

DRUG CRISIS: SOCIAL CRISIS? PHASE 1

FINAL REPORT

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WITH THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE MANITOBA ARTS COUNCIL AND
MANITOBA HARM REDUCTION NETWORK

BACKGROUND

This report is being written by Daniel Thau-Eleff, Artistic Producer of the Moving Target Theatre Company. It's meant to be informal and readable, to give anyone interested a sense of what we did in the project Drug Crisis: Social Crisis? Phase 1.

I have a background in theatre for social justice. In addition to the 5 social-justice-themed plays I have written and produced through Moving Target (movingtargettheatre.com), I have led over 30 community workshops in Theatre for Living (TFL), a style of theatre which has been used in Canada and around the world to explore social issues including racism, addiction, poverty, domestic violence, climate change and many others. I trained in TFL with its originator, David Diamond (theatreforliving.com).

In December of 2019, I attended the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA)'s State of the Inner City Report (policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/state-inner-city-report-2019), and I found the event incredibly moving. It was a standing-room-only crowd of inner-city residents and community organizations – marginalized people and those who support them. The research they presented was carried out by trained researchers in partnership with marginalized inner-city residents, and it reframed the “drug crisis” as a social crisis.

A major component of their struggle seemed to be voice. Several people who spoke said things like, “We all know what’s going on. Why won’t they listen to us?” The people with the most direct knowledge of the “drug crisis” are also the most marginalized people in our society – they don’t feel they have access to political power, even though (to be fair) there were a number of local politicians in attendance. I wondered if theatre could play a role.

I met with Veda Koncan and Rune Breckon, who co-ordinate Peer Working Groups for the Manitoba Harm Reduction Network (MHRN – see mhrn.ca). The “Peers” are people who 1) use drugs, 2) are impacted by social determinants of health, such as poverty, racism, geographic location, age and gender, and 3) are working to make their communities healthier.

Together, we applied to the Manitoba Arts Council and received funding for Drug Crisis: Social Crisis? Phase 1, a series of Theatre for Living workshops with the MHRN Peer Groups in Winnipeg and Selkirk, which took place in September of 2020.



DANIEL THAU-ELEFF DIRECTING PARTICIPANTS IN THE WINNIPEG WORKSHOP, PHOTOS BY VEDA KONCAN

Winnipeg Workshops

We held three 2-hour workshops in Winnipeg on September 1, 2 and 3, 2020.

Because of COVID restrictions and because MHRN's Winnipeg office does not have a space large enough for physical distancing, the Peer group was holding their monthly meetings outside. I attended one of their meetings at Vimy Ridge Park, and I found it too noisy (Portage Avenue traffic) and too public - with so many people around, a theatre workshop would have drawn attention and awkward questions - the workshop would have been impossible, especially with such vulnerable subject matter.

As an alternate venue, the Peers suggested we meet under the Maryland Bridge. There seemed to be less traffic noise than in the park. It was private. And it was a marginalized space, echoing the marginalization of the participants and the subject matter. We held all 3 of our workshops there.

This space had strengths and weaknesses. On the days when fewer people showed up, we were able to have a fairly intimate conversation. When we had a larger group, with physical distancing, we were quite far apart and the traffic noise was louder than I had realized, so we had to shout to be heard - also one day two riding lawnmowers came to mow the lawn around the bridge, and the weather was quite cold.

It was still a beautiful and worthwhile experience. I was honoured and humbled, in both groups, by the extent to which the Peers welcomed me into their world and shared their personal, sometimes painful stories with me.



PARTICIPANTS IN THE WINNIPEG WORKSHOP CREATING IMAGE THEATRE, PHOTO BY DANIEL THAU-ELEFF

Selkirk Workshops

Our Selkirk workshops were on Sept 16, 17 and 18, 2020.

Because the Selkirk MHRN was able to secure a donation of a large, culturally appropriate venue, the Selkirk Friendship Centre, we were able to do these workshops indoors.

There was more consistency in the attendance - there were 5 participants who attended all 3 of the workshops (in Winnipeg, attendance was less consistent), so more relationship-building was possible and, thanks to the indoor venue, it was possible to have a quieter, more nuanced conversation.

