

## the students

- primarily for people with a mild intellectual disability,
- some of whom also live with mental illness and physical disabilities.
- Verbal disabilities: difficulty speaking we get around that by giving them less verbal roles or having lines repeated as a natural consequence of the script.
- Many of the students are from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- The gender ratio is about 60 – 40 men to women.
- The ages range from 30's to 60's. Occasionally there have been younger students.
- Literacy abilities vary greatly
- There are some strong personalities in the room;
- it is a very lively class room and I'm sure the noisiest in the centre.
- We meet for one three hour session per week
- Footy tipping is very high on the agenda during 'the season', and much of our news time is spent talking about the games over the past weekend.
- They are very rule based in the way they approach classes, which is another reason I like doing the plays with the group, as I often remind the students that the plays are not about sticking exactly to the script – the students bring their own personalities to the part they play and can ad lib and say their own words.

I have learnt that some students need to know that their role in the play is crucial; they like roles with titles such as manager, driver, supervisor, coach and narrator– roles that have some importance. There are really only a couple of students who really want the bigger roles. These students are not always the ones with higher literacy skills which would make it easier for me.

## Literacy skills

Originally the plays were not scripted, so the literacy activities were about the subject matter, for example we studied brochures about train fares and rights and responsibilities. Last year for the play about recycling, the students worked on individual profiles for the program. Each student (and audience member) then took a program home. We work on the play every week, which may mean researching by excursions, internet, reading and writing materials or else simple literacy activities like wordfind, cloze or personal projects related to the topic. Rehearsal is also a big part of preparing for the play and we aim to rehearse at least a part of the play every session. This may be practicing a song from the play or rehearsing a scene.

The literacy ability in the classroom is also diverse, as you would expect from this group.

The plays allow the students to engage with learning material and information week after week in a way that is repetitive but not monotonous. The plays have so many different facets to them that the literacy activities can be varied. During our play about recycling, there was an issue in the community about noisy rubbish trucks that went on for weeks and we accessed the local papers and read letters to the editor, news articles and interviews with local residents and councillors about the issue. This gave us great material for research and insight into the role of rubbish truck driver for our play. We also visited the local recycling centre where many of the workers also have a mild intellectual disability, so some of them were familiar to the students from past acquaintances. We had morning tea at the recycling centre and returned to perform our play there as well. The workers felt very special that a play had been made about their workplace and the work that they do.

## the original play

**Hells Bells** was our first play. It came out of a discussion where a student had witnessed another person being questioned by the inspector after losing their ticket on the train. This made me think about how difficult it must be for some people with disabilities who may also be marginalised in other ways, and so we started workshoping how to deal with this situation. One of the other students suggested that we do a play about it and so Hells Bells was born. It was a one act play and totally unscripted – we just rehearsed it and allowed for changes as they came up. Everybody had a role, even the student who had very high anxiety just being in the classroom felt able to take photos on the day of performance. Each student also had a speaking part, whether that was introducing the play or actually speaking in a role. I saw it as an ideal way to explore social justice issues, but the students all wanted it to be a spaghetti western, with guns and arrests, so we compromised and had arrests but no guns. We performed the play for other students at CNLC. The students loved doing the play, and were ready to 'do another' the next week.

## **the next plays**

**Delicious Nutritious a play about healthy eating.**

### **‘Many Happy Returns’**

- grew out of a discussion around returning faulty goods to a supermarket.
- research, by going on an excursion to Safeway. We were treated to a tour out the back and
- met the manager of the meats section who told us that he had low level literacy skills and now he’s the managing butcher.
- We wrote the play about a birthday cake needing to be returned as it was mouldy, and some friends were organising a surprise party. The cake was successfully returned.
- Again everyone had a part and we had a growing audience, this time with a visit from some classes from North Melbourne Language and Literacy. Having a bigger audience didn’t seem to affect anyone’s nerves, just made it more exciting.

### **Locomotion**

This play grew out of a discussion with one of the students about loneliness. Loneliness is difficult to navigate without any other barriers, so for marginalised people, it must be even more difficult. We explored different ways of connecting with communities in this play. Through local agencies in Carlton, we came to use La Mama as our performance space for a one-off performance of our next play – Locomotion. We also had a dog in the play which was a great way to focus everyone’s attention away from themselves and on to the play. Having the performance in the big space – and in a ‘proper’ performance space meant that there were a few more nerves, and this time students had invited family, friends and other agencies along to be a part of the audience. We worked from a script and had a song included – Kylie’s version of ‘locomotion’.

### **Bin to Work.**

With this play we took the centre’s topic of sustainability and decided to focus on recycling. The information sent out by councils isn’t always clear, even though there is a lot of effort made to make information accessible – it just misses the mark sometimes. We went to the recycling centre and ‘tip shop’ at Reservoir, and did our research. The students had already decided they wanted a rubbish truck driver, and manager, so we had a few of those. We also had our own song about recycling, which I had adapted from a song I’d learnt at a Community Music Victoria workshop for literacy and language teachers.

We also used more props and costumes than we had before, using safety vests, which added an element of authenticity to their roles. We also used phones and when the students performed the play at the recycling centre, the setting created a wonderful layer of reality. The audience appreciated being their dual role as audience and subject of the play.

## **what hasn’t worked**

We have had a few students join the class and balk at doing the plays. We managed to keep one student with a very serious anxiety issue, until I think he just couldn’t cope any longer with the constant level of stress. It is also a very noisy classroom and there are a lot of big personalities in the room. This doesn’t suit some students at all. However, there are some existing students who have adapted to the plays. They don’t like a big role, but they like having their own role to play.

## **the songs**

Can be difficult as group singing relies on people singing in time with each other. The first time we used a song was ‘locomotion’; the loudest person got us through in the rehearsals, but on performance day no one was loudest, so we muddled through. The next year, with Bin To Work, I gave everyone there own line to the very short and very repetitive song, which was the first line of each verse, adapted to whatever piece of rubbish the person was holding. One person said their line, then the rest of the group joined in. This year we are having special singing sessions with an experienced community singing teacher.

Not everyone likes singing, and some people in the group just stand there, but that’s okay. They seem to take a while to warm up to some things.

## **overall**

The plays have been a great teaching and learning tool.