

HIV and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performance: arguments for the place of the arts in health education

A context and background to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance work around HIV.

Who we are

We are a group of interdisciplinary researchers at the University of Melbourne, based in Theatre at the Victorian College of the Arts and in clinical research on HIV at the Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity. We are working with an Advisory Group that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, leaders, health care workers and People Living with HIV, alongside non-Indigenous HIV community leaders, activists and archivists.

Project outline/aims

We have compiled a community report, with the aim of making a case for the use of theatre and performance to increase awareness of HIV in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities within the context of health promotion and education, and/or as art (entertainment). We hope that the report will offer itself as a useful resource to evidence the need for future performance work in the field and to support artists and/or health organisations in making their case for funding, resources or in accessing support systems and networks. The report identifies widening gaps in access to health promotion and new biomedical HIV prevention methods for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in comparison to the general population of Australia. Our key questions are:

- What performance work exists already?
- What can we learn from them in terms of artistic choices and organisational strategies that make them successful in a health context in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?

Why this project?

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are over 2 times more likely to contract HIV than non-Indigenous Australians.
- There are notable divergences in the subgroups represented in new HIV diagnoses amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities compared to Australia's non-Indigenous population. For instance, reported HIV diagnoses are occurring more among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and injecting drug users (IDUs), with higher numbers also attributed to heterosexual sex, than among non-Indigenous Australians.
- This trend is coupled with an ongoing, concentrated epidemic of STIs occurring in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at the top end of Australia: namely, Northern Queensland, Darwin and the Kimberleys.
- Action must be taken to avoid a similar situation to that of Canada, where a concentrated HIV epidemic is occurring within the Indigenous population.

- No data currently exists that could identify the prevalence of HIV in the transgender and gender diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population; this is concerning given it has been suggested that transgender women globally are 49 times more likely to be living with HIV than the general population.
- In the past, theatre and performance has been significant in contributing to discussions and understanding around HIV and AIDS but there has been a notable decline in performance work addressing HIV and AIDS since the early days of the epidemic.
- Considering this, there is a strong case to be made for additional HIV education and other strategies of knowledge-sharing (which include theatre and performance, or artistic resources co-delivered with a performance event) to specifically target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, IDUs, sistergirls and brotherboys and the wider queer community.

What we've done so far

- We have undertaken a literature and performance review of the field.
- In the community report we work to highlight ongoing discrepancies between HIV prevention and treatment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in comparison to the general population of Australia.
- The report includes a review of sexual health promotions and arts-based interventions that have been used to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- The report also provides a review of theatre and performance work that has taken place by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and companies on the experience of living with HIV.
- We make a case for the arts—specifically theatre and performance work—to address the ongoing stigma that exists for those living with HIV to simultaneously educate and mobilise audiences by generating meaningful, urgent conversations.

What we found...

A section of the report examines health promotion campaigns and other related programs designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In this, ideas around the social determinants of HIV provide insight into how Western (colonial) models of health program design and delivery are failing to consider and effectively respond to the wider context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. As a result of colonial practices, alongside HIV and STI rates, Indigenous populations around the world continue to experience disproportionately higher levels of poverty, racism, substance abuse, unemployment, incarceration, health gaps and gender divides, with lower education outcomes. Given this, the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in terms of health promotion design, delivery and evaluation is vital to ensuring future agency in the way ahead.

- Early and ongoing work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in organising events around HIV education has been, and continues to be, vital. As an example, the Anwernekenhe conference, established in 1994 in an effort to mobilise community, is a pillar in the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander response

to HIV. Over time, Anwernekenhe has evolved to address the impact of HIV on gay men, sistergirls and brotherboys, IDUs, women, sex workers and mobile/transient populations.

- Meaningful and ongoing community consultation is crucial to the design and implementation of any health program. It is also helpful in ensuring the cultural safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- “Fly in, fly out” approaches to health promotion continue to fail, while methods that foster community agency and social mobilisation continue to prove effective.
- Researchers and practitioners in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health promotion urge for a purposeful shift away from negative, deficit-focused approaches for articulating community needs and towards methods that build on existing strengths. For instance, identifying healthy behaviours and preventative measures already in place before launching a targeted health promotion campaign offers greater potential for strengthening and building on existing effective structures.
- Across the literature there is a common call for the inclusion of arts-based activities and methods in health promotion and education. It is important to consider how traditional arts and ceremonial practices are so deeply embedded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and notions of health, as well as their potential role in community engagement and events.
- There are few examples of projects attempting to evaluate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community health programs in a way that contributes to the field or even reflects on original project aims to suggest future possibilities for improvement.
- Further, there does not appear to be any studies that document the actual processes of communities eliciting and sharing what is working and what is not working in terms of overall health program design and delivery. This represents a significant missing link in the collecting, collation and sharing of effective health program methods and practices between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Having reviewed key findings from the literature around targeted health promotion design and delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the report considers a history of HIV and AIDS theatre/performance work inside and outside of a health promotion context.