In both groups, there were times when an exercise we did led to a participant wanting to talk - to reflect and/or share parts of their story, and the rest of us listened.



WORKSHOP SPACE UNDER THE MARYLAND BRIDGE

EXERCISES (WINNIPEG AND SELKIRK)

Our theme for both groups, chosen by the Peers, was **“Our struggles as people who use drugs.”**

I started these workshops, as I always do, with fun, physical theatre games.* After each game or exercise, we gathered in a circle to debrief. I asked, “How was it?” and people responded: “Good,” “Bad,” “Funny,” “Fun.” Then I encouraged them to go deeper. I asked, “Could this game we just played be a symbol for our theme – our struggles as people who use drugs?” And if they say yes, I ask, “How?” I emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers – it’s all learning, and I make room for everyone in the room to participate, if and when they feel comfortable doing so.

We did many exercises over the 3 days. I am recording some comments and conversation that came out of the exercises – things that stayed with me, times when I felt something from these participants’ response or analysis.

In an exercise called **Fear and Protector**, participants stand in a circle. I ask everyone to arbitrarily choose a “Person A” and “Person B.” Then I tell them that Person A is their “fear” and Person B is their “protector.” The game is to move around the space so that your “protector” is in between you and your “fear” – but, of course, everyone else is doing the same, so the group moves in interesting and chaotic patterns, often with lots of laughter. We debrief after.

When I lead this game – it’s not a leading question, people come up with various insights, but in many cases, this exercise gives participants perspective on their fears – it makes their fears (whatever those may be) seem less real, less powerful. With this group, I was struck by how valid their fears are. When I asked the group what their “fear” person symbolized, one participant said, “I’m afraid of submitting to a system that wasn’t designed for me, that I don’t like or agree with, but I have to if I want to get help.”

Another said: “My ‘fear’ was the people who want me to stop using [drugs]. My ‘protector’ was anyone who doesn’t bother me and lets me use.” He continued, “Who wants me to stop using? My family, some friends, anyone who cares about me, pretty much.” He felt that, in his life, “Everything is backwards. Good is bad, bad is good, up is down, forwards is backwards.”

In a game called **Clap Exchange**, we pass a rhythm around the circle – a single clap first, then a series of claps.

In the debrief, one person related it to her experience – she had stopped using drugs entirely for 7 years, but when she “rejoined the circle, it was as if nothing had changed. I got right back into the rhythm.”

This game did not come easily to either of these groups – the Winnipeg group especially. One participant’s comment was, “We f-ed up!” But another pointed out that, no matter what had happened, even if each person f-ed up at different times, “We kept going.”

After the open-ended games and exercises, participants learn to create frozen “tableau” images with their bodies. We start this with **Complete the Image** – we stand in a circle, one person enters the circle and makes a shape/pose, another joins them, so that their two shapes together tell a story – in this case, a story about “our struggles as people who use drugs.” Then I ask the first person to come out. The second person stays and a new person enters, making a new shape, a new two-person image that tells a different story. We continue this, rotating through the group. At some point, I ask both people to stay and a third person to join them, then a fourth, a fifth until the entire group is part of the image.

In this group, there were many images of death, mourning, and overdose-related crises. At the end of the day, one participant made an interesting comment. She said (I’m paraphrasing slightly), “Yesterday we all had different meanings for everything. But today, we all knew what it meant.” I was surprised by this comment because, to me, the multiple meanings and understandings are one of the great strengths of this work! This participant seemed to feel the opposite. My interpretation is that, in a community so fragmented and marginalized, the multiple meanings felt destabilizing. It was the exploration of shared experience and shared meaning that she found valuable.

* Due to COVID, I modified the games so that participants were always able to stay 2 metres apart.

STORIES

The participants shared many valuable insights, both as part of the exercises and before/after/on breaks from the formal workshop. Here are some that stayed with me:

When we talked about why people use drugs, the words “relief” and “connection” came up many times. One participant noted, “Everyone has their own reason for using drugs. All the reasons are different, but everyone has a reason.”

