool to fight the frustration, fatigue and resulting resignation most people feel in regard to difficult social issues. Thanks for my favourite theatre experience ever.”

Mindy Francis, audience member

We felt the whole event (*after homelessness...*) was brilliantly done – the play had an edgy humour that portrayed the harsh realities of the downtown eastside while putting a human face on it. The re-run with the interactive component was equally as gripping, and David’s moderating work to oversee it, to education, the question, and the challenge was exquisite towards finding seams of redemptive hope.

Gordie Lagore, audience member

“I found the play *after homelessness...* be a very accurate account of what it is like to be homeless. The issues that the play touched on from mental illness to addiction, the barriers once living in the DTES preventing many from finding a way out even if they want to.”

Heather Saunders, audience member

In *after homelessness...* we are to yell “stop,” and offer viable solutions for the problem. Our suggestions will be sent to policy makers, who struggle to come up with the solutions themselves. It is a brilliant suggestion. Few of us have ever considered ourselves policy makers. The audience is charged with power. We are given a voice in all of this, and as the night progresses, we begin to bridge the gap between “us” and “them.”

Homelessness is a problem we all care about, but very few ever feel they have the power to help make a change. This innovative piece of theatre helps give us all a voice, and begin to reconcile the feelings of helplessness we have surrounding homelessness.

Headlines Theatre is unique. It is a theatre of change. It is a theatre of the mind, and the heart – theatre that is actively helping to change policies, and the opinion that nothing can be done by the “average Joe” without the money or power to help make a real difference. I greatly admire the work of the strong and dedicated people involved in this production, and thank them for allowing the issues to be voiced, by anyone who cares enough to voice them. To all of them, I say Bravo.”

Michele Venetz, audience member

“I very much appreciated how *after homelessness...* highlighted the many difficulties that homeless persons may be experiencing, such as mental illness and drug and alcohol addictions. The play makes it obvious that there is a greater need for access to drug and alcohol programs, counselors, mental health after hours services for those in crisis and for easier access to housing. And, the interaction with the audience let each of us realize that this problem is not just for the homeless population to solve, it is really up to all of us in society to help solve. Wonderful project which I'm sure will contribute to some interesting suggestions for this social problem.”

Kimberly Fraser, audience member and Registered Psychiatric Nurse

“I was very impressed with *after homelessness...* and was struck by the gritty reality it portrayed. I had never been to a Forum Theatre production before, so had no idea what to expect. I'm really excited about the passion expressed and the potential for effecting social change.”

Sandie Seymour, audience member

"after homelessness... was an incredible production that burst beyond the boundaries of ordinary theatre to address serious issues of homelessness in the community of Vancouver. Not only were thought-provoking questions asked, but solutions were brainstormed and recorded to bring about change. Thank you for such an enlightening, uplifting evening!"

Meghan Mast, audience member

*"I attended *after homelessness...* in New West and was thoroughly captivated by the whole process. I am a university professor who has worked with street-entrenched youth on literacy projects so I had a special interest in the topic. I was particularly impressed with the decision to present a more nuanced representation of the issue of moving away from homelessness -- It is my experience that many street youth do not necessarily wish to stay on the streets and so need a variety of support systems in place to transition into whatever lifestyle they aspire to. This play was both dramatic -- and the interaction with audience doubly dramatic with the inherent tension of waiting for participation, and thoughtful in terms of social action -- posing possible solutions in all their complexity while also reaching toward policymakers."*

Theresa Rogers, Professor, Department of Language and Literacy Education, UBC

Headlines Theatre's "After Homelessness"

by Celeste Insell

In early December I went to see Headlines Theatre's production of "After Homelessness". While I did not provide an intervention that night, it later occurred to me that as an audience member, the production had left me with an uneasy feeling that I just could not shake. After further examination, I began to realize that each and every one of the productions I had seen by Headlines Theatre remained etched in my memory years later.

Why had its' productions left such a lasting impression, when so many other theatrical events had faded from memory? In fact, was it that uneasiness that had caused these events to linger in my mind? Did those presentations not only make me think about the issues that they were addressing, but did they also stir up something inside me that had changed my perception of the world?

Forum theatre was designed to empower the powerless to take action. Its' creator, Augusto Boal had developed this as a tool for the poor and marginalized communities of Brazil to find solutions to crushing problems which seemed hopeless. But in Canada, are we faced with the same situations? Are audience members just too comfortable to take action?

Clearly, Vancouver has got a homeless problem, but do we not have social services to help people who are facing homelessness? Do we not have social safety nets? Words from Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" echo through my head. "Are there no prisons? Are there no work houses?" Could it be that in this country we are just too comfortable for this kind of theatre? We are certainly one of the most apathetic nations. We take our democracy for granted and only a small percentage of the population bothers to vote - too jaded, too cynical and way too comfortable.

