



WOT'S THAT TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECT?

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WotOpera IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

four days at the school writing an opera with my year 10 class, and another day at the Parramatta Riverside Theatre putting the performance together and holding a concert. At the time, I wondered how much this team could offer an already-privileged group of private schoolgirls – after all, this was the department that the documentary *Mrs Carey's Concert* (Connolly & Raymond, 2011) featured. There were half a dozen choirs to join, orchestras, concert bands, chamber ensembles, percussion ensembles (including a Taiko group), a guitar ensemble and more. That extensive performance program was aligned with the classroom program, so each could benefit from the other, and the classroom program further benefitted from three or four composers-in-residence who helped create a composition-as-outcome inspired curriculum, and a range of classroom teaching staff with their own interests, expertise, and ARIA awards. These kids *knew* art music. They performed regularly at venues like the Sydney Opera House, Town Hall and Entertainment Centre. What could WotOpera offer them that the school didn't?

The answer was simple. Transformative opportunities aren't the same for every young person, and while these lucky students were in a school that offered them in many shapes and sizes, WotOpera was a truly unique experience. The high-pressure, high-energy schedule which sees the group (each school that WotOpera works with nominates 20 students) write a libretto on day 1, start setting the libretto on day 2, complete composing the opera, audition for parts and paint scenery on day 3, and stage the work on day 4 put students in a completely new situation, even in their familiar school surrounding. All students, without exception, took up the challenge and rose to the occasion.

Key to creating this stimulating artistic pressure-cooker were the staff: WotOpera hadn't been created on the back of any educational model or leader, though music educators will identify its practices with established pedagogies. Instead, its staff were professional opera performers and composers. When they talked about opera they didn't do it with a historical or scholarly context, like a museum guide leading

a school group past artifacts labeled 'masterpiece: do not touch', but as a living, breathing art form, being made and remade with them as part of their creative lives. This attitude said: join us.

The whole thing was run democratically: when students are creating the libretto, the creation of characters, plot twists, even individual lines were decided by listening to *every* idea offered and then voting on them. Similarly, roles were cast by audition and group vote, and the scenes of the libretto written at high speed in breakout groups. When it came to setting the words to music, talented composers such as Benjamin Loomes, Daniel Walker or Peter Aoun sat around a keyboard with the student, taking it in turns to tap ideas out, try out vocal phrases or any new musical idea. The composer may jot the idea down, or students may write letters or simple notation over the words they've already written. To facilitate learning of the opera in such a short time, WotOpera then created a quick recording of it which was then passed out to students on USB sticks to take home and practice. Students were told that teachers wouldn't be listened to, an established method of getting them out of the way of the creative process (Green, 2008).

Murray Dahm, artistic director of WotOpera and inspirational group leader, speaks passionately (with booming professional bass voice) about the WotOpera democratic approach. 'It can be about anything they want. There are no restrictions on what their creativity is. Well, there are: nothing disrespectful, but that's it, anything else is on the cards. They can create an opera about any character set anywhere in any time with anything they want.' (Dahm, 2012)

This adds up to a stimulating environment, with supportive professionals, so it's easy to imagine that each project is a success. But transformative? The key may lie in the 'no mistakes' approach that Dahm takes (Dahm, 2013). In a typical high school composition project, students are given stimulus material, and then sent away to compose alone. In WotOpera projects, everything is done together, every idea out in the open for peer review, and its adoption into the work – or not – is immediate.



WotOpera with Kilbreda College 2012 (top), WotOpera at Nossal High School with Murray Dahm (middle), WotOpera at Lambton HS with Peter Aoun, Project Leader (bottom). Photos: Bridget Elliot.

All students are challenged by this, but are highly engaged by seeing their ideas come to life as soon as they have them, and engagement is absolute. This in itself is democratic, because all ideas are equally immediate.

Back at MLC School I watched a relatively new student who had buckets of talent (and not just in music) but who was having a rough time committing to school and who was obviously underwhelmed with education in general go from being too-cool-in-the-corner to leader-on-the-stage. The group dynamic changed around her from one of tolerance to one of openness and acceptance, and that student went on in the space of a year to become a leader of the school and community. WotOpera seemed to be her tipping point. Dahm says this is typical in his experience: 'What you find is that throughout the entire process, any nuance to a character, any dialogue, any particularly good descriptor, when it comes to an emotion, is actually a fabulous door-opening experience. And when you explain that to the student, they just change. We've had students say they never knew another student before the program, and now they have a new friend.' (2012) At Eagle Vale High School in 2011, they also witnessed cross-cultural transformations, with 'islander students accepting non-islander

students because they shared a skill that the islanders valued (singing) but which had not been heard before.' (Wood, 2013)

Such stories are moving, but they have not happened by accident. Founder of WotOpera, philanthropist Graeme Wood AM, remains involved as an aspirational leader within the wider Artology group. 'One of the biggest thrills I get out of WotOpera is hearing the stories of transformation – not just the individual stories of new-found confidence and enthusiasm, but also the positive ripple effect through families and friends. I've long believed in the hidden creative potential within every student and in the benefits of experiential learning. WotOpera brings these powerful forces together usually for the first time and invariably with beautiful results.'

