

## **Assembly 3 December 2007**

### **Great Programmes in Boys' Schools: To the Precipice**

Today and next Monday I would like to share with you two examples of great programmes at boys' schools. The examples are very different yet I believe they show how talented boys are and how these talents can be expressed in exceptional ways. This week's story comes from Cranbrook School, in Sydney, Australia.

Cranbrook has a highly-regarded Performing Arts programme, but it was thought that boys would gain valuable insight into the craft of playwriting and production by working alongside professionals in the field.

When Robert Wickham was appointed the school's first Director of Drama in 1994, he had a clear vision for the school's Drama programme. He had been associated with the school for eight years and had no doubts about the potential of its boys to achieve great things in drama. The school has a strong tradition in drama and counts many successful actors, designers and writers from the ranks of its former students. But Robert's vision was to hire a professional playwright to write a brand new Australian play, to be presented at a Sydney Theatre, and acted by drama students at the school.

Cranbrook School has always worked to provide special experiences and opportunities for those who study and teach in the Music and Drama Departments. A number of years ago it decided to establish an artist-in-residence programme enabling the boys to work with leading figures from the world of music and theatre. The task for Robert, therefore, was made easier: the playwright became another artist-in-residence.

The Drama teacher and some senior students set about finding the right person to be their playwright and soon discovered somebody already well known in Sydney for writing plays acted by young people and targeted at young people. That person was Tommy Murphy.

Having found the right playwright, the next task was to find the right students for such a project. This meant finding students who were not only keen and able to perform, but who were also keen and able to be involved in the making of drama. This required an audition process, for students from Forms 1 to 6, where the boys were asked to search the media for a story which dealt with an issue that was important to them and which they felt had theatrical potential. They were then required to present this story on stage. As a result, Tommy Murphy selected twenty students.

Tommy Murphy started with no particular subject or theme in mind for the play. But he did want the play's themes to have appeal and relevance to young people universally. They all met once a week for eight weeks with one goal: to find a spark. They got to know each other via theatre games and writing exercises. They allowed the room to become like a campfire where stories were shared. Over this period of time, they learned about the craft of playwriting.

The playwright set up an Ideas Folder (Fodder Folder) and each of the twenty young actors agreed to contribute at least two pages to the folder each week. Sometimes there was a specific task: write down a dream that you had this week; record and transcribe a conversation you hear; write your life story; write from the perspective of ten years in the future looking back. What gives you hope? What makes you angry? At other times the actors simply contributed random thoughts about themselves or the experience of making the play. A promise was made. Tommy Murphy was the only one who had access to read Ideas Folder. It was his research, something tangible that he could take from the room. And for the students, it was safe and anonymous, a letterbox to an outsider.

Tommy began to write in secret, using the Ideas Folder and extracting stories. By this time the group had established trust and there was real fun in the room. The Ideas Folder was bursting at the seams. Tommy began planning characters, situations and themes to make the skeletons of six scenes.

The story of the play they shaped begins with four thirteen-year-old boys gathering on top of a cliff face on Sydney Harbour. They dare each other to jump into the water. One, a boy called Alan, can't do it. They play had its first Scene and the rest were soon to follow.

The scheduling of rehearsals so that all cast members can attend reliably is always a challenge in a busy school that places huge demands on its students seven days a week. The aim was to find one two-hour rehearsal time per week for eight weeks. With the exception of the final scene, no more than four actors were required on stage in any scene. Finding two hours when four actors could reliably come together was so much easier than finding times when all twenty could come together!

For two hours each week, each group of actors rehearsed unaware, officially at least, of how things were developing in the other scenes. They spent time at the cliff face on Sydney harbour to give them that sense of reality and danger.

It was also time to think about set designs and what props would be required on stage. They also started work on the musical score, on the costumes and on the lighting. For a number of reasons, it was decided to perform this new Australian play in a venue outside of the school. By going to a major Theatre in Sydney, the students' and the playwright's achievements would be presented directly to the public.

How long does it take to write a one-act play? Well, the boys from Cranbrook School now know. It took 234 days from the time the idea struck to the opening night. Perhaps the most important lesson for the boys was perseverance. They realised that the play might be a failure and for the production to succeed everyone must contribute their utmost by way of ideas, acting techniques and showing up week in and week out for almost a year.

By all accounts, the final production was astonishing. It was very professional and entertaining leaving the audiences wanting more. The production was deemed a 'hit' and played to full houses for five performances.

For the twenty boys and Tommy Murphy this experience was rather like being that little boy Alan, standing on edge of the cliff, deciding whether to leap into the unknown.

The reason I find this story interesting is because it displays what students can achieve, given the opportunity and encouragement. It is also why we at St. Paul's are about to start our own artist-in-residence programme. Next week, Dr. Stephen Ng will arrive at SPC as the guest of the Music Department. Dr. Ng, who is an alumnus, is Professor of Vocal Music at Stetson University in Florida. He is a singer (tenor) and well-known internationally. Dr. Ng will be working with the choirs and with individual music students running a series of workshops and master classes. Dr. Ng's stay will conclude with the Carol Services on the last day of term.

I would like to see the artist-in-residence programme extend to other areas in the years to come: maybe a visiting playwright for our drama students; or a well-known painter for our Visual Arts students; or a famous Chinese Literature professor. I am sure you would agree that we all gain through exposure to talented people from all walks of life.

J R Kennard

\* The above text is based on a speech presented by Mr. Robert Wickham, the Director of Drama, Cranbrook School, Sydney, Australia.