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non-verbal theatre with hearing actors made a big impression on the theatre industry in Vietnam.

Now to Hong Kong.

Two projects: firstly, Mike conducted Visual Communication Workshops for one week with hearing people. Most of the participants were Chinese and all could speak English reasonably well (though not the 'Aussie type' English), so I had to be aware of my spoken interpretation from Mike's Sign Language. The pace needed to

be slower, and the English needed to be precise and clear.

For the second project Mike worked with the Hong Kong Theatre of the Deaf on No More Lesser. As you may be aware, Cantonese Sign Language is very different to Australian Sign language so we had the services of another interpreter Raymond. Once again, I interpreted Mike's Auslan into spoken English to the other interpreter, who then put it into Cantonese Sign Language. This lasted for about one week as Mike and all of the

actors know some American Sign Language, they evolved into communicating directly with each other. Raymond and I were out of a job! Not really, as Mike also needed to communicate with other hearing Chinese people such as the crew and media – so, back to work.

Yes, as an interpreter it was a marvellous experience. Language is fascinating, but one needs to be very careful as misinterpretations happen easily.

'Why do all the bad guys have a disability?'

Helen Connors

– current representations of disability are as much moral and political issues as they are aesthetic –

Though the consequences of current representations of disability are significant there has only been rare attempts to redress the situation. As part of the 1997 International Day of People with a Disability (December 3) the theme 'Celebration of Ability,' creating positive opportunities to challenge the perceptions people have regarding disability, the NSW Department of Ageing and Disability took an initial step by presenting a film festival – 'Why do all the bad guys have a disability?' Over four days speakers investigated a variety of film genres in a program which included *Dr Strangelove*, *Cosi*, *Wait until Dark*, *Freaks* and *Lucky Break*. It is hoped this initiative will continue on an annual basis.

Louis Nowra and myself spoke on the film *Cosi*. Based on the play written by Louis in the '70s *Cosi* tells the story of a young director played by Ben Mendelsohn, employed by the administration of a psychiatric hospital to put on an annual con-

cert. However, one of the patients, Roy (Barry Otto) has other ideas and wants to produce Mozart's opera *Così fan Tutti*.

This article presents the comments presented by Accessible Arts at the discussion session of this film.

There is little recognition that:

- people with psychiatric disabilities paint and exhibit their work; write and publish stories and poems.
- people with intellectual disabilities write songs, play instruments and act professionally.
- people with physical and sensory disabilities dance and perform.

Why? The media! TV, film, papers, magazines etc shape opinion and attitudes. What you find is a situation where misconceptions and stereotypes

WHY DO ALL THE BAD GUYS HAVE A DISABILITY?

surrounding disabilities are reinforced and maintained.

These, current representations of disability are as much moral and political issues as they are aesthetic. Documentaries on the 'super cripp' in a wheelchair who climbs mountains; films that utilise visual metaphor and present situations where people with disabilities represent a myriad of evil/ depravity to the advertising of many charities that present images of 'the hard lot of these poor souls.' None demonstrate the reality: what we have in common is more than what sets us apart – the same ups and downs, humour and aspirations. These images perpetuate a situation where people with disabilities are set apart, excluded from the broader community.

Vision, in western culture, has been privileged as the primary sense responsible for the formulation of knowledge. When something is recognised visually it is named and placed in the order of things that are culturally familiar. The individual physical body is perceived visually by the external social body, and much information in 'seeing' is loaded with attendant associations and meanings. This situation has particular significance for people with disabilities.

People with psychiatric disabilities often find, when appearing in public, that the staring and the expressions of other people betray the rejection of the one who is different. This often leads to removal (by self or others) and people will not partake in social activity – but the disability must be concealed, controlled, normalised and finally altered.

People with psychiatric disabilities have had a long relationship with the arts community but even in this environment stereotypes and misconceptions continue. Modernists, Surrealists and Abstract artists have been touched by the appeal of the 'madman' and psychotic art but this only symbolised the setting free of their own creativity and of disturbing the foundations of western aesthetics. While artists collected 'outsider art' to give them artistic advantage the work and contribution of artists with psychiatric disabilities remains virtually unrecognised.

