

Performance as a way of healing trauma: Treehouse Theatre



Treehouse Theatre participants and teachers

Treehouse Theatre has been performing shows for more than 15 years, helping hundreds of children come to terms with the trauma they have experienced and make them feel welcomed and safe in their new country. This is how Treehouse came about and how it helps many more children come to terms with the trauma they have faced and provides a path for them to settle in Australia.

By RICHARD WENTWORTH-PING.

To watch a performance of Treehouse Theatre is to go on a rollercoaster of emotions. There should be tissues on each seat. The cast are all children aged between 11 and 17, all recently arrived as refugees to Australia, most with at least some family members, some on their own. They share their stories in three distinct sections. The first are childhood stories. They are playful, cheeky, spirited and tell of the universality of the joy and fun of being young that we can all recognise.

The second and longest section details the stories of how they came to be in Australia. These are stories that all refugees will know: war, persecution, displacement, death, fear, intimidation.

In the final section, the cast share stories of their early weeks in Australia, with all the confusion, curiosity and uncertainty they felt in finding their way in an alien land.

The storytelling – raw, honest and at different turns shocking, inspiring and funny – touches everyone who witnesses the stories.

Catherine Maguire-Donvito knew instinctively that Ruth Hartcher-O'Brien was a kindred spirit, bright red hair, welcoming and loved by the migrant and refugee children she was teaching at the Intensive English Centre (IEC) in Western Sydney (migrants and refugees attend IECs to become proficient enough in English to go into main school). There are many IECs in Sydney's west and south, where many migrants and refugees settle, with community support and more social housing and that's where Ruth and Catherine work.

Working with refugees at the IEC, school counsellor Catherine had far too little time to really help them deal with the traumas they had faced. Trauma healing, in children especially, is all about being able to build trust, alongside psychological safety, which takes time. The number of children needing her support meant she could not devote enough time to each child.

However, she noticed that those attending Ruth's drama classes seemed to do better. Ruth was fearless in her work at a time when the prevailing wisdom was, "Don't talk about the tough stuff". Ruth went there, talking about the tough stuff and basing her lessons on the children's own experience. Could this be expanded into a more formal approach to help refugee children? The answer was an unequivocal "yes".

Treehouse Theatre has its origins in Ruth and Catherine finding themselves at the same IEC with the same desire to help the students in their care recover and thrive. They took inspiration from the Tree of Life art therapy program started in South Africa. Catherine and Ruth took the idea that storytelling was an important

part of healing and translated that from art on a page to performance art.

The students have come from a variety of countries, all suffering the effects of war, persecution, displacement: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Sudan, The Congo and, in the past few years, Afghanistan.

Many have suffered the deaths of family members through war. Fear is an ever-present theme in their recent lives in their home countries: fear of going to school; fear of walking on the street; fear of being kidnapped; fear of starvation when under siege. In their adopted country Australia, fear is also present: fear of not making new friends; fear of never having friends as good as they had in their first country; fear of learning a new language; fear of what school would be like.

The traumatising factors are numerous: flashbacks, nightmares, living with disability in family members unable to receive medical treatment, moving from country to country, losing friends in the process, separated by moving between countries, leaving beloved family members in danger, desperate journeys to safety, crossing borders at night, dodging flashlights of soldiers, shivering with cold, being turned away by capricious border guards, herded into camps in foreign lands, humiliated by aggressive locals and jeered at in schools where they spoke a different language, penury, racism, loneliness, isolation and bullying.

Ruth and Catherine evolved the Treehouse program and process. The first step was simply to create a safe space where the children could start sharing their personal stories, often starting with normal childhood stories before they faced hardship. The common life experiences of growing up, getting into mischief, playing, laughing and learning are universal. As the stories were shared, the children realised they had common bonds, no matter where they were born.

From this position of safety, trust was built and the trauma stories started to be revealed. Over the weeks, different experiences were disclosed, sometimes each story having multiple levels, almost as if the person sharing was "testing the water" to see the reaction before sharing the full story.

Unlike the time restrictions placed on Catherine's counselling, the drama classes Ruth was running with her allowed more time to be invested. Trauma-informed teaching and counselling are embedded in all the work. Trauma was rightly seen as a natural reaction to what had happened, not some mental illness. This process allowed the students to feel connected to each other, to have a purpose and to develop a sense of dignity.

The dramatic nature of these stories soon became obvious so in the classes Ruth and Catherine started



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building them into scripts so that the children could perform as a group. The journey was continuous: from simply playing together to sharing childhood stories, to sharing trauma stories to performing those stories with each other. Each step on that journey builds trust, while confronting and dealing with the tough stuff.

Ruth's initial vision was for the whole IEC, refugees and migrants alike, to share stories. She enlisted the support of the principal, then all the English teachers came on board with their classes, each taking a particular theme or time of life of the students. The result: students from every class performed to the whole IEC.

After three years of these performances at Miller High School, Catherine proposed that they take the idea of performing students' stories out of the school and do it under an independent banner, in professional theatres. These stories had such power and weight that they needed a wider audience. Stories that would resonate with other students all over Sydney could help educate, inspire and engage.