Fast-forward to 2013, and WotOpera in Sydney, this time involving Lurnea High among others. If the transformational impact was impressive in a private school, multiply it by 100 here. Lead roles in the cross-age group have been given to a young boy in the IEC (Intensive English Centre) from Spain who has only been in Australia a few months and who has never sung in English before, a self-taught bass player from an Islander community aspiring to have a career in music, and a year 11 girl who is an Iranian refugee,



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Newcastle WotOpera. Photo: Tanya Saint James.

released from an Australian detention centre in the last year.

In a thick Iranian accent and stumbling English, she beams at the camera, saying 'This opera is very good for me, because I making me confident. When I singing, teacher are help me, and tell me "don't shy", and I'm very better than before. Yeah, I'm comfortable.' (Artology, 2013) This shouldn't be surprising: research has already shown that refugee and newly-arrived immigrant children benefit from targeted music programs (Marsh, 2012). In these kinds of schools, WotOpera can deliver some of the same benefits, such as social inclusion (p. 106), cooperation, empowerment (p. 107), and forging new connections within the host culture (p. 108).

Curtain up at the Seymour Centre, where the other participating schools give Lurnea's opera a standing ovation, and its stars whoops and whistles. Each of the four works that night brings

a tear to the eye, and each for a different reason – in Lurnea's performance it's the evident journey and self-conscious change that has been required just to bring some students onto that stage to present their own creative work, and in another school's it is the slight boy who emerges unnoticed from back stage into a solo that takes the breath away from every member of the audience. 'That kid is going to Broadway', an impressed parent in the audience comments.

Working with a mixture of communities from high to low socio-economic backgrounds is important to WotOpera. The strategies that they have developed to engage students in opera speak to the very issues being discussed in education more broadly in the twenty-first century. Dahm says that with some cultures, 'knowing how they engage can be vital - it isn't necessarily sitting up straight and

being quiet and attentive - some young people just are not capable of that in my experience - but they are still engaged and paying attention' (Dahm, 2013).

One such student, who spent much of the time slouching against the wall in a 2010 WotOpera project was in fact so dedicated to the project that he now volunteers as a team member while he pursues a music career: he worked as part of the recent team at Lurnea High, bringing to the project not only his musical experiences, but the

experiences and expectations of a Samoan cultural background he shared with many students at the school. He is under pressure from his family and community to 'stop playing around' with music, and get a 'proper' job, but so far he is resisting and following his passion, a role model to dozens of teenagers in similar situations.

'Recognizing that engagement and finding the time and opportunity to validate it is vital', says Dahm. 'I had one Nigerian refugee describe the opera voice as having "bounce" which was a

perfect way to describe "vibrato" if you don't know vibrato!' (2013) Other strategies the WotOpera team employ centre around validation of the young people they work with. Leading by example is important, as is showing that they are willing to make mistakes, and never criticising any work that a student offers. 'I often describe what I do as going into battle with young peoples' self doubt - and that is a battle I'm willing to fight to my last breath,' Dahm adds. (2013) The students can tell, as well. Too-cool student said 'Murray brought out incredible things from all of our ideas. None of us thought it could be that good, but it was. Murray was the cornerstone of what we produced: he channeled our ideas.'

Whether English is their first, second or third language, students are keen to talk about their WotOpera experience too. Students from Blairmount Public School said 'People sometimes

burst out in class but they don't have the nerve to burst out in front of their friends, so when we're here ... we get to say what we feel like, and sing what we feel like, and it's good because it all goes down in the script'. (Artology, 2012a) A senior boy from Fairfield High enthused that WotOpera 'has really opened up a new doorway to me. I didn't expect to get anything from it... but I guess WotOpera gave me confidence when it comes to facing a crowd, talking to people. It's really a confidence booster.' (Artology, 2012b)

This was exactly what I saw when WotOpera came to my own school. The students shone with confidence. I see four or five of them around the Sydney Con these days. And yes, it includes the ex-too-cool-in-the-corner. I glow with pride.

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Author biography and more information than you'd ever want available in all shapes and sizes at <http://www.composerhome.com/about/about.html#short>

Endnotes

1Endnote
In the cited YouTube interview, Dahm actually says 'Well there are no swearing, and no nudity', but has since revised this, saying 'I've refined "no swearing and no nudity" into "nothing disrespectful" as a guideline - had a close run awkward silence with nudity so I now say that the only parameter for their creation is nothing disrespectful, we can do it as long as it is not disrespectful to any one or anything. We can still confront challenging issues but we just have to be sensitive to doing them in a respectful way.' (2013)

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Wotis and Who are WotOpera?

WotOpera is the flagship project of Artology, whose aim is "unlocks the creative potential of young people through experiential learning in the performing arts." Both Artology and WotOpera were founded by philanthropist Graeme Wood AM. WotOpera projects happen all over Australia and include holiday camps.

Learn much more at <http://wotopera.org.au> and <http://artology.org.au>