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International Day of
People with a Disability
3 December

Even in recent decades where the exploration of difference and diversity has seen the arts and aesthetics expand to include Multicultural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts practice, people with disabilities remain excluded from Australia's cultural life and identity.

Cosi presents an alternative 'picture' of people with psychiatric disabilities and is a positive step towards changing attitudes. *Cosi* demonstrates people do have feeling, aspirations and dreams, given the opportunity can communicate these through involvement in creative expression.

Until recently definitions of disability were developed within a medical framework, now people view disability as a social construct where society creates the barriers which makes disability 'impairing.' Set in a psychiatric hospital both definitions are indirectly illustrated through the activities of the cast in a time of transition between concepts. Through what happens 'inside' and 'outside' audiences come to see that once a person is labelled (medical), society will restrict or direct their activities and they will be viewed differently.

While set in the '90s the script had few changes from what was written in the '70s. With this in mind, *Cosi* becomes more 'real' to an audience that has some understanding of disability and the disability sector. *Cosi* successfully presents early phases in the change from segregation to integration. *Cosi* illustrates how changes within the disability sector have or haven't been embraced, accepted.

The subtleties in the behaviour of its characters are so well presented you know it must have been written by someone who had a direct experience of psychiatric services. Louis worked as a wardman in a Melbourne hospital for a number of years and was also employed to prepare their annual concert.

Cosi touches on some important issues that remain relevant today. It provides audiences with insight into life in an institution and what happens to people once they are labelled with a psychiatric illness. *Cosi* asks who really are the 'mad' people?

Cosi presents situations where audiences 'see':

- that behaviour which is easily accepted if performed by someone on the 'outside' will not be tolerated once labelled or 'inside';
- the debate/ relationship between a medical model verses other therapies;
- to implement change there is a need for the commitment by decision makers;
- the power of staff to undermine initiatives;
- institutional life and how routines /time tables can not be broken;
- once labelled /institutionalised the skills and life experience of people are not recognised or forgotten.

Generally hospital staff and the broader community have low expectations of people with psychi-

atric disabilities – 'keep it within their reach' – 'do not challenge them'. *Cosi* shows that given the opportunity people can achieve and develop exciting arts. It demonstrates that what is required is a willingness to develop new approaches and ways of achieving the end result – eg. it is not Opera that is difficult to understand, it is how it is set up for interpretation.

In *Cosi* people show 'eccentric' behaviour without regard for conformity or social convention, therefore audiences are able to gain some insight into the individually and humanness of characters, enabling audiences to connect with the characters and their stories.

A Fishy Story

Jack Skidmore

Although Dave liked his job at Accessible Arts he could hardly wait for Friday so he could go home, pack his fishing gear and go off for the weekend. He liked his job even better. Now that Accessible Arts had moved their office to the old wharf at Walsh Bay, now he could go fishing in his lunch break. The more he thought about it the more he was convinced that on that rainy day a week ago, it wasn't Helen Connors' beautiful face looking at him through the window of the office but a lovely dark haired mermaid. The next day Dave stopped at Coles and bought a string of pearls. As the sun sunk slowly in the west, Dave settled into his favourite fishing spot. Turning around to get the pearls from his bag; there standing right behind him was a big, long hairy bloke wearing shorts, a tattered old jumper and an old baseball cap.

'Hi I'm Hannible.'

Sitting besides Dave, as he was tying the pearls onto the fishing line, the big bloke looked at him kinda queer, so Dave told him that he was fishing for lonely oysters.

It was getting late and the only thing Dave had caught all day was Hannible. Deciding to give it away for the day, he was putting his gear in his bag, when Hannible sang out.

'I think I've got something!'

Hannible's eyes almost popped out of his head as he pulled in a lovely dark haired mermaid with one hand tangled in the string of pearls. As Hannible lived just around the corner in The Rocks, Dave thought he would take her round there until he figured out how he would get her home. Dave was out in the yard washing the salt out of his fishing gear and when he went back inside there was Hannible eating the mermaid.

Dave : 'you dirty animal Hannible, your nothing but a bloody cannibal.'

Hannible 'Its alright mate, I wasn't that hungry and I've only eaten a couple of titbits and saved the bottom bit for you.'