Treehouse staged short runs of their shows at Casula Powerhouse in Liverpool and Seymour Centre in Chippendale, both of which supported Treehouse



through their schools programs, ensuring that the cast plays to audiences of school excursions, educators and the general public. Fourteen years later, thousands of students have seen the shows, leaving with a deeper understanding of the refugee experience and empathy for their situation.

Gearing up for public performances meant a lot of extra work on weekends and in school holidays. Rehearsing during the week would mean encroaching on core schoolwork and, as refugee students have usually already missed a lot of school, expecting them to miss lessons was not an option.

Each show is produced within one semester and there are two shows each year, one from Miller and the second from Holroyd High. Principals at Miller and Holroyd have been extremely supportive and students from each school come to see the live performances.

When the cast are actively telling stories in the trauma circle, it is clearly a most difficult time. However, this is also the time when they are building incredible bonds and supporting each other. Most

have never told their trauma story before and feel deeply acknowledged and accepted at a level that they have not previously, and in particular Australia.

One difficulty is, perhaps surprisingly, is that families frequently do not understand the length of the process involved, and interrupt the process of developing the scripts from the original stories by insisting that their children go with them on weekends so they can enjoy family time. “You’ve spent enough time there,” is a comment. This conflict of loyalties is difficult for the kids. They overcome this, Catherine and Ruth used to make home visits to each family in the course of the program to explain the process in detail and garner the parents’ support. This was of prime importance in families that were particularly traumatised. One cast member’s father was killed in Iraq and then their mother died in Australia, both while they were doing the program.

The efforts are vindicated and the families finally understand when they see their children perform. The children rejoice, feel deeply accepted, feel their confidence building exponentially, feel the wonders of belonging and performance.



Ruth and Catherine believe all IEC children have “refugee hearts”, that is, the trauma and upheaval for any young person moving from country to country is enormous. Of course, refugees often have this compounded by the previous first country experience. The young people who come directly from war zones or conflict zones show one kind of trauma, which is possibly more obvious, but children of refugee parents who were themselves in the war zones show levels of being unsettled in the family and home life.

With the program taking up more time and with an eye on sustaining progress beyond Catherine and Ruth’s stewardship, Isaac Owens joined Treehouse as a third Director 10 years ago and his creativity and energy have added greatly to the shows and to the cast’s experience. Other volunteers have joined over recent years, supporting marketing, translation, counselling, lighting, and sound.

Going to weekend rehearsals, one can easily think, “How on earth is this ever going to come together?” There is so much messing around from the cast! They are restless and they can appear to lack focus and purpose. When they do focus, it’s common for some to break down in the act of telling their story and this can happen on stage. What allows them to carry on is that everyone around them – producers, cast members, the audience, all hold a safe space for them to feel the emotion.

As with almost all performance work, the saying, “It will be all right on the night” holds true. Seeing these children, who are only just coming to terms with a new language, still dealing with massive change and trauma, and with no acting experience, deliver such powerful messages, is truly inspiring, a sheer wonder. As Peter Hartcher, the Treehouse Patron, says “You are not lucky to be in Australia. Australia is lucky to have you here and you lift us all up with your stories.”

It’s true to say that none of the cast would have chosen to be in Australia. They love their home countries: the culture, the landscape, the food, the smells and sounds they grew up with, but here they are. Treehouse Theatre is a way to help them make the best of the life they have landed in.

What insights have Catherine and Ruth gained on how people suffering trauma can go on to heal and thrive? They have similar answers and there are common themes around acceptance, belonging and recognition. In telling trauma stories, people feel recognised and accepted in astonishingly profound ways. Many of them have never told their stories before, and what were just fractured experiences become coherent, taking on shape and gaining a narrative form. In doing this they take control of their stories. Mariam, an Iraqi girl, sums it up: “Before Treehouse my story controlled me and now I control my story.”

Further, telling a story in a group is a very different experience from telling it one-on-one. That sense of belonging is crucial. Even telling it just during the rehearsal times is amazingly beneficial – but to perform it and to receive feedback from hundreds of audience members has benefits that last for years. This is borne out by alumni, who come back year after year to see the current cast tell their stories. They say Treehouse Theatre was the most profound experience of their lives.

So, what are the messages for Australia and Australians, whether government, NGOs, corporates and the public? Welcome people with open arms and open borders and put adequate – no, abundant – resources into helping refugees belong, have their physical needs met, receive an education and to feel their own dignity. If that happens, it will return value by a high multiple.

The overall message from Treehouse Theatre is to “learn empathy”, to acknowledge and deeply feel our own privilege. Whether we believe in destiny, fate or being self-made, there is certainly no justice in us having and other people not having. We are not superior beings because we happen to have more.

In Sydney, a city of 5 million-plus, too few people know about Treehouse Theatre. The more that do, the more impact it will have. If you want to see a show, the next seasons coincide with Refugee Week in June 2025 at Casula Powerhouse and in late October at the Seymour Centre. R