



Empowering children through the arts

Alison Ingram in conversation with *Janet Stanley*

The enhancement of protective factors or “strengths” has become a key facet of prevention strategies. This approach is better described as a health promotion or “wellness” approach that, as in the program described here, aims to promote resiliency and develop the positive strengths of children.

Schools are increasingly being seen as able to make an important contribution towards this end, drawing on their linkages to family members, employment, peer relationships and local communities. Thus, programs offering personal fulfilment and community connectiveness provide developmental growth opportunities for children.

Alison Ingram is the Program Director of the Bell Shakespeare’s *Shakespeare In Action* program. Janet Stanley, Acting Research Fellow with the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, asks the questions and learns about the program.

Alison, what is the Shakespeare In Action program?

Shakespeare In Action is one of a range of education programs offered by The Bell Shakespeare Company across Australia (see inset). It is based on work that I developed with Alternative High Schools in New York, for “at risk” students engaged in “drop out” retrieval programs. The students participated in Shakespeare workshops, classroom video projects and community performances, which provided opportunities for personal growth through development of greater self-esteem.

Bell Shakespeare believes that sustained programs in the arts empower students and assist them to re-engage in school. By participating in the program students have the opportunity to experience: working as part of a team; working within defined boundaries; a fun and challenging project; and the enjoyment of success.

Through the series of in-school performance activities students gain a sense of appreciation of achievement through hard work as well as an understanding of Shakespeare’s language and characters. The students recognise Shakespeare’s themes and issues, which are relevant to, and resonate in, their lives today.

It is hoped that students’ experiences during *Shakespeare In Action* will stay with them in the longer term, and that they will draw on the knowledge they gain about their own abilities when they have future challenges.

The program was successfully piloted in 2002 with five schools in Sydney and then two schools in Melbourne took it up this year. The Melbourne schools worked with teaching artist, Kerreen Ely-Harper, whom Bell Shakespeare has engaged to deliver the program model in Victoria. The participating schools

were chosen by the Department of Education in each state, based on identification of students who would particularly benefit from such a program, and on the schools' participation in disadvantaged schools program.

What do the students actually do?

A whole class of about 16 to 25 students attend sessions with their teacher as an alternative to scheduled English or Drama classes. The program is adaptable to age groups Years 8–12. Usually classes are held twice a week for each group.

First, the students see a film version of the chosen Shakespearean play. They then participate in a range of theatre and acting activities, such as theatre games, acting technique exercises, and discussion of the content and events of the play. Each student is then cast, usually by self-selection. Scenes are rehearsed, one character (for example, Romeo, or Juliet) often having multiple players in the various scenes throughout the play. We are able to use Bell Shakespeare costumes to elevate the students' experience. Students' performances are taped and a video is produced using a professional film editor. Then the students view their "movie".

Students participating in the program are also invited to see a main-stage Bell Shakespeare performance, such as the recent production of *As You Like It* at the Arts Centre in Melbourne. Each school is also visited by our in-schools touring program, *Actors At Work*, enabling many more students at each school to experience a live Shakespeare performance.

Can you explain how such an intensive program is funded?

The program is funded by The Bell Shakespeare Company's philanthropic funds. Many Foundations, and corporate and individual donors give funds specifically for this program.

Are you beginning to get a feel about the success of the program?

Observation and feedback from participating schools and their teachers suggests that the program is of considerable value to students. Ninety per cent of students say they would do the program again if it were offered. In Sydney, where the program has now been running for two years, we have been able to track the progress of students and will continue with those students in 2004. By the end of 2004 we will be able to formally gauge the full impact of the program, particularly through evaluation of the students whom we have been able to track. We are extremely happy with the results we have witnessed so far.

The program sounds very exciting as it is currently running, but do you have future plans?

We intend to continue in Sydney in the same schools and, in addition, develop an after-school program. In Melbourne, we will continue to expand *Shakespeare In Action* and by 2005 we hope also to offer an after-school program.

In the near future Bell Shakespeare will be seeking broader community support to sustain the program. We are developing relationships in order to secure funding, enabling expansion of staff and the number of young people who can be offered *Shakespeare In Action*.

BELL SHAKESPEARE – 2004 EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

ACTORS AT WORK

Touring to every state and territory in Australia
February – August 2004

STUDENT WORKSHOPS

Touring to every state and territory in Australia
February – September 2004

TEACHER WORKSHOPS

Touring to New South Wales, Victoria, Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, and Singapore.
February – September 2004

SHAKESPEARE IN ACTION

Sydney and Melbourne in 2004

FURTHER INFORMATION: Alison Ingram, Program Director, Shakespeare In Action, The Bell Shakespeare Company, PO Box 10, Millers Point NSW 2000. Phone: (02) 9241 2722.