

Theatre NEMO
Putting pieces back
@
The Arches
A report
by
Ross Jamieson

September 2003

Theatre NEMO at the Arches was a great success as it achieved the objective of bringing together all the various mental health groups and organisations from around Scotland to educate the public on some of the taboos that surround mental illness. Represented at the event were organisations such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health, Papyrus, the Glasgow Link Club, the National Schizophrenia Fellowship, Project Ability, Survivors Poetry, Trongate Studios, Glasgow Women's Aid, the Charlie Reid Centre and the Glasgow Association for Mental Health to name but a few. A huge banner at the entrance thanked all Sponsors and the different parties involved. A beautifully carved visitor's book (made by David McCracken of the Trongate Studios) proudly displays entries and messages of hope from a very diverse crowd. Also near the entrance are three newspaper articles from the Scotsman, the Daily Record and the Big Issue featuring interviews with Isabel McCue that serve to explain the reasons for setting up Theatre NEMO and what it aims to do.

Theatre NEMO is dedicated to helping people affected by mental health problems to re-discover their creative energies while at the same time raising awareness of a taboo subject. Theatre NEMO is a campaigning theatre group that is designed to help sufferers of mental illness by encouraging them to participate in the arts as a form of stimulation and self-help. 'Putting Pieces Back' by Theatre NEMO is a diverse mix of exhibited art, poetry readings, theatre, music, dance and debate. Organisers of the event hope that it will help to eradicate some of the stigma surrounding mental illness.

When entering this exhibition, the first thing that strikes you is the quality of the artwork on display and the emotion that each piece provokes. The work of the late John McCue, son of Isabel and the inspiration behind the event is particularly moving. Most of John's work is of a nature-related theme featuring trees, flowers and plants in powerful, vibrant colours although there are some paintings of a planetary theme with aliens in outer space. In all of the paintings that relate to nature, none of the trees have leaves.

One of the more striking displays is a huge jigsaw puzzle in the middle of the floor with each piece representing a cause of mental illness. For example isolation, loss of freedom, family pressure, environment, genetic disposition, type of job, stress, diet, war, bereavement, abuse, head injury, drug and alcohol abuse, bullying and rape.

A stall by the Glasgow Association for Mental Health includes two montages of artwork that reflect the thoughts and feelings of the contributors towards their mental illness. Also featured is a page of writing from each of the sufferers describing in words what it is like to be a victim of mental illness. Some quotes include

"Normality. What is it?"

"Words that wound and hurt"

"Everyone is scared of losing it. The shame of admitting you have a problem. If you admit it you are weak"

Much of the artwork at this exhibition relates to issues such as ethnic cleansing, war, and scenes from the third world, religious persecution and natural disasters.

A photograph that particularly stood out featured an old couch that was half-submerged in a swamp featuring the tag line 'take a seat'. There is also photography of fireworks, pollution and candles, all in black and white to create a shadowy and atmospheric effect.

In addition to all of the artwork and displays that were put on over the course of the event there was also a play organised, called 'Out in the Open'. This play deals with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, self-harm, depression, nervous disorders and the general lack of tolerance towards sufferers. It is very well acted and emotive with extremely realistic performances from the actors. Each actor acts out a scene involving a particular mental illness and how there is a lack of understanding, or even ignorance towards it. This was a gritty play that was very well received by the crowd.

Later in the day there was a dance-based piece of theatre inspired by Sara Kane's 4.48 psychoses. This was a new choreographed dance piece by Hugh McCue brother of John Depp. Depicting the emotions, the breakdown and the struggle to come to terms with the engulfing psychosis. New music composed by Rikki Traynor incorporated dialogue and made this a spellbinding piece of "movement drama" this was followed by guest speakers on mental health issues and a debate with audience participation

The evening cabaret was the entertaining highlight of the day, showing music, dance and acting skills by sufferer's carers and friends.

To conclude

This was a two-day event that will hopefully be repeated, perhaps on an annual basis, below are some comments made in the visitor's book.

“Theatre NEMO how can you put into words the powerful feelings the drama, speeches and movement pieces bring to light. This very important subject is not talked about as much as it needs to be, we need more stuff like this thank you so much.”

“A totally unique experience! Can't wait for the next event! Keep up the good work! Love Jen”

“Why can't we have more user events like this more often”

“An excellent opportunity for some positive experiences of mental ill health a great exhibition”

“Excellent Isabel wonderful to take part, hope you will have many more” Tricia Mullen

“It's been a real pleasure thank you Isabel and well done to everyone involved” Shane

“We liked it a lot” Dykebar patients council

“A great piece of work and a great success for everyone involved” best wishes and good luck from First Direct staff.

“Fantastic day the show was great and I've met loads of people thanks” Sonya

“I know that what we are all doing is important, but believe me within your drama pieces you paint a picture and “a picture is worth a thousand words” Greta (Together Opening Doors)

“We need more people like you I hope theatre NEMO goes from strength to strength” Gavin

“Theatre NEMO thank you for the entertainment and the insight” Margaret