- Theatre and performance strategies are deeply embedded in HIV and AIDS activism across the world.
- In the earliest forms of HIV and AIDS activism, theatre and performance strategies coexist with community education strategies in order to demand visibility and to mobilise communities.
- In performance about HIV and AIDS the political and personal become intricately woven, often through autobiographical storytelling, so performance can highlight diverse experiences from varying perspectives.
- There are examples of HIV and AIDS performance work that exist in different forms: mainstream theatre, street theatre, community and school-based touring productions and health promotion training.
- A key movement underpinning some of this performance is Theatre in Health Education (THE), a form of performance that emerged specifically in response to the

HIV crisis and works in non-traditional “theatre” spaces to explore issues that relate to a particular community.

- Most instances of HIV and AIDS performance work made by and/or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities falls into street or community and school-based theatre. This underlines the importance of HIV work being shared in open public spaces and an urge by artists to take work out to the public rather than having them come to formal buildings to watch colonial forms that encompass most mainstream theatre in Australia.
- Since the beginning of the epidemic in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health groups like the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service Council (KAMSC) identified the potential for theatre in health promotion because of the Aboriginal tradition of using oral techniques for passing on information.
- This is crucial in establishing theatre and performance as a highly valued tool for communication by these communities and, secondly, it recognises the potential for infusing health messaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, culture and performance traditions.
- Importantly, this move toward theatre also stemmed from a concern for KAMSC that mainstream health promotion techniques, such as posters, pamphlets and videos were not having a strong enough impact.
- Touring productions have thus been coupled with other health promotion activities for the dissemination of resources, supported by local health workers. Performance, in these contexts, acts as an important catalyst for further conversation and knowledge-building within and amongst communities (*No Prejudice*, staged and toured 1991-97, produced by KAMSC, is an example here).
- There are also instances in which drama has been used as a tool to break down cultural barriers between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and non-Indigenous healthcare workers.
- Groups such as Handspan Theatre (active in the 1990s) and ILBIJERRI Theatre Company (currently active) have staged and toured multiple productions in schools across Victoria, introducing students to Aboriginal perspectives and experiences around sexual health and relationships.
- In contrast, work like Jacob Boehme’s *Blood on the Dance Floor* (2016-2020, co-produced by ILBIJERRI) is made within the performing arts sector and staged in mainstream theatre venues across Australia, rather than being tied to any formal health promotion or messaging.
- Certain affective and emotionally intense moments that occur in such work emphasise what this kind of performance can do as compared to street performance—the safety of the closed environment of the theatre allowing for viscerally powerful moments to be established and supported by what is placed on either side of them.
- *Blood on the Dance Floor*, as a performance in combination with the conversations and materials that surround and spill out of it—conversations in formal post-show Q&As, or informally in foyers, or on social media, or in interviews on radio, or in magazines—offers the dual possibility of educating and mobilising communities by promoting new, meaningful conversations and actions.
- Lastly, in conducting a performance review, it becomes starkly evident there are very limited examples of documented and recorded works that address HIV and AIDS

within the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. That is, they are not readily accessible using mainstream academic research methods; put simply, they fall outside of what has been documented using colonial research practices. While we acknowledge the significant gaps that remain when collating this performance history, the works listed in the report provide important insights into how theatre has been used in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community health promotion. Together these works highlight the capacity of theatre performance to convey meaning through various modes—emotionally, affectively, intellectually and bodily. Performances such as this forge valuable connections between individual audience members and the performer/s, as well as each other, while simultaneously educating and calling for action.

Conclusion

We emphasise the potential for performance to enable conversation around sensitive topics such as HIV and AIDS, as well as its history in mobilising communities into action. It is our hope that the report will assist artists and researchers in making an argument for the future funding and development of new performance work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to be shared with communities across Australia.

In conducting this literature and performance review, and through consultation with our Advisory Group, we have identified the following list of suggested steps that we believe would elicit and consolidate much of the missing performance history from the report, as well as address some of the continuing gaps around the evaluation of theatre and performance in/as health education by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:

- an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led project that includes a detailed retrieval and archival process of previous performance work addressing HIV and AIDS;
- a series of interviews with artists and community members to gather histories and documentation of previously unrecorded performance works for dissemination;
- an investigation into the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drag queens (and drag performance) in delivering HIV and health messages to community, particularly in “non-traditional” settings (bars, clubs, other events);
- group interviews with a cross-section of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community Elders, health workers and other leaders in order to reflect on what does and does not work in terms of HIV education and how theatre/performance might play a greater role in this.

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