One participant came in talking about a friend who had overdosed at her house the night before. She had Naloxone (overdose prevention) kits, but the syringes were stuck, in one kit after another. She eventually broke them open and used a different syringe to inject the person – and saved the person’s life.

Another participant insisted that when he helps a person in crisis, he doesn’t want praise, he doesn’t want thanks – “I just do what any decent person would do.” I got the sense that most, if not all of the participants have, at some point saved someone’s life.

One participant told me about what it’s like living in a downtown hotel. It’s noisy at all hours of the day – people fighting in their rooms, in the hallways, etc – the only way she can get any sleep is with sleeping pills. Any time she steps out of her apartment, at any time of day or night, people offer her drugs. I reflected a lot on that conversation – if I lived in that hotel, how able would I be to lead a healthy, productive life?

There was one participant in the Selkirk group who was so shy that just being there and participating was a huge accomplishment for him. I was impressed by him, as well as by the way the group realized what a big deal this was and supported him – in the closing circle that day, many participants congratulated him (they gave him “props”) for coming out of his shell. I also want to note that, in our image work, he made particularly powerful images.

In the images the Winnipeg group created, one participant (when we debriefed after) told me, a number of times, created shapes/characters that she meant to be animals. I usually try to steer workshop participants away from playing animals, but in this case I kept quiet and what it revealed, in discussion, was an unusual level of empathy for animals – who I’d note are also marginalized in our society.

There was an uncommon level of empathy all around – a participant talked, in the opening check-in about having run into a cousin of hers downtown – the cousin was emaciated and clearly not doing well, so this person invited her cousin to stay with her. In the frozen images, I often ask people, as their character, “What do you want?” I noticed, with many of them, that their “I want” sentences were actually something they want for another character, for example, “I want him to be okay,” and “I want her to be safe.” I wondered if this reflected, among these participants, a tendency to put other peoples’ needs before their own.

One participant who is homeless talked candidly about their survival strategies, but also felt that it’s a miracle they haven’t been killed. They continued, “We’re the most disposable population in society.” This summarizes why I continue to be drawn to this project – how can we shift society so that everyone is valued and no one is disposable?

PARTICIPANT EVALUATIONS

In Selkirk, MHRN Co-ordinator Rune Breckon asked participants to fill out evaluation forms (using a standard form that MHRN often uses). Not all of the questions were directly relevant to this theatre workshop, but I feel the responses provide insight into the workshop's impact:

When asked if the workshops were "Not helpful," "Okay" or "Very Helpful," almost all participants rated it "Very Helpful."

Almost all responded "Yes" to "I learned something that will help me stay safe," and "I can use this information in my life." (a few answered "N/A", no one answered "no.")

In response to "Something I learned today was..." responses included:

- It's okay to be vulnerable again
- that I could express myself in a safe space
- as hard as it is to reveal to new people the struggles, but it also reminded me I survived
- how to talk about things that are bugging you
- everyone hurts
- to express myself through image
- good and bad in all people
- how I can shut down when I'm uncomfortable

In response to "One thing I loved about the workshop was...", participants answered:

- fun
- showing different emotions
- meeting new people
- learning about others
- entertaining
- connecting with people
- we can help each other
- hearing the feedback on the scene
- bringing us out of our comfort zone
- seeing my peers interact with each other on a different level

In response to "One thing I would change about the workshop was...", responses included:

- nothing
- more participants

Other feedback included:

- love it
- It was great!

PHASE 2

To wrap up Drug Crisis: Social Crisis? Phase 1, I met with the Peers to talk about whether we wanted to continue working together, and if so, what would we want to do next?

The Peers want to create a short video about harm reduction. Moving Target is currently partnering on this video with film-maker Julie Epp, Elder and Knowledge Keeper Albert McLeod, and Manitoba Harm Reduction Network, including MHRN's Winnipeg and Selkirk Peer groups. The project is now called Peer Voices, and is supported by grants from the Manitoba Arts Council and the Winnipeg Foundation's Centennial Institute.