The answer is that more than ever we need theatre companies like Headlines to remind us of the problems we may face each and every day in this society, and how we need to find solutions. Furthermore, in this age of so-called "Reality TV" (which is often far more scripted than any of Headlines plays and offers us entertainment without any solutions) Headlines Theatre's productions are filled with people who are facing problems that are *very real and very immediate* (and there in lies the uneasiness). When we leave the theatre the people that populate the play are still dealing with these problems, but something has changed.

The participants employed in these productions find some support from the community which is both financial and emotional. Through the workshops and the subsequent production, the participants are able to gather the courage to move forward and get more help. The fact that people fill a hall to listen to stories which are distilled

from the experiences of those on stage gives these events great importance -- it says what happens to you every day is important to us and the community you live in. As an audience member I am both a witness and participant, and even though I might not get up on the stage that evening, while others do - I am forever changed. I know when I walk out that door the situation continues, but now I am part of it, and I will look for ways to make a change. I may not make huge changes all at once, but over time, when presented with the problem, I can take steps, no matter how small, to be part of that solution. I am not powerless, nor am I apathetic.

The value of Headlines Theatre is that it remains a spring board to take action. Headlines Theatre productions throw light on the problems through the practice of audience members intervening in the action on stage in an effort to find solutions to the problem. Once an intervention is viewed, the audience is encouraged to comment on the actions taken, and to come up with other solutions by making other interventions. Headlines Theatre makes it possible for those performing the play to strip away the layers of the problem; and engage with the audience in a dialogue through the action of the play. In "**After Homelessness**" Headlines Theatre has brought two worlds which collide on a daily basis, into one large room to interact with each other on a far more human and intimate level. We each stand on either side of the bridge and we cross and meet each other in the middle where we can see some of ourselves in each other... and beyond the empathy we move towards action.

I guess this is why all the productions I have attended produced by Headlines Theatre stay with me and inform actions that take place in my life. Headlines Theatre's productions deal with events firmly rooted in reality such as the scarcity of water and the use of it as political tool to control masses of people in "Thirst", to the debilitating loss of a mother, to homelessness in Vancouver and a society that needs to re-evaluate its' priorities, Headlines Theatre gives us the opportunity to come together and work on solutions; and to accept responsibility for the kind of community and world we live in. Accepting this responsibility and acknowledging we are all in this together is the first step towards real change.

Furthermore, while there are many wonderful theatre companies in Vancouver that deserve support - Headlines Theatre is truly unique in its unflinching desire to help facilitate solutions to some of our societies most pressing problems; and because this company has the courage to do more than simply entertain us -- and because it takes us out of our comfort zone -- it continues to be an extremely important cornerstone in Vancouver's Theatre community, as well as the community at large, for over twenty years.

Not-so-positive feedback

“Instead of *after homelessness...*, another good title would be the difficulties in creating after homelessness. *After Homelessness...* tells us about the difficulties of street life and why the homeless chose to live on the street. The actors fully clothed the tale of despair, hopelessness, loneliness, fear and the sense of no one listening. I found myself thrown into their situations, in many cases; speechless. I found myself understanding; wanting to do something but much like them, helpless and/or hopeless.

We were asked to think about policies throughout the show. At times, I felt so shattered that I was embarrassed to think that I could not think about these things. Midst the scenes, my mind almost ran rampant on how to get out of the situation. I could see how one would become very weary.

Gail McKay, audience member

<http://www.plankmagazine.com/review/after-homelessness-sinking-heart>

Cathy Sostad, Plank Magazine

“The forum part of *after homelessness...* on the evening I attended was...problematic. One group of audience members were on their own wavelength and made a lot of noise that wasn't particularly relevant to the issues at hand.⁴¹ As moderator, Diamond spent much of his time and energy keeping control, like a teacher having to deal with rowdy students in a class. Diamond is extremely committed, intense, and very, very good at this. You have to wonder how, if at all, it could work without him there. In fact his presence and role are so very central, and so commanding, that it sometimes seems to be the David Diamond Show. The problems dramatized in the show are difficult and complex. The reactions and solutions proposed by the audience interveners were almost all naive and simplistic: be nicer, don't do drugs, don't go off your meds, don't succumb to despair. The government, cops, landlords, social services, and Olympics got a lot of blame. But I didn't hear a single idea that the official scribe, assigned by Headlines to take notes that could later be translated into policy suggestions, could realistically do anything with.

A couple of the interveners were fascinating—people who had, themselves, obviously been there. For the actors this may prove to be a life-changing experience. And the evening does give the rest of us--people who feel concerned about this problem and frustrated by its apparent intransigence--an outlet. It makes us feel that we are doing *something*. But I'm not convinced that anything more than feeling better will actually come out of the project. I hope I'm wrong.”

Jerry Wasserman, Vancouverplays.com

⁴¹ See the Artistic Director's report for the evening of November 26, 2009